

“Mirrored reflections”: moral communities among “military police officers”, “militias”, and “pi-lícias” in Rio de Janeiro

“Jogo de espelhos”: comunidades morais entre “polícias”, “milícias” e “pi-lícias” cariocas

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Abstract

The present paper sheds light on a little-known social actor in Rio de Janeiro's criminal landscape. “Pi-lícias” are civilians who impersonate policemen in everyday life, working illegally for legitimate police officers in different ways. They are found in private security markets, as “informants” in parallel police investigations, or even as “auxiliary forces” in police and/or paramilitary raids against drug trafficking gangs. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with candidates for the military police career, the study aims to demonstrate how the “moral communities” founded among military police officers, militias, and “pi-lícias” pave the way for illegal “schemes” that emerge from private security markets in Rio de Janeiro.

Keywords: policing; illegalisms; state; moralities; schemes.

Resumo

O presente artigo objetiva lançar luz sobre um ator social pouco conhecido da dinâmica criminal carioca. Os “pi-lícias” são civis “desejosos em ser polícia” na vida cotidiana, e que acabam eventualmente trabalhando ilegalmente para policiais de diferentes formas: no mercado da segurança privada, em funções mais “ocultas” do policiamento cotidiano enquanto “informantes” em investigações, ou mesmo tal qual “forças auxiliares” em operações policiais e/ou paramilitares contra o tráfico varejista. Baseado em trabalho de campo etnográfico junto a candidatos à carreira policial militar no Rio de Janeiro, pretendo demonstrar que a fundação de “comunidades morais” entre “pi-lícias”, policiais militares e milicianos é fundamental para o agenciamento de alguns “esquemas” criados a partir dos mercados ilegais da segurança privada presentes na metrópole.

Palavras-chave: policiamento; ilegalismos; Estado; moralidades; esquemas.



Introduction: outlining the problem

Recent research findings on illegal markets and armed groups in Rio de Janeiro have highlighted significant geopolitical changes in the city's metropolitan region (RMRJ). Traditional representations that address illicit drug traffickers as the primary "enemy" of state security forces (Machado da Silva, 2010; Misse, 2011; Leite, 2012), as opposed to militias protecting favelas and poor neighbourhoods from drug trafficking (Zaluar & Conceição, 2007; Cano & Iooty, 2008), seem insufficient in understanding Rio's contemporary criminal context. Authors such as Hirata et al. (2021), Duarte (2021), Carvalho Rocha and Motta (2023), Figueiredo (2024), and Roque (2024) reveal overlapping practices among both criminal groups, leading to new problematisations about the analytical boundaries of categories such as "drug trafficker" (Silva, 2019), "militiaman" (Brama, 2019) or even "narco-militiaman" (Alves, 2023).

Another significant (yet overshadowed) aspect of the ongoing criminal scenario is the sheer scale of the illegal private security agent workforce. It is estimated that since 2022, Brazil has been home to over a million private agents (FBSP, 2022, p. 6), closely associated with police and militia forces. A staggering half of this labour force operates outside legal

regulations (*ibid.*, p. 7), resulting in a surplus of illegal protection services in the country. The Brazilian private security market operates within entangled networks with the police, spanning organisation, functioning, and recruitment (Brito, Souza and Lima, 2011, p. 168). In Rio, these markets are managed on trust-based relationships, notably between military police officers (PMs) who share the same environments in patrols and battalions (Cortes, 2015, p. 93). Even without legal authorisation to practice, civilians trusted by the officers are employed in private property protection, armed escorts, or patrolling public places. Data from PNAD/2017 shows that the state of Rio de Janeiro has 113.292 private security agents, which is 1.3 times the number of state officers (Rodrigues, Ribeiro and Cano, 2019). The lack of legal authorisation is a significant concern, with approximately 70% of the companies being unauthorized solely in the Baixada Fluminense region (Goulart & Florentino, 2023). The estimated figures for the capital and the rest of the state are yet to be determined.

However, in Rio's criminal landscapes, a figure remains largely unknown though playing a significant role in the interactions between the police and the illegal private security markets. The purpose of this article is to shed light on this shadowed player, known as "pi-lícias" by officers of the Rio de Janeiro Military Police (PMERJ). They are often found operating within illegal security

"schemes"¹ run by police officers, as well as serving in more covert roles as informants or auxiliary forces in police and/or paramilitary operations against retail drug trafficking.

The category's meaning is rather curious as it combines the prefix "pi" with the suffix "lícia". As per the military police jargon in Rio de Janeiro, "pi" denotes "swollen foot" and is used in a derogatory manner to describe any civilian as a potential alcohol abuser, as someone lacking the essential attributes – such as hierarchy and discipline (Castro, 2004) – of the "military spirit". On the other hand, the suffix "lícia" refers to the term "polícia" ("police" in Portuguese) that officers use indiscriminately in their daily lives to refer to PMERJ and its personnel. In a nutshell, a "pi-lícia" is a civilian who strives to become or at least appear to be a "real policeman". Yet what truly caught "pi-lícias" between the civilian and police worlds is not just their "desire" (never fully realised) to be part of the cop universe. As we will see, their material and symbolic proximity to the PMs is ambivalent: they are partially able to capitalise on some of the benefits of this proximity, while having their "desire to be police" instrumentalised by the officers for other purposes.

