Criminal organizations in peripheral urbanization: hypotheses from three Brazilian metropolises

Organizações criminosas na urbanização periférica: hipóteses a partir de três metrópoles brasileiras

Thiago CANETTIERI [I]
Priscila COLI [II]

Abstract

Since the end of the 20th century, violence and crime have been objects of study in various fields. However, for a long time, the influence that criminal organizations exert on urbanization was neglected, a topic that has only recently gained relevance. This article seeks to contribute to this emerging field by presenting hypotheses on the relationship between peripheral urbanization and the actions of criminal groups. To do so, we analyze cases in the Southeast region of Brazil, drawing on our own research on the involvement of these groups in city production in Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte, in addition to the literature produced in São Paulo. In conclusion, we propose some keys to interpret this relationship in the context of peripheral urbanization, aiding in the understanding of the socio-spatial practices of criminal groups.

Keywords: peripheral urbanization; criminal organizations; production of space; transversality.

Resumo

Desde o final do século XX, a violência e a criminalidade têm sido objetos de estudo em diversas áreas. No entanto, por muito tempo, negligenciou-se a influência das organizações criminosas na urbanização, um tema que só recentemente tem ganhado relevância. Este artigo visa contribuir para esse campo emergente, apresentando hipóteses sobre a relação entre a urbanização periférica e a atuação de grupos criminosos. Para alcançar esse objetivo, realizamos uma análise de casos com base em nossas próprias pesquisas sobre a participação desses grupos na construção da cidade no Rio de Janeiro e em Belo Horizonte, além da revisão da literatura produzida em São Paulo. Ao final, propomos algumas chaves de leitura para interpretar essa relação, visando aprofundar a compreensão das práticas socioespaciais adotadas por grupos criminosos.

Palavras-chave: *urbanização periférica; organizações criminosas; produção do espaço; transversalidade.*

Introduction

Since the late twentieth century, the theme of violence and criminality has been the object of scholarly inquiry across multiple fields of knowledge. In Brazil, research on this subject has sought to understand the reasons for entering the world of crime, the relations between different normative regimes coexisting in the peripheries (Feltran, 2020), the constitution of armed groups engaged in illegal practices (Misse, 1999, 2011), and the economic dynamics generated by illicit markets (Telles, 2009; Hirata et al., 2023), among other aspects. For a long time, however, the influence of criminal groups on urbanization was neglected – an issue that has only recently begun to gain relevance (Coli, 2022 and 2025; Araújo and Petti, 2022; Hirata et al., 2022; Santos, 2023; Prieto and Verdi, 2023; Canettieri, 2023). This article aims to contribute to the emerging field by advancing hypotheses on the relationship between urbanization and the activities of criminal groups. To do so, it draws on an engagement with the concept of *peripheral urbanization* as elaborated by Caldeira (2017).

"Periphery" is a category of analysis employed by numerous scholars in urban studies to denote the site of reproduction of the labor force (Bonduki and Rolnik, 1979), the areas more distant from city centers – that is, a specific geographical location (Santos, 1978) – as well as spaces of political and social innovation (Holston, 2009; Simone, 2009). Caldeira (2017), however, deploys this category in a distinct sense. For her, "periphery" or *peripheral urbanization*[1] characterizes a mode of city-making in the Global South which, though pervasive, is neither uniform nor singular, allowing for local variations and the articulation of other analytical categories. Peripheral urbanization encompasses a set of interconnected processes, such as specific forms of agency and temporality, bottom-up political engagement, the production of unequal and heterogeneous cities, and transversal relations with official logics.

Transversality, the process that interests us here, refers to the ways in which residents, in the course of city-making, relate to official logics, thereby involving formal actors (such as government and private contractors). According to Caldeira (ibid.), this interaction cannot be neatly framed within the categories of formality or informality, it operates rather transversally. In this article, however, we argue that informal market institutions and criminal agents must also be considered part of this transversal logic. These actors play a central role in organizing the production and circulation of real estate commodities in the peripheries of Brazilian cities. Thus, this article interrogates how criminal organizations such as milícias and drug-trafficking factions influence peripheral urbanization.

At the outset, it is important to stress the complexity of this investigation, given the absence of formal data, with empirical research serving as the primary source of evidence. Considering the methodological difficulties of accessing such information, this text assumes a prospective character, above all pointing to potential paths for inquiry. We analyze dissimilar cases within Brazil's Southeast region, drawing on our own research on the participation of criminal groups in the production of the city in Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte, as well as on the literature produced in São Paulo. To this end, we provide a structured framework on the sociospatial practices of criminal groups within this emerging field of study. In doing so, we aim to propose interpretive keys for transversality that move beyond the relation between peripheral urbanization agents – residents – and official or criminal logics.

We therefore seek to bring together studies situated within the Brazilian context that typically circulate only within their respective regional circuits. By analyzing them in parallel, this article aims to break down such boundaries. While the unequal relationship between North and South (Robinson, 2002, 2006) and the need for theoretical decentralization in urban studies (Roy, 2009, 2014) are widely discussed, the importance of South–South connections remains underexplored – an aspect we intend to highlight. By examining how criminal organizations operate in three distinct metropolises and how these groups contribute to the production of urban space, we offer a new perspective on criminality and spatial configuration, incorporating additional variables into the analytical category of peripheral urbanization. This approach may enrich debates not only on other Brazilian cases but also in diverse contexts across the Global South.

