

Chaos as a strategy and “protection” as a commodity in São Paulo’s “Cracolândia”

Caos como estratégia e a “proteção” como mercadoria na “Cracolândia” paulistana

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Abstract

The article presents a recent analysis of Cracolândia between 2017 and 2023, when the policy of dispersing homeless people in the territory was resumed through violent operations conducted by public security agents. After providing a brief history of the most recent police operation, which was called Operação Caronte (Charon Operation), the dispersion of people and the spread of flows are discussed as a strategy to create chaos and enable political commodities, practices, and negotiations on the border between legal and illegal. The study used the following methodologies: field research, critical cartography, consultation with the media, and experiments, aiming to produce knowledge jointly with collectives and civil society organizations operating in the territory.

Keywords: illegalisms; space production; Cracolândia; political commodity.

Resumo

O artigo apresenta uma leitura recente da Cracolândia paulistana entre 2017 e 2023, quando foi retomada a política de dispersão das pessoas em situação de rua no território por meio de operações violentas conduzidas por agentes da segurança pública. Após breve histórico da mais recente operação policial, denominada Operação Caronte, discute-se a dispersão das pessoas e o espalhamento de fluxos como estratégia para instalar o caos e viabilizar mercadorias políticas, práticas e negociações na fronteira entre o legal e o ilegal. Como metodologias, o artigo mobiliza pesquisas de campo, cartografias críticas, consulta a meios de comunicação e experimentações no sentido da produção de um conhecimento situado junto a coletivos e organizações da sociedade civil com atuação no território.

Palavras-chave: ilegalismos; produção do espaço; Cracolândia; mercadoria política.



Introduction

For more than three decades, '*Cracolândia*' (Crackland) has persisted in the center of the city of São Paulo, specifically in the region that comprises the neighborhoods da *Luz*, *Santa Ifigênia* and *Campos Elíseos*. This permanence makes it obvious the failure of countless police interventions, and, in a broader sense, the "war on drugs" strategies.¹ Although betting on failure is counterproductive, despite rare exceptions, the public policies to deal with this situation repeat the old formula: large police operations to incarcerate and violently displace people who use crack through methods of torture. This form of action is experienced for more than two decades, since 1997 with a operation called Zero Tolerance (Alves and Pereira, 2021).

Here, the objective is not to reconstruct the history of failed police operations in *Cracolândia*, which have already been very well systematized and documented by different researchers (Rui, 2014b; Menezes, 2016; Marino, 2021; Calil, 2022), but observe some recent situations that has been transforming the territory in a relevant way since 2017. That year, after the interruption of a pilot program based on harm reduction perspective,² followed the resumption of the policy of violent dispersal of people through public Security agents. As methodologies, this article mobilizes field research, critical cartographies, consultation with the media and experiments towards the production of a situated knowledge (Haraway, 1995) alongside collectives and civil society organizations operating in this territory.³

Although we are talking about a specific and recent moment, the starting point here is the question: to what extent can insistence on error be interpreted as a strategy to maintain this situation? To this end, the article is divided into three parts that present the game of forces taking place in this territory, revealing how the permanence of *Cracolândia* makes political commodities viable (Misse, 2010; Hirata, 2010) as part of the shuffling the boundaries between the formal and the informal, legal and illicit. It is in this interlacing weave that both, everyday practices and sociability networks and official State interventions, continually move between the legal and the illegal in the urban production (Telles and Hirata, 2007; Telles, 2010). Sociologist Vera Telles (2010) highlights how this game of forces and the construction of alliances in certain political microconjunctures are central characteristics in the dynamics of disputed Latin American urban environments such as "*Cracolândia* in São Paulo".

The starting point consists of a brief historical review, where we highlight important elements to understand the processes of space production, the emergence and permanence of *Cracolândia* and the stigmas that currently delimit this territory as clandestine and criminal. Still as a historical review, we highlight the characteristics of the control strategies used in the last three decades, identifying a pendulum movement between dispersion and containment.⁴ In the second part of the article, we present a critical reading of the most recent police intervention in *Cracolândia*, called Operation Caronte (Charon) (2021-2022), where we mapped the dispersion, the illegalities and other control devices used towards the bodies and territory.

Finally, we present how the policy of dispersion and the installation of chaos have enabled political commodities and criminal State practices (Tilly, 1985), based on three arguments: (1) the demarcation of this territory as illegal and criminal justifies a series of urban illegalities, which expand the processes of speculation and financialization of the production of space (rentism, fictitious capital, from public funds) that has already been contained in urban plans since the 1990s; (2) the use of a situation of chaos, based on the violent dispersion of the '*fluxo*' (flow),⁵ increases conflicts on a local scale, creating popular support for the adoption of increasingly violent methods, such as compulsory hospitalizations, a process that mobilizes moral elements, but which have as a backdrop the great economic interest on the part of therapeutic communities; and (3) the chaos installed in the territory has transformed protection and security into an increasingly valuable commodity, whose control has been disputed by different actors, including public security forces, responsible, at the limit, for implementing the policy of dispersal. In other words, the same people who implement chaos are those who sell protection, which we can identify as a "militia logic" (Rizek, 2019).