In this sense, the article describes the "moral communities" (Bailey, 1971) among police officers, "pi-lícias," and militias underpinning illegal private security schemes in Rio de Janeiro. In response to the Dossier

"Illegalisms and the Production of the City", I address those legal-illegal entanglements to demonstrate how law enforcement agencies are viewed as important "centres of power" (Geertz, 1997, p. 187) for the urban poor in Brazil. I argue that police forces in Rio de Janeiro serve as a cultural model that influences the local "urbanism" through a "set of attitudes and ideas" that reinforce "collective forms of behaviour and social control", as described by Wirth (1976, p. 107). My argument is that police forces have been increasingly involved in the social production of urban Rio de Janeiro, redefining our understanding of "the police" beyond its institutional environments.

To support my arguments, I base my analysis on data crafted over a period of 15 months (from July 2019 to September 2020) through ethnographic fieldwork. During this time, I observed hundreds of candidates taking the PMERJ exams. Some of these candidates had personal experiences with the police due to their jobs in security companies run by agents. One such candidate was Wellington, a "pi-lícia" who was formally trying to join the force for a second time. Wellington's story highlights two crucial points. First, it reveals the connections between the police, militias, and "pi-lícias" in the "protection markets" operating in Rio de Janeiro "through, above, below and beyond the state" (Loader, 2000, p. 238). Second, it provides insights into the

growing political autonomy of police forces in Brazil (Pires, Albernaz and Rodrigues, 2024) by demonstrating how they dispute the meanings of everyday life in poor Brazilian peripheries and favelas through legal and illegal practices (Manso, 2020; Feltrán, 2021).

The article is divided into two main sections. The first section discusses Wellington's life in light of his interactions with PMs and militiamen. I explore initially how these relationships bound "moral communities" in Rio's neglected areas, where "reputational markets" energise the appeal of a police career to many. The second section focuses on a particular event in the candidate's history when he was placed illegally inside a "drug house" to serve as an informant for a police investigation. Even though he was not a legitimate officer or militiaman, Wellington's active role in the investigation shows us how these "communities" facilitate illegal policing practices often perpetrated by "pi-lícias." In conclusion, the article suggests that the relationship between police officers, pi-lícias, and militias function as an unstable dynamic of moral and political "mirrored reflections".

Wellington's trajectory

During my first week in the fieldwork, I encountered Wellington and other candidates who seemed disinterested in the subjects covered in the intellectual exams for the police.² One day, during a break in one of the classes, Wellington and his companions decided to go out and have a coffee to overcome their laziness on a rainy Saturday morning. When I asked if I could join them, they did not object. We went down together and got coffee from a vending machine at the hall entrance where the lifts were located. We then went onto a covered balcony to chat for a few minutes. While sipping his coffee, Wellington grumbled about the relevance of certain exam topics: "*Will I calculate drug seizures in Excel? Do I have to know Dom Pedro's (First Brazilian emperor) birthday to complete a Police Report? Fuck, aren't the exams for the Military Police? Bro, do I have to know where the sun rises to shoot?*".

Wellington had a very confident and outgoing personality that made him stand out in his social environment. He was popular among his classmates, who found him humorous, articulate and engaging. Due to his older appearance and communication

skills, Wellington had a certain leadership role among his younger peers, who respected him for his reputation. This reputation was built on the stories he told and the way he presented himself, which contributed to his social status within the group. As Bailey (1971, p. 12) observes, reputations are formed within a community based on the stories that circulate among its members. These stories shape how people perceive others and define hierarchies and patterns of inclusion/exclusion within the group. Wellington's reputation was that of an ex-military man who knew the ins and outs of *cop life*.³ He had an impressive insider's knowledge of law enforcement, even though he was not yet a formal member of the police.

On that morning, he told me that he could have been in the PMERJ for almost 10 years. He took the 2010 exams but couldn't pass because he failed the IT test. He was very upset about the classes because he feared failing again due to his difficulty with numbers. Wellington was still a member of the Air Force when he tried the exam for the first time. He joined the military when he was 18, after completing high school. At the age of 24, he left the Air Force when his six-year temporary service ended, attempting to become a PM to continue the military path that several men in his family and

neighbourhood had followed. Although he regretted not succeeding, he believed it had its good side. He said, "Dude, I'll tell you: if I'd joined the police at that time, I'd have died". Wellington justified his statement by saying that he used to carry his "oitão" (big eight)⁴ everywhere, getting into fights and collecting many enemies in his youth. I listened to all this in silence, quite intrigued, trying to imagine the kind of enemies he had collected to carry a gun and fear being killed. However, I decided to keep quiet and wait for other opportunities to learn more about his life. After all, as Doc once explained to Whyte (2005, p. 303), "Stop asking questions. Hang around and you'll learn the answers in the long run".