In addition to this introduction, the article provides first a brief discussion of the sociology and ethnography of crime, highlighting the intricacies of the constitution of criminal groups operating in the periphery, with emphasis on the specificities of each of the three metropolises under study. This will allow us to understand the differences in modes of operation among these groups. We then engage directly with the notion of peripheral urbanization, particularly focusing on the question of informality and the transversal logics that shape the production of peripheral space. The following section addresses the relationship between the criminal world and the production of peripheral space. Here, our emphasis lies on real estate dynamics, examining how criminal groups interact with real estate markets at the boundary between the formal and the informal. We then demonstrate how recognizing criminal groups as active agents in the dynamics of peripheral urbanization constitutes a contribution to the field of urban studies, to public policy, and, ultimately, to the understanding of criminality itself. Finally, the conclusion presents the article's main arguments and suggests a research agenda for continuously investigating the mechanisms that connect criminal groups to the production of urban space.

The constitution and action of criminal groups in the peripheries

The presence of criminal groups in peripheral territories is well known, appearing in newspaper headlines, political discourse, and academic works. Given the historical inequality of a country such as Brazil and the limited scope of socialization through formal and stable employment, thousands of poor Black youth become involved in illicit activities as a means of survival and, in some cases, of achieving prosperity. Crime emerges, as Feltran (2011) describes, as a normative regime that spreads across peripheral territories – not because the periphery has a natural propensity for criminality, but because this way of life best adapts to the adversities experienced daily by these populations. The risks and consequences of entering the world of crime are well understood, yet so too are the structural difficulties of attaining the horizon of labor citizenship.

Everyday life in peripheral territories is (re)produced within a zone of indeterminacy that traverses legality and illegality, formality and informality, the licit and the illicit (Telles, 2010). Explanations for this intrinsic complexity generally converge on the observation that in a dependent, peripheral capitalist country, integration into wage labor has always been

the exception rather than the rule. At the same time, national peripheral economies destroyed autonomous means of reproduction, pushing vast populations into the cities. National development relied on the super-exploitation of labor (Marini, 2005), which displaced large segments of the working class into distant peripheries and restricted access to formal, stable employment. Informal economies, therefore, are not residual but emerge from the subordinate and dependent articulation of a peripheral economy such as Brazil's.

This scenario worsened with the crisis of the capitalist system, which brought a drastic shift in expectations regarding integration into formal labor markets and full citizenship. Whereas the generations of the 1960s and 1970s could, despite immense obstacles, still imagine a future within the sphere of formal labor, the 1980s crisis nearly closed off this possibility altogether. From the 1990s onward – and especially in the early 2000s – the lived experience of those born in peripheral territories diverged substantially from that of their parents and grandparents. They grew up in a context of generalized crisis, which altered temporal perceptions of progress (Caldeira, 2022). More than this, as Feltran (2011, pp. 32-33) reminds us, the "crises of formal employment, of labor, of the project of social mobility, of social movements, of the family, [are] all negatively linked to the growth of violent criminality." In his ethnographic incursions into São Paulo's peripheries, Feltran observed that the generalized crisis of recognition and legitimizing categories produced a critical effect: the discursive regime of the world of crime expanded as an alternative to the disintegration of previous categories. Criminal pathways thus increasingly appear as viable strategies of social reproduction for a growing number of young people.

Against this backdrop, one can better understand how and why the world of crime proliferates in peripheral territories. Much is said about the spread of crime as an imposition linked to inequality and social exclusion, structural violence, and selective or absent state presence (Leeds, 1996; Arias, 2018). It is less frequently discussed, however, how under such conditions the underworld provides the means and symbols of mobility without social recognition (Feltran, 2011). This is possible because the criminal world functions, first and foremost, as an economy operating through illegal markets. Thus, not only informal economies but also *criminal economies* become part of the reproductive strategies of peripheral populations.

Through illegal markets (drugs, stolen cars and car parts, influence, protection, etc.), these groups consolidate themselves, mobilizing vast resources, attracting peripheral youth, and establishing hierarchies of power. Within their territories, they impose a mode of conflict regulation grounded in their own normative regime. Even those not directly involved in criminal practices must interact with criminal normativity – one among several social norms with validity in peripheral territories (Amorim and Feltran, 2023; Beraldo, Richmond, and Feltran, 2022; Feltran, 2014). The coexistence of different normative regimes is made possible by the mediation of money (Feltran, 2014). State, labor, and religion also function as regulators of daily life in the periphery, so that the criminal world must always negotiate with them (Manso, 2023). The relationship is one of negotiation rather than simple opposition or antagonism. Residents navigate between these multiple normative orders, though not without conflicts and disputes.

At the same time, it is essential to note that the world of crime constitutes a form of collective action, albeit one that is radically distinct in

terms of form, discourse, and strategy from what are conventionally termed social movements (Feltran, 2011, p. 323). Criminal organizations are thus associative groups of the periphery that derive legitimacy from a context in which the very right to have rights is restricted.

Criminal organizations in the Southeast

The world of crime is highly diverse, even within the Brazilian context. For this article, we emphasize three territories in the Southeast of Brazil: São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Belo Horizonte.