Brief history of a popular territory

At the beginning of the 20th century, with the transition from an agrarian economy to an urban-industrial economy, associated with the coffee market crisis, the *Campos Eliseos* region lost importance and political

status (Branquinho, 2007). From 1920 onwards, part of the coffee barons' mansions became guesthouses and tenements, further expanding the popular presence in the region. It is important to highlight that the popular presence in the observed territory is historical, although initially designed to serve as housing for the elites, the *Luz* and *Campos Eliseos* neighborhoods have always coexisted with the presence of poor workers, living mainly in tenements located in the *Santa Ifigênia* neighborhood. Targets of hygiene policies and evictions, even at the end of the 19th century, the actions of public authorities in the region were guided by the inspection of these popular housing units, identified as the spaces responsible for the spread of epidemics such as yellow fever in the city (Borin, 2021).

The "abandonment" of the mansions and the departure of the elites to other regions is the first movement to devalue the area. In the subsequent decades of 1930-1940, "beautification" projects and numerous projects and constructions to implement large avenues during Prestes Maia's administration attempted to recover the region. The result was the dispossession and removal of thousands of people. At the time, in the *Luz* region, 86 people were displaced with nowhere to go, and they became known as the "homeless legion" (Bonduki, 2004). Thus, in the 1940s, the territory experienced the beginning of the dynamics that would begin to settle in space approximately seventy years later (Calil, 2022).

In 1953, interventions against the prostitution and gaming house in *Bom Retiro*, a neighboring neighborhood, resulted in the migration of this dynamic to the region. Along with the displacement of these practices came a range of activities that accompany

this market, such as bars, nightclubs, hotels, restaurants, adult cinemas, among others (Jorge, 1988). The characteristics and consequences of this intervention activate a moral degradation as a milestone in the trajectory of this territory, which became to be identified as the “*Boca do Lixo*” (trash mouth) (Joanides, 1977). In the 1960s, the implementation of the bus station in front of Júlio Prestes square significantly expanded the circulation of people in the territory and, consequently, the presence of businesses and popular dynamics. This dynamic, while enjoying relative tolerance on the part of police authorities, has also always been the target of state repression and violence; arrests and removal practices were frequent.

In 1982 the bus station was deactivated, leaving an idle structure of cheap hotels and bars, which, together with companies

of clandestine transport, begin to operate a demand that still exists in the territory, accentuating the process of “degradation of the area” in the social imaginary. When crack arrived in the city of São Paulo, it didn't take long to establish itself in the region, in the early 1990s, initially occupying part of these hotels and progressively the surrounding streets. During this period, associated with the first anti-trafficking policies, the first projects to revitalize the area also emerged, where the main strategy was the implementation of large cultural facilities, called “anchors”, which, based on their presence, as a type of an “urban acupuncture”, would promote a movement to attract or retake the center by elites and middle classes.

The historical movement described above cannot be understood as a deterministic view of history. This would obscure the complex

Figure 1 – Police action by the 3rd DP in 1969)



Source: São Paulo's State Public Archive.

Figure 2 – Furniture from a prostitution house in ‘Boca do Lixo’, destroyed with sledgehammers by the police in Júlio Mesquita square



Source: (Cenas..., 2022).

disputes that have existed for centuries in the production of this space in the city of São Paulo. Recognizing this trajectory is important for us to understand that the popular presence in this territory is historic and has always been the target of projects and attempts of expulsion by the State and its agents, associated with private interests.

It is evident that the State's strategies and interests in the region have changed over time. Currently, the predominance of financialization in the economy and in the production of space results in other types of intervention in the territory, and public authorities become responsible for removing people and expropriating stigmatized areas, opening the border for the execution of large revitalization projects operationalized by private actors via concessions and partnerships. A financialization under the control of neoliberalism: which instrumentalizes social policies for the economic modeling of partnerships. The management of inequalities, spectacular public policies, the form of instrumentalization of the production of space – including urban planning strategies – of the present are not the same during this long period – even though in all these years violence has been the usual form.

Control strategies containment or dispersal

During the 1990s, when the concentration of people who use crack on the streets began, the media and public authorities' discourse treated the issue as a problem of crime, a vision more linked to the moral aspects in relation to the illegality of crack cocaine than public health. At the beginning of the 2000s, in parallel with the

public authorities' plans to revitalize the central area of the city, the interests of the property market began to gain strength, and the need to put an end to Cracolândia suddenly became an urgency on the political agenda. Gradually, Cracolândia gained space in electoral speeches, mainly after *Operação Limpa* (Clean Operation) and the introduction of the *Nova Luz* Project during the administration of then mayor José Serra (2005-2006), and later throughout the administration of Gilberto Kassab (2006-2012).