I was able to understand his statement over time as I gradually pieced together fragments of Wellington's "biographical mosaic". At the age of thirty-three,⁵ my interlocutor was working as a sales representative for a hospital equipment company. The job – the first in his life with a formal contract – was far from "good pay". Yet it was something, according to Wellington, more "concrete" than the "gig jobs" he had done for a long time elsewhere, mainly in the private security market. Married for fourteen years and with two children, he credits the

birth of his second child five years ago as the main reason why he has taken life "slower" since then. His new work routine took up a large part of his time from Monday to Friday, with the weekend being dedicated to his family or occasional work trips to visit clients in Rio's hinterland. All this, nevertheless, did not stop him from taking trips to meet one of his two "mistresses" or even go out with friends away from his wife's eyes. His salary of approximately three thousand reais (six hundred dollars) was spent in this way: on some family expenses, on occasional "evenings out", and on occasional "treats" for his "mistresses" like money to get a manicure, buy lingerie or paying bills such as electricity, water and gas.

"Getting money" was always the main reason for Wellington to consider PMERJ as a professional life option once again. He believed that the economic gains in the force – legal or illegal – could improve the condition of all involved in his family and (extra)marital adventures. Becoming a PM created a dilemma for him, explained through a common native representation of cop life that I heard from many other candidates and some agents throughout the fieldwork. Roughly speaking, they claimed that "every PM, to get respected, must have a mistress" and that the reputation of virile is allegedly one of the reasons why cops get involved in corruption, given the incompatibility of the "lusty lifestyle" with low salaries.⁶ Wellington summarised the argument: "You take a more 'hardened' 'policeman'... like a 'long-term

sergeant'. He'll have to provide for at least his ex-wife, wife, son... not to mention the 'sluts' he fucks. How can he handle all of this if not entering the 'sacanagem'¹⁷?"

Wellington's professional expectations in the police were not random, but the result of his unconventional professional career path. Due to his large physique, martial arts skills, and military training in the Air Force, he started receiving invitations to work as a bouncer in various establishments such as nightclubs, brothels, concert halls, small commercial galleries, and corner shops. Initially working weekends or evenings to supplement his salary, he eventually dedicated himself entirely to these "gig jobs" after leaving the military. In these occasions, he got to know legitimate police officers who worked informally like him, as well as other cops who employed their military peers or trusted civilians in their security firms. These connections led Wellington to take the PMERJ exams in 2010 after leaving the Air Force. The officers he had become close to play an essential role in both his professional and personal life.

My interlocutor always took pride in his close ties with law enforcement agents, claiming it provided certain "advantages." He mentioned that most of his security jobs came through referrals from his police friends. The civilians working in these roles typically had no formal training; instead, they entered the field through connections with legitimate agents or other civilians close to the police. According to Wellington, individuals were

chosen based on their reputation and performance, with the expectation that they would meet the standards set by their police employers: "To work as a bouncer, you have to know how to be a real badass sometimes. If you act like a "água de salsicha" (sausage water)",⁸ no one will call you back". He emphasised the need for bravery, courage, firearm expertise, and combat skills to establish a strong presence in the market and gain recognition among cops involved in these activities. The rates for these services varied depending on the specific requirements of each situation:

"Sometimes, on a Saturday samba party, you could get a hundred, a hundred and fifty [reais] per night (twenty to thirty dollars). At the whorehouse you could earn more 'cause the owner was my 'mate' [the owner was a policeman]. But the really good stuff is when you work at fancy parties. I've taken up to two hundred and fifty a night (fifty dollars), plus food and personal lost belongings we could find at the end of the party."

Although proximity to the police significantly broadens the professional possibilities (Velho, 1981) for many, Wellington expressed his interest in joining the police not only in economic reasons. This brings to light two important points. Firstly, the notion of "respect" among the military police in Rio is driven by fear (Ramos, 2017). The ability to "harm someone" (ibid., p. 20) is the primary operator (Bailey, 1971, p. 12) that establishes the hierarchy among members in

the police moral communities. For instance, I angrily asked Wellington once if he wanted to join the police "just for the money" since he was constantly trying to convince me to quit my job as a schoolteacher to try out for the PMERJ. Surprised by my irritation, he tried to explain why he was thinking of joining the police beyond the material benefits:

"Money is important, but that's not all. You don't understand me! Everyone wants to be 'friend to the police', right? Have you ever seen anyone looking for trouble with a policeman, like hitting on his wife or slapping his son? When shit happens, it's the 'cop' who decides whether you're right or wrong. If you know how to use your gun and badge, being a policeman can open many doors."

Wellington's explanation seemed to extend beyond simply seeking better "job opportunities," as he emphasised the importance of maintaining a good relationship with the police. Hornberger (2004, p. 213) illustrates that in precarious social contexts, establishing positive relations with the police can be crucial for the urban poor to survive. In regard to Brazilian peripheries, where police forces wield significant control and influence due to their high discretionary power (and low accountability) (Albernaz, 2020; Ferreira, 2021), many residents perceive the police and other armed criminal groups as the primary "centres of power" in the local social order. Candidates like Wellington observe how officers utilise

PMERJ as a "platform" to enhance their local reputation among neighbours, friends, and acquaintances in their residential, work, and leisure environments.⁹ In these areas, being recognised as a "friend," "acquaintance," "wife," "son," or at least as "someone close" to a "tough cop" paves the way for "gain respect" from locals.

The second important point relates to certain *hegemonic forms of masculinity* found in police moral communities. I understand "hegemony" in the Gramscian sense, as explained by Connell (1995), who emphasises gender as a place for exercising power also through culture. Hegemonic masculinity includes a set of behaviours that represent more honourable and widely recognised ways of "being a man" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2013). These behaviours, however, depend on specific conditions within a particular time and place to be established as dominant.