In São Paulo, the world of crime is marked by the virtual hegemony of the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC). This organization establishes rules of conduct, a normative order (called "*proceder*"), and common objectives oriented toward meeting both collective and individual needs of its affiliates (called "*irmãos*", or "brothers") (Feltran, 2011, 2018; Manso and Dias, 2018). The PCC was founded inside a São Paulo prison, as a response to state repression: the 1992 Carandiru prison massacre, in which the São Paulo Military Police killed 111 largely defenseless prisoners who protested against guard abuses. A group of survivors, transferred to a maximum-security facility under Carandiru's former administration, formed the PCC in 1993 (Feltran, 2018). In its founding statute, the PCC declared an alliance with the *Comando Vermelho* (CV) from Rio de Janeiro and adopted its motto: "Peace, Justice, and Freedom" (Lessing and Willis, 2019, p. 587). It became the leading drug-trafficking organization in Brazil and ranks among the largest criminal organizations in the Southern Hemisphere. Today, the PCC controls more than 135 prisons in the state of São Paulo alone and has established cells in all 27 Brazilian states and in at least five neighboring countries (Feltran, 2020). According to Rodrigues, Feltran, and Zambon (2023), the PCC operates as a network of knowledge, technologies, and resources, structured to connect individuals involved in various activities or criminal enterprises. The scale and scope of its activities – which include drug retailing, arms trade, the distribution of stolen vehicles, and contraband – form part of a broad and diversified portfolio of high-yield financial operations. The PCC has thus become Brazil's foremost operator of illegal markets, nationally and internationally, mobilizing hundreds of millions of reais per month (Feltran, 2019). It is also important to note that the group's illicit activities are interconnected with legal and formal economies through multiple channels.

In Belo Horizonte, by contrast, the world of crime is far more fragmented. Gangs in the city are small groups, typically composed of 10 to 12 members. Their territorial control is limited and dispersed, extending only to small portions of vilas, favelas, and peripheries – sometimes just a few streets or even a single alley (Nascimento, 2011; Rocha, 2017; Beraldo, 2022; Clark, 2023). These groups are generally composed of young people, guided not only by drug trafficking but also by a code of honor or by opposition to rival gangs (Rocha, 2017). This dynamic generates gang wars characterized by homicides, often retaliatory in nature (Nascimento, 2011). More recently, however, a process of "professionalization" has occurred, suggesting a trend toward greater economic efficiency (Clark, 2023).

In Rio de Janeiro, the world of crime was for many years dominated by drug-trafficking factions known as *comandos* (Misse, 2019, p. 179). These *comandos* are criminal organizations composed of civilians – usually poor youth identified as "drug-trafficking boys" or "movement boys" (*garotos do tráfico, rapazes do movimento*) (Araújo Silva,

2019, p. 168), initially established themselves in favelas. These territories offered both strategic advantages for military defense and opportunities to exploit the vulnerability of residents (Dowdney, 2003, p. 74). Over time, however, their presence has extended beyond the favelas into peripheral neighborhoods and social housing projects.

The comandos operate on two distinct but interdependent fronts: inside prisons – "behind the wall" – where they recruit new members, and in the territory – "outside the wall"– where they sell drugs and engage in other illicit activities (Misse, 2011, p. 18). This model originated in Rio de Janeiro's prison system in the 1960s, when common criminals and political prisoners were incarcerated together. The former learned from the latter how to organize to defend their rights, leading to the creation of the *Falange Vermelha* in the 1970s. Initially, they fought for "peace, justice, and freedom" for common prisoners (Lima, 1991, p. 43). A decade later, with the arrival of cocaine, this group became involved in drug trafficking, expanding beyond prison walls and renaming itself *Comando Vermelho* (CV), as it is still known today (ibid., p. 50). Although multiple comandos now exist in Rio de Janeiro – such as TCP and ADA – they all operate according to the same model pioneered by the CV, a model later exported and adapted in other Brazilian cities.

Since the late twentieth century, another type of criminal organization has gained strength in Rio de Janeiro: the so-called milícias. Although the term is neither new nor unique to Brazil, local media in 2006 revived it to designate state security agents and ex-agents who extorted protection payments from residents of West Side Rio de Janeiro in exchange for defense against drug traffickers (Araújo Silva, 2018, p. 3). Some authors understand milícias as an evolution of the death squads that operated in the *Baixada Fluminense* (Neto, 2017; Souza Alves, 2003; Zaluar and Conceição, 2007), while others trace their origins to the mafias of illegal transportation and to the so-called *polícia mineira* (a vigilante policing practice), both active in the western part of the city (Alerj, 2008; Carvalho, Rocha, and Motta, 2023; Manso, 2020).

Over the years, the composition and scope of milícias have evolved, exhibiting increasing plurality and adaptability – factors that render the term, in the Brazilian context, polysemic and challenging to define. To capture this internal diversity and its national specificities,[2] Coli (2025, p. 9) proposes the broad and dynamic category of "Brazilian milícias":[3] organized, territorial, and coercive criminal groups composed of a hybrid set of actors, including state security agents, elected authorities, and civilians, oriented toward economic and electoral profit. Their territorial control is defined and sustained by the range of services they monopolize. Their portfolio of activities is diverse and mutable, but can be summarized in three major fronts: (1) illicit markets; (2) community extortion through protection fees; and (3) city-making, including real estate development projects, monopolization of essential public and private services, and strategic control of natural resources.

Analyses based on anonymous tip-off services indicate that milícias are predominantly present in the western part of the city and in several areas of the metropolitan periphery, especially the *Baixada Fluminense* (Geni, 2020).