With each election, it has become a more present element in debates and confrontations between campaigns, almost always under the urgency and slogan of "ending Cracolândia", and giving substance to the need and justification for state intervention. The important thing seems to be to act with a firm fist, regardless of the consequences it produces. In political discourse and popular imagination, the territory began to be understood as a social and urban wound that needed to be stopped, justifying violent and immediate projects and interventions with the aim of "revitalizing" this territory. Thus, the violent interventions unleashed continually support territorial control strategies, whether through the provision of compulsory hospitalizations or daily police violence against the homeless population, or through the eviction of poor workers living in *malocas*,⁶ pensions and/or housing occupations.

To control the presence of *Cracolândia* in the midst of projects to transform this territory, historically, intervention proposals have oscillated between strategies of containment or dispersal according to what better fits the interests of the moment, and these usually are implemented by public security forces. On the one hand, when the objective was to show

responses to electoral promises, dispersion was adopted as a form of action, as happened from 2012 onwards with the operation called ‘Pain and Suffering’ under Kassab’s administration, which instituted daily police actions with the aim of dismantle social networks and gathering points, avoiding people from settling in a specific place. On the other hand, in other moments outside the spotlight of the election, the strategy was of controlled containment, forcing the invisibility of this reality for society, and thus creating, at the same time, a kind of zone of controlled tolerance, social deprivation and annihilation of citizenship through everyday violence. This “accordion” effect between containment and dispersion sets the rhythm of the State’s control and management strategies in *Cracolândia*.

Caronte Operation: deepening policies of dispersion

The ongoing dispersal tactic was updated under the name of “Operação Caronte”, (Charon Operation),⁷ carried out between 2021 and 2022 in six phases with several stages each, and led by the Civil Police in partnership with the Metropolitan Civil Guard (GCM) and the Military Police (PM). The City Hall and the Government of the State of São Paulo claim that the current actions are based on “investigation and intelligence” to identify the alleged drug traffickers. However, in addition to the weekly execution of several arrest warrants, police forces simply repeat the script of intimidation and violence, using batons, pepper spray and gas bombs to avoid and

disperse concentrations of homeless people, maintaining them circulating through different parts of the city center.

Within the scope of Charon Operation, in May 2022, police forces moved the *Cracolândia* concentration from *Princesa Isabel* square to *Helvétia* street, close to the *Santa Cecília* region. A first movement had already been rehearsed, when in March of the same year the concentration of people who use drugs was moved from the square known as “*Praça do Cachimbo*” (Pipe square), on the corner of Júlio Prestes square and Cleveland street. The movement of the concentration of people, during this period, seems to have happened through negotiations between public authorities and the so-called “disciplines”, figures who organize local drug trafficking and mediate conflicts between people, often violently. Delegate Roberto Monteiro, responsible for ‘Caronte Operation’, in an interview with the G1 portal, stated:

We had news that the concentrations of people who use drugs, by order of a criminal faction, a leader, moved to other locations, not only to Princesa Isabel square, where we already have intelligence work being carried out there, but also to other points, as was already happening with our repression of drug trafficking. (Guedes and Santos, 2022)

After the operation in Princesa Isabel square in May 2022, the concentration of people who use crack spread to different points. *LabCidade*, in partnership with other researchers and activists, carried out mapping that identified at least sixteen locations where the concentrations of people who use drugs migrated (Marino et al., 2022a). More than

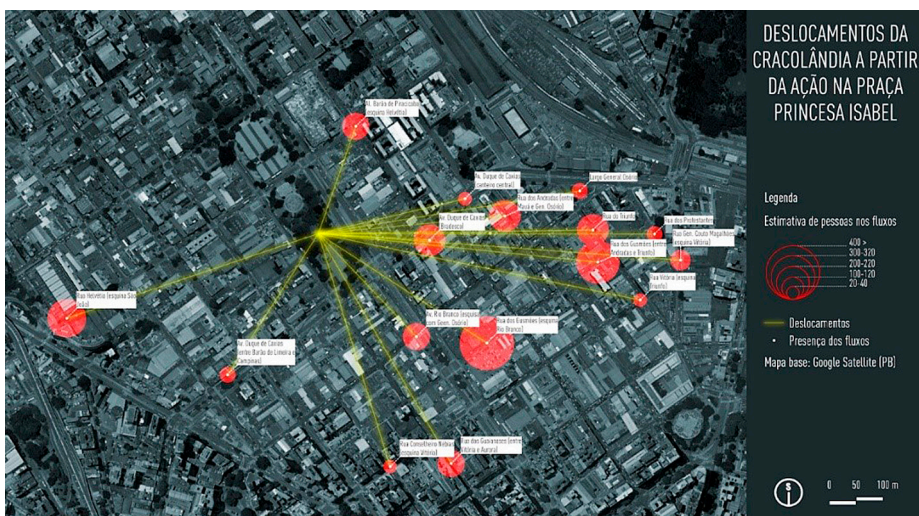
saying to where it went, the objective of the mapping was to deconstruct the government narrative at the time, which stated that the dispersion tactic was a success, that, in addition that saying that the operation was qualifying access to public services, would be generating a reduction of the public crack use scenes. In a text published in the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*, Alexis Vargas, the then executive secretary of Strategic Projects at São Paulo City Hall, stated: "The numbers confirm that we are on the right path. *Cracolândia* is getting smaller, users are receiving more service and the center of the capital of São Paulo is increasingly occupied by families" (Vargas, 2022).