Wellington regaled me with numerous tales of his success with women. He attributed his appeal to various factors, including carrying a gun, wearing clothing accessories associated with the police, and being accompanied by legitimate agents who could get him into exclusive venues. Through these stories, I learned that certain military-style grooming, bold jewellery, conspicuous watches, specific tattoos, and particular gestures were all part of the "material objects" (McCraken, 2007, p. 102) animating the performances of masculinity

within police communities. Additionally, I heard civilian acquaintances refer to the combination of a men's Invicta watches-style, a heavy chain necklace, and a gun as the "PM kit," as they noticed that agents did not part with these items. They believed these items helped officers recognise each other outside of uniform and served as a form of presentation in a dual world involving potential interactions with criminals and women. Displaying the "PM kit" signified to wrongdoers that a formidable officer was present, ready to respond to any threat while attracting women drawn to men associated with law enforcement.

Moreover, in line with Mizrahi (2018, p. 5), the "masculine person" within police communities emerges not only through the consumption of such material adornments, but also through the very presence of women flanking their members. Yet those gender performances have two particularities. 1) they are strongly associated with specific "moral regions" (Park, 1976) located in Rio's impoverished areas. 2) they are not performed exclusively by the officers, given their entanglement in the broader societal context in which the police operate. To summarise, being or appearing to be a policeman in these neighbourhoods embodies hegemonic forms of masculinity.¹⁰ And it is not surprising that many candidates, including Wellington, would prefer working as a cop in the city's poorer precincts than the

wealthier neighbourhoods, as the reputation of a policeman allows for a greater sense of control, influence and respect in these areas.

For all these reasons, Wellington could take advantage of his public recognition as someone belonging to the local police community. His appearance allowed him to blend in as an undercover agent while moving through various community spaces of living, working, and leisure:

"Every Sunday, a samba party was at the 'Águia de Prata'. There were days when police friends were hanging around, inviting me to sit in their box. I'd come up to join them, watching the girls and drinking whisky and beers. The girls were staring at us all the time! We'd just say: 'Hey you, come up here, now! The box was always packed with women. It felt like you were 'fishing'! Easy girls, easy sex."

The "Águia de Prata" was a samba school that had seen better days in Rio de Janeiro's carnival. Its president maintained strong bonds with the local crime scene, and "bicheiros", police officers, militias, and "pilícias" were familiar presences at local events. Just like in other police places, privileges such as access to the VIP area were allowed due to camaraderie with the police, militias, and bicheiros. Wellington also described some bars and clubs that he and other trusted men close to PMs were allowed to enter, or even a red-light circuit frequented with police

friends, where orgies affirmed vows of trust and secrecy. Taking part in these activities seemed to be fundamental for the positive galvanisation of these men's reputations and the political strengthening of their moral communities.

Although militias¹¹ also cohabit in these moral communities, my interlocutor mentioned that he had never been interested in permanently joining their ranks. He had only worked for militias in minor roles, such as collecting "security taxes" in his old neighbourhood while unarmed. A few years later, however, he occasionally took part in raids against drug traffickers as an "auxiliary force" in the invasion of favelas due to his military training. Because of his proximity to members of the militia policing his old neighbourhood, he admitted being harassed in the past to take on more responsible roles in the gang. However, he said he had never given in to the invitations for the reason of disagreeing with some of the criminal practices he had experienced as a local resident:

"At first, they [the militia] came up with a good idea. In my community, things got so much better when they came in. Things became quiet. There were no more robberies... all those junkies going to buy drugs. Shootings, noisy parties that let no one sleep... all that was over. Everyone approved their actions because nobody could take that shit anymore. But I've felt uncomfortable because

they did bad things too. Not bad things with bandits, junkies, or thieves... all of them must die! But, bro, threatening residents? They used to extort 40, 50 reais [8-10 dollars] monthly from the hot dog guy. The one who managed a corner shop had to pay 100 reais [20 dollars]. Everyone was forced to buy gas from their company. You know, that wasn't my "thing". If you want to 'clean' the neighbourhood, count me in. Now, extorting my neighbours? Fuck off!"

Wellington stopped working for the militia as soon as he started doing "security jobs," even though he could have made more money moving up in the paramilitaries' rank. Unlike some other candidates I met, he was less ambitious. For him, having a strong moral alignment in his professional career was more important than just economic gains. In the past, he refused to engage in "bad things" against innocent people, including extorting his neighbours in the local "protection rackets." However, he remained close to some of the militiamen because they frequented the same police places where other cops passed through. Some of these legitimate officers were also members of militia groups or were closely connected due to being stationed in battalions in the areas controlled by the paramilitaries in Rio's western suburbs.

My interlocutor emphasised that for some civilians, joining these groups was the best way to express their frustrated desire to "be a cop". Among the militia, in addition to many expelled officers, some civilians had attempted and failed to join the police force formally. "Pi-líciás" also represented this idiosyncrasy, as many of them had failed the police entrance exams - just like Wellington had. Yet, despite being closely related, "pi-lícia" and "militia" differed in how these social identities were connected to that of the "police". Like Wellington's case, the "pi-lícia" is someone who constantly strives to "be" or at least "appear" to be a police officer. A "pi-lícia" does not assert, but rather impersonates the police identity by utilising cultural objects or social performances associated with the police world. From the perspective of the police, every "pi-lícia" still retains residual elements of "civil pollution" in their social identity.