The differences among criminal organizations in these three metropolises illustrate the breadth of diversity. While one can speak of a discursive expansion that legitimizes practices associated with the so-called "world of crime," the modalities of implementation are particular, dependent on local and conjunctural arrangements. Nonetheless, the dynamics

that constitute criminal groups, despite their heterogeneity, invariably involve the constitution of illicit markets and protection markets. This entails the formation of an economy that enables the circulation and, above all, appropriation of both monetary and non-monetary resources, thereby extending the networks of power, control, and coercion emanating from these groups in their internal disputes and in confrontations with rival factions.

A considerable portion of the literature on such organizations focuses on illicit activities seemingly disconnected from the production of space. Here, however, we suggest that space production is integral to the activities of criminal groups, which play a key role in regulating and structuring informal real estate markets. To further develop this hypothesis, we must examine how peripheral urbanization unfolds, a discussion that will be presented in the following section.

Peripheral urbanization: transversalities and informal markets

The most significant postcolonial critiques of urban theory in the early twenty-first century denounced an imbalance in the field of urban studies: while the urban contexts of the Global North were treated as legitimate centers of theoretical production, the rest of the world appeared as incomplete variations of those models (Robinson, 2002; Roy, 2009). In response, the proposition of "decentralizing" the field emerged – shifting the axis of knowledge production from the North to the so-called Global South – , a movement that came to be known as the "Southern turn" in critical urban studies. To accomplish this, it became necessary to explore new geographies of theoretical production that had been insufficiently considered or disseminated within mainstream scholarship (Roy, 2009).

One of the central challenges of this turn was not merely to assemble a catalog of case studies but to formulate a theory grounded in local contexts, avoiding both the simple replication of existing models and the trap of overgeneralization. This required a dual movement: to "locate"– recognizing the importance of local specificities in theoretical formulation – and to "dislocate" – placing ideas in dialogue with other contexts, both South and North, without losing sight of the tensions and resonances that arise from such encounters (ibid.).

Within this horizon, Caldeira (2017) revisits and updates an analytical category to characterize a pervasive mode of city-making in the Global South: *peripheral urbanization.* Through a comparative analysis of urbanization in Istanbul, São Paulo, and Santiago, she identifies common elements such as specific temporalities and agencies, bottom-up political mobilization, the production of unequal and heterogeneous cities, and transversal relations with official logics.

Peripheral urbanization is dynamic: it advances laterally in search of new frontiers. As autoconstructed areas become consolidated in urban terms, they grow more expensive and less accessible, pushing part of the population to more distant regions where land is cheaper, but infrastructure and services are lacking. This ongoing movement reinforces urban heterogeneity and inequality, making it necessary to analyze this mode of urbanization simultaneously in spatial and temporal terms.

As in other studies of contexts across the Global South (Kuyucu, 2014; Streule et al., 2020), this work identifies residents as central

agents of peripheral urbanization, driving processes of autoconstruction that build houses, neighborhoods, and cities. This agency is not limited to the act of building: It also involves mobilizing to demand basic services from public authorities, which makes residents fluent in the language of rights and enables them to constitute themselves as collective subjects. This relationship with the state and with formal logics, however, is shaped by a form of interaction that Caldeira (2017) defines as *transversality* – a mode of engagement that escapes the dichotomies of formal versus informal that, for a long time, dominated analyses of labor, housing, and urbanization in the Global South. As Roy reminds us, the concept of informality, in addition to masking the variety of logics at play, often shifts blame onto the poor while ignoring the participation of state actors (2005).

Although it is essential to understand peripheral urbanization beyond informality, informality nonetheless plays a structuring role in the urban reality. In Brazil, urbanization has historically been anchored in the binomial of "restricted and concentrated land ownership + super-exploitation of labor," producing a persistent shortage of housing for people with low incomes (Oliveira, 2003, 2006). Within this context, the flexibility of not fully adhering to the norms of the "formal/official city" – as noted by Abramo (2009) – grants the urban poor some possibility of insertion and survival in segregated metropolises. Thus, housing accessed through the formal market becomes a restricted privilege, while illegality often constitutes the only means by which the poor can integrate into urban life.

In the realm of physical construction, this reality manifests in the intensification of land use, whether through multiple structures on a single plot or the addition of extra floors to house family members or generate rental income, often incorporating these properties into informal real estate markets. Recognizing the role of such markets within transversality is crucial for understanding the organization of territories shaped by peripheral urbanization. The periphery is not constituted solely as "pure use value": there are also mercantile dynamics, albeit informal, that residents mobilize strategically to sustain their social reproduction (Paolinelli, 2023). Access to informal property involves calculations, including economic ones, which do not diminish the protagonism of residents as principal agents; on the contrary, they highlight sociospatial practices that sustain markets and integrate the economy of the periphery organically into the broader urban economy and everyday life.

Crime and the production of peripheral space

Based on this framework of the reality of housing provision in Brazilian peripheral urbanization, we can understand the participation of criminal actors in this process. Here, we emphasize that they play an important role in shaping peripheral urbanization, influencing building patterns, relations with the state, pricing in real estate markets, and the selection of those who gain access – or not – to certain areas for housing. As previously mentioned, this argument is based on the concatenation of different ongoing research projects that point to the participation of criminal organizations in the production of space in Brazilian peripheries. Among these, research in the Southeast stands out, where the involvement of actors such as drug-trafficking *comandos* and milícias is particularly significant.

Drawing on our own research and other publications, we can identify certain patterns of interaction between the world of crime and peripheral urbanization. Based on this, we propose a set of hypotheses that inform our understanding of this relationship. Here, we highlight four: (1) crime as an actor in the frontier of urban expansion; (2) crime as an agent of land regularization; (3) crime as a real estate broker; and (4) crime as an actor in housing evictions.