The results illustrated on the map showed that *Cracolândia* did not shrink, it became more dispersed, occupying several places instead of a single one. In smaller and itinerant concentrations located within a radius that does not exceed 750 meters from *Princesa Isabel* square. These small

gatherings of people reproduce the dynamics of *Cracolândia* in various corners of the region of *Luz, Santa Cecília, República, Campos Elíseos* and *Santa Ifigênia*.

The map is a current photograph of the different places where users were concentrated in June 2022, which does not mean that these places are occupied at the moment, as the combined action of the Military and Civil Police and the Metropolitan Civil Guard remains oriented towards maintain the constant dispersion of homeless and people who use drugs. This scenario makes it very difficult to carry out an accurate count of the number of people. The estimate from this survey is that between 1,000 and 2,000 people are in a situation of nomadism in the center of the city of São Paulo. The difficulty of producing this estimate is just one of the reflections of disastrous police approaches. If it is not even possible to know the exact size of this

Figure 3 – Displacement from *Cracolândia* after the dispersal action carried out in May 2022 in *Princesa Isabel* square).



Source: Marino et al. (2022a).

population, the provision of health and social assistance services is undoubtedly even more compromised. Furthermore, violence causes strong distrust among individuals towards public agencies, hindering the approaches and formation of bonds by health and social assistance teams. Field reports confirm that after dispersing people from *Princesa Isabel Square*, '*Consultório na Rua*'⁸ (health street agents) were greeted with thrown rocks as they approached the groups, something that is not common in this territory.

The stated overall objective of *Caronte Operation* was to combat drug trafficking and dismantle organized crime in the central region. However, the sixth and final phase of the operation revealed itself as a tool for social and territorial control, perpetuating intersectional discriminations through oppressions of race, class, and gender (Balera et al., 2023). A recent study conducted by the Public Defender's Office of the State of São Paulo provided crucial insights into the procedures and outcomes of the mass detentions carried out under Operation Caronte. The sixth phase aimed to curb drug consumption in public places, justified by the possibility of offenses under Article 28 of Brazil's Drug Law n. 11.343/2006 (Brazil, 2006), according to Mayor Ricardo Nunes.⁹

According to research by the Public Defender's Office (Balera et al., 2023), between September 20 and November 24 of 2022, in a period of 66 days, 841 people were detained simply for carrying pipes. An average of approximately 15 arrests per day, usually in groups of 12 people. It is important to highlight that the Public Defender's Office was able to access information from the legal proceedings of only 641 people. The analysis

of the files of the 641 people detained shows that the main criterion for police approaches was being on the streets of influence in the *Cracolândia* region and carrying a pipe in their hands, causing the operation to receive the popular name of "*Operação Cachimbo*" (Pipe Operation). However, Article 28 of the Drug Law, while prohibiting the consumption and possession of certain substances, does not criminalize the possession of objects and instruments for consumption.

Mass arrests for simply carrying a pipe are already illegal, in addition, the argument mobilized in the operation justified hundreds of arrests for investigation, another illegal conduct. It is important to highlight that article 50 of the Drug Law (Brazil, 2006) requires that in cases of arrests involving substances in the act, a toxicological report must be carried out in which the nature and quantity of the substance seized is verified, being this document mandatory for drafting the arrest report and establishing the materiality of the crime. In 73.6% of the pericial reports, only "remnants and dirt" were found in the seized pipes that justified the mass detention of 549 people. Subsequently, these arrests were considered illegal by the judiciary because they contained tiny amounts of substances. Also according to the Public Defender's Office report on the process of mass detention in the *Cracolândia* region:

[The] control no longer focuses on the drugs or the people, but on the mediating objects. The question "do you have your pipe there?" [...] is a reflection of the processes of objectification and criminalization. People who are objectified are now incriminated for carrying things that appear to come to life." (Balera et al., 2023, p. 92)

Another relevant piece of information is the spatial relationship of police operations in the last phase of Caronte is that all 641 detentions analyzed occurred within a perimeter of two kilometers around the 77th Police Station; and in 335 of the arrests, the documents show the same address at *Helvetia* street, n. 1, in addition to another 186 arrests also being in other points on the same street. In addition to population selectivity, there is also rigor in the territorial selectivity of police action. According to Balera et al. (ibid.), the Summary Reports of the proceedings for the detained individuals overlooked important specifics such as gender, race, and housing status, highlighting the mass nature of the detentions and the erasure of the individualities of the people.