On the other hand, militiamen are not liminoids (Turner, 2015) living between the civilian and police worlds. They do not mimic the identity of the police since some paramilitaries are current or former police officers, firefighters, prison officers or military officers. Similarly, civilians who enter militia gangs tend to construct their identity and legitimacy much more in opposition

to drug traffickers – even if it increasingly occurs in "ideal" terms concerning on-the-ground action between both groups. For that reason, some militia's new criminal practices, particularly their involvement in drug trafficking, are taboos for Wellington and many other "police wanna-be" candidates.¹² Indeed, concerning police communities, some operators function as a "moral taxonomy" to hierarchise their civilian members, ranging ideally from purity (police) to dirty (drug trafficker). This categorisation, however, is not based on the physical attributes of things, as Douglas (1976, p. 55) explains, but rather on the morality within a specific social group. According to the author, taboos are "rules of behaviour" that exclude anything that threatens the symbolic order of a political entity, such as the communities centred around the police.

It is unsurprising then that poor residents of peripheries and favelas consider joining the military police for these benefits and privileges. In contexts of precarity, some civilians seek proximity to local centres of power such as drug gangs, militia groups, and the police, for the material and symbolic gains this affords. "Pi-lícias" are one outcome, among others, drawing the lines of Rio's criminal landscapes from police communities. Yet their desire to "become a cop" leads

us to the paper's next session: PMs' instrumentalisation of the pi-lícias' desire to emulate them. After all, why are they allowed to stick around legitimate police officers?

"Doing Troy"

While the narratives of warfare recounted in cop life differ from Homer's "the Iliad and the Odyssey" iconic poems, police officers in Rio de Janeiro adapt one of these tales in a very particular manner. When a military cop says he is "planning to do" or "doing Troy," he alludes to a set of strategic manoeuvres to ambush criminals typically (though not exclusively) in favelas. "Doing Troy" does not involve a spectacular TV-like police raid to confront criminals. Instead, it involves clandestine and illicit operations to monitor drug gang activities in areas of interest covertly. Once the moment is ripe, officers can then make a calculated move to attack, enhancing their chances of apprehending criminals and seizing drugs and weapons. The analogy drawn to the Greek myth of the "Trojan horse" lies in the shared use of "infiltration" into the enemy's territory to carry out a "surprise attack" – whether the enemy is a Trojan soldier or a Rio de Janeiro drug trafficker.

"Troy" operations can be done when most agents leave the favela, but a few stays behind hidden in strategically located houses. As criminal activities return without the police presence nearby, "Troy" agents can launch surprise attacks on the criminals or stay hidden for an extended period, waiting for a pre-arranged "second operation" with their peers. During this second operation, the officers can easily target and apprehend (or kill) the fleeing criminals by firing shots from windows or rooftops. "Troy" operations can also be planned using sensitive information obtained from legal or illegal police investigations held by the "P2",¹³ or with the help of "X-9s"¹⁴ to locate drugs and weapons, identify escape routes, or uncover hiding places of criminals.

Yet not only legitimate police officers participate in police operations in Rio de Janeiro. The moral communities described in the previous session pave the way for civilians to take part in these "schemes" as well. On one occasion, while visiting Wellington's home, he showed me his room and proudly took out of his wardrobe two old vests he had carefully stored for years. The first one was black, with the inscription "security helper" on the back – just like many other vests I

had seen commonly worn by private agents. My interlocutor told me that he had used it in different situations, such as when he committed his first murder, at the age of 22.

On a fateful Ash Wednesday, when he finished his shift at the petrol station he had been watching, Wellington saw two men on a motorbike slowing down near the bus stop where he was heading. Although the street was empty at 6:00 AM, they passed quickly and didn't notice him a few metres before the stop. At that moment, my interlocutor said his "police spirit" spoke louder: he put his hand on the "oitão" and quickly headed towards the men. While one of the robbers was collecting the victims' belongings, he cocked his gun and fired. Two of three shots hit the target. The man on the back fell backwards in agony while the motor driver fled along the empty avenue with civilians running from the shooting. My interlocutor approached the robber, opened the visor of his helmet and, in cold blood, unloaded his revolver. Another three shots to his face completed the job.

Before the murder, locals knew Wellington as a simple bouncer watching a petrol station. But the incident changed his reputation, forcing him to "disappear" until things calmed down. Police friends patrolling

the area warned him to "get out of the neighbourhood", saying that many people witnessed the murderer and that he had no legal permission to watch the station. Indeed, his closeness to the police brought him not always "advantages". He said avoiding some more dangerous parts of Rio's poor suburbs, particularly at night, because someone could recognize him as a "friend of the police". His fears were not without reason. At the time of fieldwork, Wellington had already committed three other murders - though no charges have been made against him. He did not consider himself a "professional killer" or a kind of "vigilante", asserting that all his victims were criminals killed in particular circumstances. Besides the bus stop robber, he shot dead two drug dealers during one of the "militia operations" he took part in. His fourth victim was also a "cracudo",¹⁵ executed with the complacency of close PMs after he confessed to allegedly mugging one of Wellington's mistresses.