(1) *Frontier of urban expansion*

The expansion of the urban frontier, incorporating new lands into the metropolitan fabric and advancing the peripheralization of the metropolis, is an old phenomenon. Settlements in irregular and precarious subdivisions, located far from the center, have long constituted a way of accessing urban land, avoiding the financial burden that rent places on family budgets. This scenario, as Simoni-Santos (2020, 2023) observes, has been undergoing a redefinition, marked by the presence of new actors in shaping the dynamics of urban expansion.

Analyzing the periphery of São Paulo's South Side, Simoni-Santos (2020, p. 292) highlights the strong influence of the world of crime on these dynamics, noting that "real estate business has become part of the set of alternatives guiding the profitable economic processes" of the universe of illegal activities. Similarly, Prieto and Verdi (2023), studying the east side, identify occupations initially mobilized by actors linked to the PCC. According to the authors (2023, p. 67), "invasions mediated by crime function as an escape valve in the context of financial crisis, since land subdivision is a strategic component of the business" of PCC. In this way, criminal groups secure the appropriation of extraordinary profits arising from real estate ventures on the edge of urban expansion.

The pioneering of occupation, combined with armed control, ensures exclusivity in the commodification of land and thereby reproduces the status of private property negotiated in the most peripheral areas. At the same time, the criminal agents provide loans needed to purchase lots and finance autoconstruction, thus reproducing the logic of interest-bearing capital. In the words of Simoni-Santos (2023, p. 294), "indebtedness and the world of illegalisms, with their specific forms of social control, merge." These actors of the criminal world operate at the frontier of urban expansion, brokering the production of new subdivisions. This is possible because they represent a principle of social order that is legitimized and recognized in the peripheries. Thus, they end up "bringing together under their umbrella housing provision (with important political mobilization), property gains (of money and land), and the results of productive labor (in a chain that extends from direct construction work to the scaled production of building materials)" (Simoni-Santos, 2020, p. 293).

In Rio de Janeiro, the involvement of milícias in the production of urban space was first documented by the *Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry* (CPI) on Milícias of the Rio de Janeiro State Assembly in 2008. Since then, numerous reports in the local press have documented the activities of these groups in real estate projects, including apartment buildings, houses, and subdivisions, on the metropolitan periphery.

For a long time, it was believed that milícias occupied areas dominated by drug trafficking with the aim of expelling dealers and ensuring order and "tranquility." However, the report by Hirata and Couto (2022) reveals that, in most cases, the areas occupied by milícias had never been under drug-trafficker control, demonstrating that the main objective of these occupations was to expand their

territory and, consequently, their illicit markets, such as security and housing. Silva, Fernandes, and Braga (2008) emphasize that the growth of milícias is closely tied to the expansion of the urban-real estate frontier in the city's West Side. A recent study shows that it was in milícia-controlled areas that the largest number of housing units was tendered in Rio de Janeiro (Hirata et al., 2022). Nonetheless, maps of armed groups reveal that milícias are concentrated primarily in the West Side (Hirata and Couto, 2022), the area of greatest growth due to still-available land. In these areas, the practice of *grilagem* (land grabbing) is frequently carried out by these armed groups.

In the *Baixada Fluminense* context, Coli (2025) identifies the expansion of what she calls "milícias-created enclaves": illegal subdivisions, partially enclosed by barriers, created, controlled, and constantly modified by a variant of the Brazilian milícias that she terms "territory-making milícias." This term reflects the fact that these milícias do not take over existing territories (as in other cases), but instead, through land subdivisions, create their own territories. The term also alludes to the emergent character of these territories, which do not exist a priori but arise through consistent topographical work, including successive landfills in environmentally vulnerable areas – such as flood-prone zones.

In Belo Horizonte, crime also plays a role in real estate expansion. Although, as already noted, the city's criminal world is less articulated than that of São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro and thus lacks the capacity to initiate frontier-expansion processes, there are indications that when other actors – such as social movements or spontaneous sociospatial groups – occupy unused lands, agents linked to the criminal world quickly move in to operate in those areas. Through the armed imposition of their interests in expanding economic gains, criminal groups appropriate part of the occupied land for their own activities and for negotiating properties in the informal market (Canettieri, 2023, 2024).

Because Belo Horizonte's criminal organizations are fragmented, resources raised through the real estate market are often diverted to finance "wars" among criminal factions. Since Belo Horizonte's drug trade is disconnected from the international trafficking route, its factions do not operate with the same degree of organization, preparation, or military capacity as in other contexts. For example, high-caliber weapons are rare in these organizations. Due to disputes that go beyond the drug market, these gangs engage in cycles of violence – known locally as *wars*. Resources obtained from their activities in real estate markets may provide the means to confront rival factions with superior weaponry, or to expand resources for purchasing goods or paying bribes (Canettieri, 2023).

(2) *Real estate broker*

The involvement of armed criminal groups in the real estate market has proven to be an important vector of financial appropriation, logistical structuring of illicit activities, and expansion of the regimes of normativity and legitimacy that constitute the world of crime. In this way, the world of crime comes to function as a real estate broker in the areas under its influence.