Beyond mass detentions, *Caronte* Operation had a significant influence on the execution of health policies in the territory. After being arrested for possessing only pipes, the detained individuals were taken to the police station, where they awaited transfer to the *Vergueiro* Emergency Care Unit (UPA) for ongoing a possible health treatment. Upon arrival at the UPA, following a medical evaluation, a psychiatric hospitalization at *Cantareira* Hospital, located in the far north of the city, was primarily offered. Treatment at the designated CAPS¹⁰ facility was only offered to those who did not accept hospitalization. While waiting at the police station, law enforcement officials resorted to intimidation tactics such as: "pull down your pants, get naked there, get into the cell, do you want to stay here in jail or do you want to continue treatment there?"¹¹ (ibid., p. 68), prompting individuals to quickly opt for the first option proposed, hospitalization at *Cantareira* Hospital. According to the

Public Defender's survey, the management of care processes mediated by the force of intimidations from Caronte Operation resulted in 99% of hospitalizations being "voluntary", yet the average length of stay in the *Cantareira* hospital was only three days, raising questions about the voluntariness of hospitalization and the ineffectiveness of only one care offer linked to police coercion.

The duality between hospitalization and imprisonment is the operational mode for managing urban and social issues in city spaces, where the threat of imprisonment becomes a tool for territorial control over vulnerable populations, such as individuals experiencing homelessness or drug use. This raises the question: what is the effectiveness of Caronte's Operation actions in combating drug trafficking? The operation appears more as a mechanism for controlling bodies and devaluing properties in these locations, exacerbating conflicts among residents, small property owners (boarding houses, residences, businesses), and large corporations involved in public-private partnerships with the state.

The expulsion of these people by the force of the state, coupled with the social networks and survival strategies of people experiencing homelessness, quickly leads to the emergence of new agglomerations. These new locations, although constantly changing, remain in the same region, in areas characterized by predominantly low-rise popular and collective housing – such as boarding houses and housing occupations – as well as popular commerce, that in one way are seen as "obstacles" to the advancement of urban transformation projects facilitated by public-private partnerships (PPPs).

Thus, recent interventions mirror the disastrous outcomes of previous operations like "*Sufoco*" or "*Dor e Sofrimento*," (Pain and suffering) carried out a decade ago, which resulted in dispersals famously known as "crack processions" (Rui, 2014). This approach effectively mobilizes the state around violence against drug users, operationalized within a specific spatial regime of dispossession combined with the actions of various police forces. Such a public policy choice, which prioritizes police action for complex social and urban issues like those in the area known as "Cracolândia," triggers multiple tensions within the territory, shaping disputes over narratives about the same reality. Next, we will undertake a critical analysis comparing different perspectives on approaching the complexity of the context in the region, aiming to foster more realistic understandings of the territory.

Conflicts, illegalities, and political commodities

The state as an inducer of urban illegality

The dispersal of *Cracolândia* serves neither the interests of the homeless population nor improves the living conditions of those who work or reside in the city center. However, it clearly serves to open up property market expansion in the area. In 2012, alongside Operation "Pain and Suffering," the administration of Mayor Gilberto Kassab demolished dozens of properties in the *Luz*, *Santa Ifigênia*, and *Campos Elíseos* regions. This movement was revived in 2017 by the Mayor João Dória, building was demolished with people inside.¹² These properties, often

providing precarious housing for the poor in the city center, were partially replaced by large apartment towers facilitated through a Public-Private Partnership that did not accommodate the local displaced residents (Almeida et al., 2020).

This movement continues: within the operational radius of *Caronte* Operation, bars and businesses are closed and sealed under the pretext of irregularities, similar to many others across the city, yet here they are targeted for final closure. The presence of crack cocaine in the region for over three decades has cultivated a social fear narrative, gradually stigmatizing the local dynamics as a decisive factor in shaping urban geographies of crime and violence (Avendaño et al., 2019). Beyond its complexities in the intersection of social, legal, and public health domains, crack carries moral representations of illegality, becoming a key element in the devaluation-appreciation cycle in spaces that concentrate drug use scenes. By aligning with urban hygiene principles, it enhances spatial adjustments driven by property market speculation tied to urban renewal and redevelopment projects in the city center (Rolnik, 2019; Calil, 2022). The existence of a "*Cracolândia*" is not accidental, and its elimination is not the primary choice of public administration. It is worth reflecting on the utility these exception territories acquire in urban political economy, characterized by perpetual ambiguity and permanent transience (Rolnik, 2019).