Back in his room, I came across a second black vest that I had never seen before. It was made of sturdier and heavier material, yet relatively "soft", and had several compartments for weapons, magazines, radio transmitters, and other police gear. There was also an opening in the chest area

to insert what Wellington referred to as a "ceramic plate". I exclaimed, "Fuck, this vest looks just like the PM's! When did you wear it? Were you using it for shooting bandits?" Wellington was thrilled by my question and proudly replied, "You know, this one has a long story," explaining that the vest was a PMERJ's bulletproof vest given to him by a close policeman.

Wellington acquired the referred vest as a result of his involvement in a drug-related investigation. According to him, it was common for law enforcement officers to place trusted individuals in key locations to gather sensitive information. These individuals were not necessarily police officers, but ordinary civilians connected to the police, similar to what many "pi-lícias" are. When he was asked to "do Troy," Wellington had already left the Air Force and was making a living through gig jobs facilitated by his contacts in the private security market. In addition to work, he also encountered police presence in bars, nightclubs, and brothels that he frequented, where agents took on roles as managers, workers, or customers. As mentioned earlier, "militias" and "pi-lícias" like Wellington were also present in these locations, occasionally participating in illegal "schemes" coordinated by the police.

The referred "Troy" operation was planned by a "Charlie"¹⁶ named Jairo. He worked at a police station in Rio's downtown precinct, near a brothel watched by Wellington on weekends. Jairo and his colleagues were regulars at the parties, and the military policeman who gifted Wellington the vest had introduced him to Jairo because of a joint investigation by two law enforcement agencies: the Rio de Janeiro Civil Police and the PMERJ's intelligence division. An abandoned mansion was transformed into a "trap house" and had been monitored by the agents from a flat on the other side of the street. In a few weeks, some drug users and dealers had already been identified, and their phones had been tapped. However, in order to raid the house safely, Jairo said he needed more information about it from the inside. He was interested in learning more about the property's physical structure, how many drug sales points operated there, how many people worked in the business, whether they were always armed, and what weapons were used.

Although he was not a legitimate officer, Wellington enjoyed a good reputation among the police due to his military training and willingness to accomplish any "mission". Jairo needed a trustworthy and unsuspecting civilian with all these characteristics to be planted into the trap

house. Wellington seemed perfect for the job. *"So, dude, the civil cop invited me to help with the investigations. Damn, it was a lot of responsibility! I started going there like a junkie. I grew a beard and hair and wore dirty clothes. I made mental notes about everything inside the mansion, just like I was asked to. And then I reported everything to Jairo."* Euphoric, Wellington recounted how he had to buy cocaine vials and pretend to consume them just as other users did. He even had to really "dar um tiro" (to shoot)¹⁷ once because one of the dealers decided to share a vial near Wellington, inviting him to join them. Despite these imponderables, the vital information needed to conclude the investigation was gathered quickly.

In the end, Jairo and the other agents were impressed with Wellington's performance during the investigation. He and another legitimate undercover cop were then placed inside the house on the day of the invasion. They were responsible for monitoring the scene from the inside and effectively communicating the best time for the other agents to break in. Dozens of undercover "Charlies" and "Mikes",¹⁸ confident in the team's communication, waited for their sign in unmarked vehicles outside the mansion. A few other "Segurança Presente"¹⁹ agents were in the flat used during the investigation. Wellington

recounted the story with great satisfaction, emphasising that all the action began when he texted Jairo on the phone:

"The house was a fucking mess! They used to sell coke, crack and marijuana there, but other people were already living with the traffickers and junkies. On that day, someone started a fight in the backyard, and the armed bandits at the front door left their post to see what was happening. I thought: 'It's time!'. I texted Jairo, and in a few moments, the guys burst in. Everyone got into jail! They seized drugs, guns and money, taking everyone to the police station. I even had the chance to flash my badge! Man, I've never felt more alive! When they broke in and shouted: 'Freeze, police!', me and the other cop "doing Troy" got those motherfuckers by surprise as well. They weren't expecting it. They [the criminals] did not react!"

A central point in Wellington's experiences with the police revolves around how he deals with risk. When asked if he was afraid of taking unnecessary risks, he explained that he used to take on these 'missions' not just for economic gain, but also for the adrenaline rush and the opportunity to feel like a real cop. This attraction to high-risk situations is similar to the allure of extreme sports or dangerous professions, as argued by Lyng (2005, p. 5). The 'pi-lícias' I met seemed to enjoy a certain thrill when engaging in

deviant behaviours, such as feeling "sensual attractions" for crime or even pleasure in "doing evil", as Katz (1988) and Topalli (2005) discussed. It is essential to remember that fear, a key element within the notion of 'respect' in Rio's police communities, plays a significant role in shaping the concept of respect in the local police culture.

Even though he was not formally part of any police force, Wellington described all his actions as if he were a "real policeman." Indeed, he had actively contributed to the investigation by monitoring the trap house for weeks and by "doing Troy" – which paved the way for the final invasion. Despite taking on a riskier position alone as an "undercover fake cop" in a hostile environment, Wellington did not consider it a problem. Instead, he felt honoured for being someone trusted by "real cops," confirming his "vocation" to become a police officer in the near future. Yet as a candidate still trapped in a liminoid condition as a mere "pi-lícia," his first-hand experiences of cop life were intermittent. Only in specific situations was he able to embrace the full potential of "being a cop," albeit in a secondary position within the moral ranks binding police communities. Venturing into risky situations like "doing Troy" was how Wellington and other "pi-lícias" vented their "lust for the police," though it usually came with the potential for a high price for mobilising the police identity.