In the case of the PCC, it is already known that participation in the real estate market serves as a means of laundering money derived from illicit activities. According to a report published by *Piauí* magazine on October 27, 2020, a property-buying and -selling scheme involving this criminal faction moved more than 100 million reais (Abreu, 2020). However, the PCC's role is not limited to money laundering. Several researchers (Giavarotti, 2020; Prieto and Verdi, 2023; Simoni-Santos, 2023) have

noted the organization's involvement in real estate ventures at the fringes of peripheral urbanization. As Giavarotti (2020) highlights, there are several reasons for the entry of the PCC's *irmãos* into real estate: the market is highly capitalized and liquid. According to his research, members of the PCC have become significant players in this continually expanding market. Organized crime operates in São Paulo's peripheries by producing irregular land subdivisions, negotiating property sales, and collecting rents. Both Prieto and Verdi (2023) and Simoni-Santos (2023) emphasize that the PCC's role as a real estate broker has become increasingly crucial in peripheral territories.

The real estate business provides the group with opportunities to invest in goods that are easily produced – given the ongoing process of peripheral urbanization – and that have enormous market potential, thereby diversifying the group's investments. There is a distinct real estate logic at work: plots located along main streets or near paved roads are generally reserved for the criminal group's own ventures, while interior plots are sold to whoever can pay. The group regulates the property market of the occupations organized by its members. As Prieto and Verdi (2023, p. 68) observe: "Land is a constitutive part of the *brothers' progress* [our italics]." In other words, real estate activity provides organized crime with a means of accessing financial resources.

In Rio de Janeiro, numerous studies on space production by milícias suggest that their interests primarily focus on immediate profits from the numerous real estate transactions in which they are involved (Manso, 2020; Benmergui & Gonçalves, 2019; Hirata et al., 2021). The CPI das *Milícias* report (2008), for example, already demonstrated that in some areas milícias charged a fee on property sales that varied between 10% and 50%. Other studies indicate that these organizations also profit from the provision of services such as internet, cable TV, water, and electricity (Hirata et al., 2021). Araújo and Petti (2022) further highlight the participation of milíciamen in condominium management within subsidized housing programs such as *Minha Casa Minha Vida*, where they gain additional revenue by charging an extra fee per unit. In addition, loan-sharking practices may lead to property loss in cases of default, with the property then sold or rented by the milícia (Hirata et al., 2021, pp. 23-24).

Coli (2025), however, demonstrates that contrary to the prevailing assumption about milícias in the national context, the primary goal of so-called "territory-making milícias" is not immediate profit but rather the formation of a dependent and dutiful constituency, consolidating their territorial power politically and socially. Fieldwork evidence suggests that, in their milícias-created enclaves, plots are initially donated rather than sold.

Research on real estate markets in Rio de Janeiro's favelas also shows the role of drug-trafficking factions. Kawahara (2023) underscores that these groups also participate in informal real estate markets, establishing collaborative networks. This practice, also adopted by milícias, involves partner agents who act as *testas de ferro* or *laranjas* (front men or straw owners), enabling criminal groups to operate in the property market. Properties acquired through these arrangements are often used to store weapons, drugs, or fugitives. Kawahara (2023) further observes that both drug factions and milícias construct rental properties – though the former less systematically than the latter – and that both intervene in municipal oversight, preventing official urban regulation from reaching the territories under their control. This allows real estate interventions that yield significant profits. Kawahara (ibid.) cites as an example an eleven-

-story apartment building in Muzema, an area controlled by milícias, almost entirely dedicated to rental units appropriated by criminals.

Despite such convergences, Benmergui and Gonçalves (2019) emphasize that the logics and scales of operation differ. In drug-controlled areas, space production relies largely on autoconstruction, with residents building *puxadinhos* (house extensions) to sell or rent. In milícia-controlled regions, by contrast, the final decision about what and how to build lies with the criminal organization itself. Coli (2025), however, identifies a different pattern in the milícias-created enclaves she studied: there, residents themselves are responsible for all stages of house construction, while the milícia intervenes only in urban improvements – often also carried out by residents. This model suggests that, in these contexts, the central objective is not merely immediate revenue but the consolidation of durable ties of dependence and social control, sustaining the political-territorial power of milícias.

In Belo Horizonte, criminal groups also act as real estate brokers in the peripheries. In her research, Clark (2023) develops the hypothesis that drug trafficking has a strong influence on the housing market in the favela she studied. Coelho (2017) likewise points out that trafficking groups operate in the real estate market, appropriating properties or investing in units for their illicit activities. According to Coelho (ibid.), drug trafficking converts the capital generated by the commercialization of drugs into real estate investment – a type of operation that meets the imperative of wealth accumulation.

In addition, research in recently established urban occupations shows the presence of agents linked to drug trafficking who manage entire portions of occupations as *loteadores* (land subdividers), charge fees on transactions, or appropriate land directly and violently (Canettieri, 2023, 2024). Fieldwork interlocutors reveal that gangs participate in occupations by intimidating residents into accepting the appropriation of plots that are then released into the real estate market.

(3) *Housing Evictions*

Criminal actors also shape the production of space in peripheral urbanization by carrying out housing evictions, either expelling certain families from the areas they control or capitalizing on state-led evictions to expand their power – by influencing which families are allowed to stay or by using the vacated properties for new real estate ventures.

Both dynamics are visible in Belo Horizonte. In his research, Canettieri (2023, 2024) observed a case illustrative of the first dynamic. The cultural center of an urban occupation operated in a small two-room shack donated by its owner, who also possessed two other properties in the area. At a certain point, she decided to reclaim the house, disrupting the work of the association. The local gang did not approve and expelled her from the three properties. One was again ceded to the association, another continued to house the same tenants but with the gang now collecting the rent, and the third was put up for sale. The proceeds from the sale were used to purchase new weapons for a confrontation with another local gang (Canettieri, 2023, 2024).