An association between illegality, violence, and economic, political, racial, generic and sexualized inequalities, produces urban spaces regarded as having "questionable reputation," delineating imaginary perimeters susceptible to both, parallel clandestine

practices, and "exceptional interventions" by the state (Rolnik and Calil, 2021). This process involves property market speculation that proves effectiveness in perpetuating cycles of capital accumulation through dispossession and expropriation in Latin American cities, yet it falls short of providing better alternatives for local housing and social issues (Rolnik, 2015). A partnership between public and private sectors that, through spatial readjustments driven by the market:

[...] operates under the guise of sanitary morality associated with drug prohibition. Urban intervention projects multiply as 'solutions', while inequalities and selectively distributed violence also multiply. It is in this scenario that the city becomes a perverse tool that segregates, devalues, demonizes, and punishes." (Rolnik and Calil, 2021, p. 4)

The imaginary borders surrounding the "Cracolândia" region submitted the territory to ambiguous logics between legal/illegal, legitimate/illegitimate (Rolnik, 2019), where what is permitted or not is arbitrary, decided based on convenience. Thus, within the context of the arbitrary urgency of "Cracolândia", the government gains popular approval for urban interventions that would hardly be legitimized in other situations, resulting in demolitions and forced removals.

The urban legislation has become insignificant (Maricato, 2003), and the arbitrariness in its enforcement reflects the alliance between the state and the dynamics of the real estate market. The state acts as an inducer of urban illegality and consequently

of housing informality (Tibo, 2011). In 2018, the demolition of nearly the entire block 36 in *Campos Elíseos* resulted in the removal of approximately 200 people (LabCidade, 2018), even though this block is zoned as ZEIS 3, a Special Zone of Social Interest designated for the construction of affordable housing and the maintenance of the local population. In its place, a hospital was built, facilitated through a public-private partnership. Certainly, the construction of a new hospital is valuable for the city, but the illegalities and violence in this process do not justify the means. The hundreds of displaced people did not receive adequate housing assistance, remaining in a situation of housing insecurity. An example is the trajectory of a family who, after being removed from Block 36, went to live with relatives in the *Wilton Paes de Almeida* Building, also known as the 'glass tower', which collapsed just over a month later due to a fire, forcing these people to relocate once again (Villela, 2018).

Dispersion as a bet in conflict

The arrival of new concentrations of people who use crack shapes new dynamics in the spatial production of the region. On one hand, businesses have closed, apartments have emptied, and owners have closed their properties. On the other hand, a series of disruptions affect the daily lives of residents and workers in the vicinity. An example of this occurred in December 2022 at the Public-Private Partnership Housing development on *Gusmões* Street, where residents endured four consecutive days without electricity due to

cable thefts. They were compelled to "kidnap" the Enel¹³ technicians to resolve the issue and restore power (Dias, 2022a).

New corners, sidewalks, and alleys are now occupied by the concentration of people using crack, transforming the city's circulation and heightening tensions and conflicts. While crack users are constantly moved by police force, downtown residents are adjusting their lifestyles: they've stopped frequenting restaurants or supermarkets due to the change of concentration of homeless people, hotels in the area had reservations canceled,¹⁴ and many have changed their routes or bus stops used. More recently, in November 2023, residents of the *Mauá* housing Occupation formed a human barrier and occupied a street for six consecutive nights to prevent police forces from displacing the concentration of people using drugs to their street (Marino and Santos, 2023). Thus, a state of permanent alert and insecurity is established, plunging the territory into the twilight of a moral fog.

On August 10, 2023, at an event promoted by the Public Defender's Office of the State of São Paulo,¹⁵ some local residents present requested that the Public Defender's Office also carry out a process of listening to the residents of the buildings, as they felt cornered between public power maneuvers and the concentration of people using drugs. Among the demands presented, they demanded for more living spaces. At the same time, they also expressed little willingness to coexist with others when they stated that they felt harmed by the presence and circulation of the homeless and crack dynamic near their homes. Arguments like "we can't live here anymore.

It seems that there is a preference that they can live here and we cannot"; and "I don't bother the drug user, because I enter my house and I'm there, but he's at my door, I can't get through, my right to come and go is violated" (Field diary, August 10, 2023)) express the strong disintegration and emergence of conflicts in everyday social relations. The discomforts and positions of residents emerge as an element that highlights the conflict, the dispute over space and the challenge of implementing alternatives that guide collective coexistence and respect for difference. The foundations of the sense of community are thoroughly dissolved, and the dispute over narratives creates socio-spatial separations and differentiations in the territory.

The State reinforcement of the enemy figure justifies the implementation of policies of annihilation or expulsion. This impulse is present even in statements that may be considered more moderate, such as: 'we're not against each other here, I'm not in favor of residents wanting to burn out the drug users, on the contrary, I wish all users could receive treatment, but elsewhere" (ibid.).