Final remarks: mirrored reflections

During my fieldwork, I soon noticed that candidates referred to themselves as "future police" rather than using individualising terms like police officers, cops, agents, or military police soldiers. At first, this seemed to indicate the significant influence of the police organisation in shaping their professional identities. Even the established police officers commonly used "police" to refer to the organisation and its personnel. Both prospective recruits and police officers seemed to emphasise their collective professional identity as "police" (organisation) rather than their individual identity (officers) within the force.

However, as time passed, I realised that candidates' representations of the "police" were not the same. These representations were not images reflected completely flat but rather from concave or convex mirrors, which always produced differences in how they appeared. Sometimes, when candidates expressed what kind of 'police' they would be when they joined the 'police', these mirrors were placed in front of each other, creating an infinite loop of reflections. Thus, it seemed to me that native claims to mirror the identity

of the police organisation actually highlighted the differences in how candidates perceive the idea of "police," rather than the complete assimilation of each prospective officer's individuality and subjectivity into the image of the PMERJ.

Those "mirrored reflections" also occur between two other identities associated with the police. Firstly, the "militia" should be highlighted as one of these potential "reflections", though, as argued, they do not always mirror similar images among militiamen. My interlocutors are not divided into two large, fixed-position groups defined as those who "adhere to" or "reject" the paramilitaries. Instead, the moral opposition established between "militias" and "drug traffickers," even if considered in "ideal" terms, tends to place the former alongside the "police" in this political spectrum. However, my interlocutors see that some of the elements traditionally associated with the paramilitaries' mythical identity no longer correspond to the practices of many gangs. As shown, I have observed an ongoing process of pollution of the paramilitary identity, according to some interlocutors, mainly because of their increasing proximity to the illegal drug markets. As one candidate pointed out to me during our initial conversations: "OK, but what militia are you talking about?"

Alongside 'policeman' and 'militia', a third mirrored reflection that emerges is the 'pi-lícia,' representing the individuals living in the blurred boundaries between civilian and police worlds, such as Wellington. Interestingly, he claimed to have never heard about "pi-lícias". But upon closely listening to his stories about "cop life", it became apparent that he was likely familiar with the concept. In my interpretation, his pretended ignorance may have responded to the stigma I noticed in the conversations of "real policemen" about these limonoids, who continually reinforced the 'impure' remnants of their civilian identity.²⁰ Another police career interlocutor, heavily influenced by his father, a retired sub-lieutenant from PMERJ, managed to capture some of the intrinsic meanings when he described 'pi-lícia' as 'someone who wants to take advantage of cops.' For him, "pi-lícias" were associated with police officers for personal benefits.

However, as I have tried to show, these relationships present a series of nuances that escape this hasty native definition. From the stories I heard, mainly from Wellington, it was common to realize how "cops" and "pi-lícias" traded goods of different kinds all the time. This made a candidate like him someone who did not just want to "take advantage of cops" on the one hand, nor a guy who

claimed to be a "cop in practice, just needing the badge" on the other. In my view, in order to enjoy, even indirectly, the "advantages" linked to "being a cop", the "pi-lícia" is obliged to offer something in return for his relationship with these agents. A police agent is not simply someone whom the people around him manipulate. On the contrary, his professional status sometimes allows him to manipulate people close to him to achieve his goals. Moreover, this involves not only the formation of different reputational markets that are strongly territorialised in poor neighbourhoods in Rio de Janeiro but also the arrangement of "schemes" through these moral communities based on the relationships of trust and secrecy established between these men.

In reality, when "doing Troy", the police placed Wellington in a more fragile situation when compared to the agents taking part in the investigation. He was not only "infiltrated" in the "trap house" on his own for weeks, but was also placed on the police raid that arrested the traffickers. The candidate was fully aware of his lower position in the hierarchy of these police communities, admitting his submission to his police peers. However, Wellington said he enjoyed carrying out any "missions" he was assigned beyond the "security jobs" he did. His satisfaction was related not only to the fact that they opened

doors to the enjoyment of money and status in places where the police were seen as a local "centre of power". Equally important was the fact that he enjoyed these experiences, such as "doing Troy" in an abandoned house, raiding favelas, or even having orgies with prostitutes in a brothel. The "pi-lícias" do not see this subordinated position as a stigma, even though it seems to be a burden to be paid for the instrumentalisation that many of them suffer at the hands of the police. Even though it is hierarchical, it is still a two-way relationship.

The experiences I have encountered in my work have led me to believe that the way people perceive the categories of "police," "pi-lícia," and "militia" reflects a fundamentally moral content and appeal in a sort of "mirror reflections". How these social categories are portrayed or distorted depends on individuals' positions in response to their daily life situations, where values and interests are context-dependent. In this dynamic, a "pi-lícia" may be stigmatised or praised by a "policeman." The actions of a "militia" can bring them closer to or farther away from what my interlocutors consider to be "the police." According to Eilbaum (2012), these "mirrored reflections" evoke situational moralities that defy any overarching social

structures. Consequently, no single universal principle is capable of guiding all these contents in the same way.