In a study on a favela in Belo Horizonte, Coelho (2017, p. 62) notes that the local drug trade used its influence to reinsert into the informal property market "new plots" that had been "vacated by the municipality's intervention." Clark (2023), in a study of crime's role in space production in a Belo Horizonte favela based on a criminal investigation,

recounts a case in which a gang expelled families from an area it had recently conquered from a rival group. Since these families had ties to the former dominant group, the victorious gang expelled them out of fear of a counterattack. The acquired houses were then used to store weapons and drugs.

In Rio de Janeiro, milícias function as regulators of land use and occupation in the areas under their control, whether by directly carrying out evictions or by exploiting state-led removals. In the early 2000s, the *CPI das Milícias* report already documented milícia-led evictions (Alerj, 2008). Primary causes included the expulsion of individuals and families linked to rival groups in order to secure territorial dominance, as in the Belo Horizonte case. But the same document also reported evictions for other reasons. Cano and Duarte (2012) detail some of these causes, including failure to pay fees (for security, condominium management, or other services such as water supply), as well as noncompliance with milícia rules. Many studies point out that the main objective of milícia-led evictions is profit through the use of the property – whether by selling, renting, or re-parceling the land. Hirata et al. (2021), for example, report cases where residents were expelled from land on which milícias subsequently built multiple housing units for sale and rent.

State-led evictions can also benefit milícias and their businesses. Araújo and Petti (2022) describe a negotiation during the removal of a community in the city's West Side, in which the *padrinho* (the milícia boss responsible for the area) leveraged his political influence (Hirata et al., 2022) to alter the location of a Minha Casa Minha Vida housing complex and secure the position of condominium manager. Among the benefits of this maneuver were the continued control over the same families and the addition of new families relocated from other areas of the city, thereby expanding his authority.

It is important to note, however, that removals do not always serve milícia interests. Coli (2025) analyzes a case in which more than one thousand families living in a risk area and registered for resettlement in a *Minha Casa Minha Vida* housing project were replaced by another group in a municipal political maneuver. These families had lived in three milícias-created enclaves in the *Baixada Fluminense*. According to residents, the leaders of these "territory-making milícias" had told them beforehand that they would not be relocated, suggesting access to confidential information. Some also alleged that the milícia had negotiated "behind the scenes" with city hall to prevent removal, though these rumors were never substantiated. Even without official confirmation of milícia interference, the logic that their central interest was electoral reinforces the hypothesis that displacing these families would mean losing voters – and therefore went against their interests.

Drug trafficking factions also act as regulators of land use and occupation in Rio de Janeiro. Newspapers frequently report evictions to facilitate illicit operations, such as storing weapons and drugs in houses. More recently, however, the same motives driving evictions in milícia areas – such as fee collection, rule enforcement, and profit from property sales and rentals – have also appeared in trafficking-controlled zones. Kawahara (2023) notes that real estate production in Rio's favelas is predominantly oriented toward rental markets, and that trafficking-related evictions and fee collections are cited by interlocutors as central drivers of this trend. As Manso (2023) and Vital da Cunha (2015) show, some drug factions

have also begun to identify as evangelical and prohibit Afro-Brazilian religious practices in their territories. In extreme cases, such as the *Complexo de Israel* in Rio's North Side, trafficking leaders expelled *candomblecistas* and *umbandistas* from their homes.

In this way, evictions carried out by armed groups serve a dual function: on the one hand, they consolidate these groups as managers of local conflicts, enforcing their coercive power and legitimacy in the areas where they operate; on the other hand, removals become a means of accessing resources for illicit activities – what Harvey (2005) terms "accumulation by dispossession" – or of appropriating properties for the logistical support of their operations.

(4) *Land Regularization*

One of the defining features of peripheral urbanization is its position at the margins of formality. This condition generates constant insecurity of tenure, since these properties are not recognized under the principle of property rights. The recurrence of this situation in Brazilian urbanization has, in turn, produced the need for a specific instrument to guarantee residents' access to the properties in which they live: land regularization (*regularização fundiária*). This instrument transforms informal properties into formal ones, which often results in rising real estate prices, since they are now recognized under formal law (Gonçalves, 2009). Prieto and Verdi (2023, p. 67), analyzing a case of land regularization in the East Side of São Paulo, note that the "consent of the brothers" was essential for the process to go forward. PCC members were not only the agents who had organized the occupation from the outset, but also held power and legitimacy within the community; such a process would only be possible with their approval.

A similar situation is reported in the study by Hirata et al. (2021). According to the report, the pioneering practice of urban occupation promoted by milícia-men, especially in municipalities of the West Side of the Rio de Janeiro Metropolitan Region, is frequently rewarded with the promotion of land regularization and the legalization of properties produced by milícias. The report also highlights numerous allegations of involvement by city and state representatives in passing legislation that facilitates regularization in such areas, indicating possible associations between politicians and milícias. There are many cases of bills (routinely approved) that allow for the regularization of land subdivisions and the immediate legalization of areas known to be occupied by milícia groups. In other instances, these bills designate milícia-occupied areas as Special Zones of Social Interest (*Áreas de Especial Interesse Social*), granting them differentiated treatment and enabling simplified regularization.

In this way, the criminal world that promotes urban expansion and accumulates wealth through informal negotiations may also have a strong interest in land regularization processes and, not infrequently, even promotes and approves such initiatives. After all, land regularization carries the potential for public improvements, and formal legal recognition facilitates money laundering through real estate transactions while also increasing land prices and, consequently, the profitability of these groups.