Residents and merchants who, after this year's police actions, began to live with the fragments of '*Cracolândia*' and are placed in an extreme situation, and demand immediate measures against the disturbances caused by the repetition of displacement of homeless and people who use drugs. In addition to the hostility towards homeless people, the feeling of animosity is transferred to activists, workers in the psychosocial care network (Nascimento and Pieve, 2021) and collectives that have been working for decades for rights guarantee.

Figure 4 – “Lives at Craco matter” act mobilized by collectives and workers in the psychosocial care network)



Source: Moreira (2022).

The spreading of the people (*fluxo*) has made visible a discontent among a portion of civil society opposed to these collectives and workers, as these would supposedly defend the permanence of Cracolândia and would even profit from it (Marino, Lima, & Jacon, 2023). Throughout 2022, there were several demonstrations by residents of these neighborhoods, once again demanding the adoption of radical measures such as forced hospitalization and aggressive police operations. In November 2022, a manifesto was drafted by the community in Caronte support of Operation (Portal Santa Cecília e Barra Funda, 2022). Two months earlier, in September, prompted by a petition from residents, Civil Police conducted an action against artists and activists from the *Teto, Trampo e Tratamento*¹⁶ project, who conduct cultural and harm reduction actions to the people that use drugs every Thursday. On that occasion, in addition to victims of police

brutality, professionals and participants in the activity were detained for investigation, and a bicycle with sound equipment for the activity was seized. The bicycle, as a work tool, was returned 13 months later, in October 2023, with the intervention of the Public Prosecutor's Office (Dias, 2023).

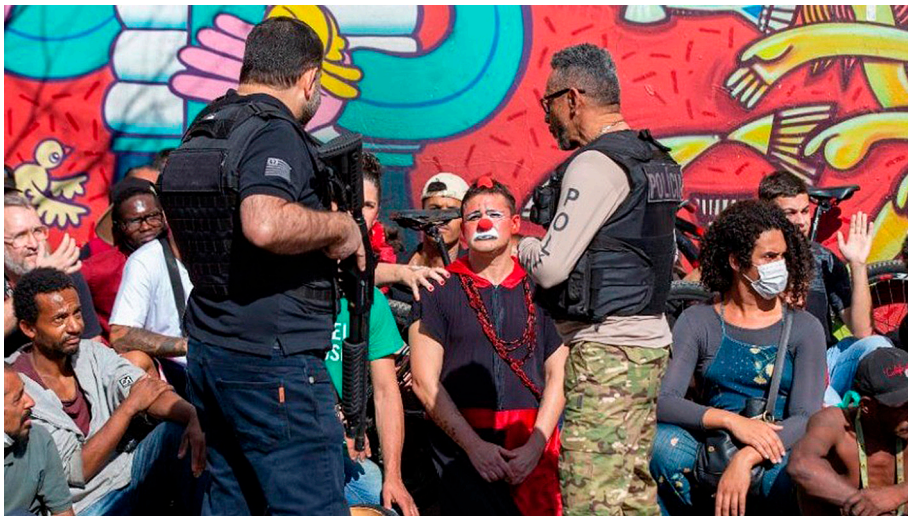
This climate of animosity takes away the focus and makes it difficult to debate propositional actions that can improve the lives of all populations that live and work in the central region of São Paulo. Bridges to dialogue are quickly burned, new alliances are formed, the population leans on and legitimizes police violence, and collectives become increasingly isolated in the public sphere. Positioned as enemies, the different groups of civil society embody the form of war in which the territory was shaped: residents and merchants against militants and activists, and the homeless population as a 'mass of maneuver'.

Figures 5 and 6 – An act contrary to the presence of Cracolândia mobilized by residents of Santa Cecília and Campos Elíseos. And publicity art for the act in defense of Caronte Operation



Source: Moreira (2022) and Reproduction of a WhatsApp group, in 2022.

Figure 7 – A group of activists and users, organized around the “Housing, work and treatment” project, are detained by the civil police for disturbing the order, an action that would have been justified by a petition from residents of the region



Source: Dias (2022b).

This divergence of perspectives materializes in a narrative that opposes harm reduction strategies and the guarantee of rights, where the care process is built on dialogue and respect for the singularities of individuals. The heightened emotions of different community actors hasten immediate responses and call for compulsory hospitalization as a magical solution and urgent necessity. In this arena, the narrative of compulsory hospitalization has gained strong popular support in recent years,¹⁷ especially since the maintenance of the dispersal policy since 2022, driven and sustained by *Caronte* Operation. The long-lasting maintenance of the dispersal policy, even though it generates enormous political strain on the leaders of the moment, intensifies the conflict by promoting discomfort and reactions from the local population and society, who, by seeking immediate solutions, start to support and adhere to the idea of forced hospitalization as the only possible alternative. However, this popular support is strategic for the maintenance and expansion of Therapeutic Communities as care equipment. This treatment model is often burdened with moral precepts, as many units are linked to evangelical or Catholic churches, a model that has received increasing power and public investment (Soares, 2020), despite numerous reports of torture and abuse.¹⁸

The creation of protection and extortion markets

The territory became a real powder keg. The constant displacement of people and the associated impacts amplify existing conflicts in the region. Throughout the year there

were countless reports of violence, whether of robberies and thefts carried out by people who frequent the drug use scenes, or by some merchants and residents who, outraged by the current situation, resorted to physical confrontations, forcibly expelling homeless individuals.