As non-definitive conclusions, the article addresses two key issues: 1) The data presented here emphasises the need to rethink how we view urban illegal markets in the RMRJ. Rather than categorising armed groups and territories as simply "drug trafficking" or "militia," it is essential to understand the complex and interrelated nature of power in this criminal landscape. This involves examining the fluctuating political communities guided by situational moralities; 2) It is crucial to recognise the role of the police forces, particularly the PMERJ in Rio de Janeiro, in perpetuating unequal distribution of lethal violence in the city. Moreover, the police force is increasingly influential in shaping the perceptions and aspirations of peripheral youth. Many young people see joining the police as a way to improve their lives, both materially and symbolically. This aligns with the view expressed by Prata (2019) and Feltrán (2021) that becoming a "jagunço" for individuals like Wellington is also a political statement in response to unmet demands for rights and integration in a society marked by profound inequality.

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Notes

- (1) It should be noted that a "scheme" refers to a personal relationship-based arrangement for operating a given illegal market. In the absence of formal regulatory mechanisms over transactions, a "scheme" always requires trust and secrecy between its participants. Additional information on this topic can be found in the works of Costa & Oliveira (2014) and Rodrigues (2022).
- (2) The preparation course where I first conducted my participant observation provided a training program based on previous intellectual exams held by PMERJ in 2010 and 2014. Theoretical knowledge was required in various subjects, including Portuguese grammar and writing, history, geography, sociology, traffic legislation, human rights, and IT. As a geographer and anthropology PhD student at the time, my initial interactions with candidates developed from my role as an informal monitor in the humanities field.
- (3) During my fieldwork, I discovered that "cop life" is a term used by police officers in Rio de Janeiro to describe the unique aspects of their daily routine and lifestyle. This term encompasses the risks and opportunities associated with police work. Stories about cop life often involve elements of the "police subculture" (Reiner, 2004), which is closely related to the sense of mission among police officers, their desire for action, and their conservative and authoritarian worldviews. The "us/them" division between police and civilians is also a significant part of this subculture.
- (4) Reference in Portuguese to the .38 millimetre calibre revolver.
- (5) The maximum age limit for entering the military police career in Rio de Janeiro was traditionally 30 years old. However, a legal dispute arose due to challenges to Bill 346/19, authored by state deputy Martha Rocha, which changed the maximum age limit to 35. The bill was approved by the Rio de Janeiro State Legislative Assembly (ALERJ) but was vetoed by former governor Wilson Witzel at the request of the PMERJ. In 2019, the ALERJ overturned the governor's veto, which had tried for months to annul the law and keep the maximum age at 30. Due to the legal uncertainty of the situation, some candidates, like Wellington, decided to take the exams, and if they were disqualified due to their age, their appointments could theoretically be disputed in court. However, in the last PMERJ exams in 2024, state deputies and the government agreed on the maximum age limit of 32 years old.
- (6) At the time of fieldwork, the starting monthly salary in PMERJ was 3,452.55 reais (approximately 650 dollars). The minimum monthly wage in Brazil was 998 reais (200 dollars).
- (7) "Sacanagem" is a term used within Rio's police universe to describe the illegal activities carried out by officers for financial gain.

- (8) Another native category related to the PMERJ's universe. It is used to describe management cops who do not "have the guts" to work in the streets.
- (9) These specific spaces, which I term as 'police places', are not mere geographical locations. As Massey (1991) posits, they are specific spaces where a unique set of social relations converge around shared experiences, such as what it means 'to be a police officer'. Notably, police territoriality is not limited to officers' duties while on duty; it extends to spaces where the presence of police officers as residents or regulars implies a degree of control over the local circulation of goods, people, and information. For a methodological discussion on the police places, see Rodrigues (2023).
- (10) Following again Mizrahi's (2018) remarks, the notion of "masculine person" appears to overlap with other "violent masculinities" such as "funkeiros", drug traffickers, jiu-jitsu fighters (Cechetto, 2004) and football fans (Monteiro, 2003). In fact, many of the candidates I met often frequented these other cultural circles in Rio de Janeiro.
- (11) "Militia" in Rio de Janeiro refers to a paramilitary group or its members individually.
- (12) My interlocutors commonly called those groups "milícia de ganso" (goose militia). In PMERJ jargon, "ganso" is a native category used to describe drug users or dealers. See Cruz e Costa (2021).
- (13) PMERJ's intelligence agency.
- (14) "Snitch", police informant.
- (15) Crackhead in Brazilian Portuguese.
- (16) Civil Police officers in Rio's police jargon.
- (17) Slang for cocaine use.
- (18) Military Police officers in Rio's police jargon.
- (19) "Segurança Presente" is a private policing program that focuses on patrolling important commercial and tourist areas on foot, bicycles, motorcycles, and vehicles. Every patrol includes off-duty legitimate police officers, former military personnel, and civilians. Currently, there are 40 units located in the capital and RMRJ, funded through partnerships between the state and local businesses. For more details about the program, visit <https://www.segurancapresente.rj.gov.br/>.
- (20) See Rodrigues (2024, forthcoming).

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