Some studies, however, point to an opposite interest on the part of such groups. In the community of Novo Palmares, in Rio de Janeiro's West Side, the local milícia has blocked the land regularization of autoconstructed properties since the early 2000s. Chisholm (2020) shows that during the *Bairrinho* project,

infrastructure works were implemented, but land regularization never came. At the time, the president of the residents' association stated that "the community leadership did not want the area regularized, and much less for any personal document regarding land ownership to be handed to residents" (ibid., p. 77). The residents' association retained all documentation, and residents had no right to access it.

Coli (2025) reports a similar situation in the *Baixada Fluminense*. Milícias-created enclaves are established through the seizing of public land in high-risk areas – unstable both legally and geologically. Despite these irregularities, Brazilian law contains loopholes that would allow for the regularization of such properties, provided there were political will. Yet, even with the direct involvement of territory-making milícias in local politics, including elected city councilors, there has been no interest in promoting regularization. As a result, residents remain in a situation of "permanent transitoriness" (Rolnik, 2015), dependent on and vulnerable to the control of these criminal organizations.

Similarly, in Belo Horizonte, Coelho (2017) shows that drug-trafficking agents are not interested in regularization, since the formalization of space reduces their degree of influence and increases state regulation. Research on Belo Horizonte's peripheries (Canettieri, 2024) reveals the same pattern: drug-trafficking agents typically operate in the real estate market before regularization and often oppose such projects, reasoning that the maintenance of land informality reduces the state's ability to intervene, control, and regulate. Since crime in Belo Horizonte is less structured than the PCC or the milícias, its ties to public officials are weaker (though not nonexistent).

Final considerations

This article has sought to reflect on the relationship between organized crime, peripheral urbanization, and transversality by articulating recent research in order to offer an overview of the topic. The focus was on three Southeastern cities, while acknowledging the uniqueness of each context. It is likely, however, that other regions of the country display dynamics distinct from those discussed here.

The criminal world introduces new elements for understanding peripheral urbanization. Particularly noteworthy is the way in which criminal groups – though operating in different contexts and organizational forms – have begun to intervene directly in urban expansion, the real estate market, land regularization, and even removals. Although this subject has gained prominence in recent studies, it still requires more in-depth investigation. As Coli (2022; 2025) observes, on the one hand, research on illegalisms and crime has seldom explored the production of space; on the other hand, urban studies have rarely considered the participation of criminal organizations in this process.

The findings suggest that the presence of such groups in the production of peripheral urban space is increasingly significant. Illicit markets mobilize political and economic capital, granting these organizations a broad capacity to operate in the real estate sector.

The notion of transversality, proposed by Caldeira (2017), proved central to understanding this phenomenon: different actors – residents, state agents, and criminal groups – interact and negotiate across distinct normative regimes and complex power relations. On the one hand, they limit public oversight and regulation,

structuring monopolies over certain goods and real estate negotiations; on the other, their interactions with state actors – as in the case of Rio de Janeiro's milícias – enable agreements that directly benefit their activities. The duopoly of the use of force, shared with the state, allows them to impose their will with relative ease, occupying public and private properties with little or no state intervention.

Criminal agents participate in the production of peripheral urban space in multiple ways: land grabbing (*grilagem*), land subdivision, construction, and the commercialization of residential and commercial properties. Areas under their direct influence are marked by violence, intimidation, and coercion, which can result in forced removals or strict control over access to and prices of real estate. It is essential to recall that Brazil's land market has historically been restrictive, and access for people experiencing poverty has occurred mainly through informal channels. These logics persist, but the organized insertion of criminal groups into the process broadens and deepens their impacts on spatial production, exacerbating precariousness, inequality, and violence on the urban fringes.

As this is a developing field, many issues still require investigation. We suggest the following as a future research agenda: (a) to examine the effects of public policies on land regularization and zoning – especially within the context of city master plans – on the activities of these groups; (b) to encourage further research capable of exposing the gaps and contradictions in overgeneralized narratives, as highlighted throughout this work; (c) to analyze the impacts of spatial production by criminal organizations on the socio-spatial structure of Brazilian metropolises – a theme still underexplored; and (iv) to promote comparative studies with experiences from other regions of the Global South.

[I] http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3662-6104
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Escola de Arquitetura, Departamento de Urbanismo. Belo Horizonte, MG/Brasil.
thiago.canettieri@gmail.com

[II[https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3941-6519
University of California, Berkeley, Department of City and Regional Planning. Berkeley, CA/United States.
priscila_coli@berkeley.edu

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Notes

(1) Caldeira (2017) employs both terms.

(2) Militias in the international context have historically been defined as temporary civilian military forces mobilized during emergencies. Contemporary literature defines militias as non-state armed groups engaged in self-defense, law enforcement, or paramilitary activities without formal institutional functions (Kan, 2019).

(3) Based on a review of the literature on milícias in Brazil, archival research in O Globo newspaper, and the author's own fieldwork.

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Thiago Canettieri: project administration; formal analysis; funding acquisition; conceptualization; data curation; investigation; methodology; resources; writing–original draft; writing–review & editing; software; supervision; validation; visualization.
Priscila Coli: project administration; formal analysis; funding acquisition; conceptualization; data curation; investigation; methodology; resources; writing–original draft; writing–review & editing; software; supervision; validation; visualization.

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email: tomlimpim@gmail.com

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