The dispersal policy also contributes to the increased presence of private security groups in the area (Marino et al., 2022). It has become common to see shopkeepers accompanied by their private security guards wielding wood sticks and machetes on the streets. This phenomenon was already noticeable, for instance, in the blocks where *Porto Seguro*¹⁹ projects are located and on *Santa Ifigênia* Street, known for its trade in computer, electrical, and lighting products. In recent weeks, the presence of these private security groups has been highly visible along *Duque de Caxias* Avenue, creating a sort of "safe zone" free from the presence of "crack users". Recent police interventions have the effect of escalating the presence of these groups, transforming safety and security into an increasingly profitable commodity. During a public hearing on Bill n. 448/23,²⁰ local merchants claimed to spend R\$ 7,000 on private security in the area. This has posed a dilemma for local residents and traders because those who refuse or cannot afford to pay for this "security service"—operated through a militia-style extortion logic—end up with the drug use scene settling at their doorstep or commercial establishments.

The role of public security agents in private security groups is notorious in the city of São Paulo, it is an old practice for active or retired police officers to do informal extra jobs for neighborhood security. But in *Cracolândia*

we identified a new dynamic: the presence of these two armed forces has modified the cartography of *Cracolândia* in the territory, pointing to the reproduction of a “militia logic” in the central region. With the dispersion of the scenes of drug use, residents and local merchants began to suffer pressure from public security agents to hire private security services, mobilizing the security guarantee and prompt assistance from state forces. In an article on *TV Bandeirantes*, audios sent by merchants denounce one of these extortion attempts:

“We are a family. If someone messes with me, at least 18 police vehicles will come. We are the GCM Rota,²¹ brother” [...] “I want to show you the difference between having security and not having it”. (Jozino, 2023)

The Sociologist Charles Tilly raises important concerns about the historical intertwining between mercantile capitalism, the production of violence and the creation of the State. When analyzing the history of the formation of European Nation-States, he highlights how banditry, piracy, extortion and clandestinity are confused with official State interventions in the production and maintenance of conflict (Tilly, 1985). Tilly examines how the logic of accumulation/concentration of capital and coercive means, via the monopolization of violence, are indispensable for the growth and consolidation of States. States, in order to continue to control capital and forms of coercion, carry out countless negotiations, in addition to creating devices for “regulation, compensation, distribution and protection” (Tilly, 2017, p. 107). However, the State is not a monolithic bloc, it always has its different tendencies, interests and

alliances, causing negotiations to move through extralegal/official terrain in the management of urban dynamics.

The mobilization of this reflection proposed by the author, far from naively moving the history of Europe to other parts of the world, can help in the search for understanding the current relations between the State, the production of violence and the sale of protection, mainly in Latin American contexts. In *Cracolândia*, the State offers the idea of protection via the constant presence of security forces while at the same time fomenting conflict via dispersal interventions, creating the idea of the “enemy” to be fought. However, it is the same State that, by producing the conflict, encourages the practice of private security by feeding a clandestine economy of “protection sales”. In a field report, residents of the territory told us that, when appealing to the delegate of the 77th P.D., he had “suggested” that they hire a private security company to solve their “problems”. Thus, by protecting some, the State makes others vulnerable, and the capitalist logic of contrast between privileges and annihilation follows.²² Tilly points out how the idea of protection is naturally dual, as it evokes security at the same time as it brings discomfort, and this oscillation depends on the context and the way in which the danger manifests itself (Tilly, 1985). A cyclical movement in which the State is able to manage and monopolize this protection network simultaneously with the creation of the threat. According to Tilly:

Since the repressive and extractive activities of governments often constitute the greatest current threats to the means of livelihoods of their own

citizens, many governments operate essentially the same way as criminals. (Ibid., p. 171)

In fact, protection has become a business, and this economy goes beyond the financial movement of the purchase/sale of private security, as it also becomes a political product in party and electoral disputes. A symbolic commodity that uses morality in relation to illegality to continue justifying the gradual offer of space to the private sector. For Tilly (2017), the negotiations constructed are asymmetrical and highlight the State's intentions in managing people, space and urban policies. These are dynamics that benefit from the state of exception that crosses the territory, where those who have the means of violence are also those who sell protection.

Final considerations

The perception and recognition of informal and illicit activities as part of the design of local dynamics are extremely important to broaden our view of the diverse possibilities of city production. An analysis of the policies carried out over the last three decades makes it clear that improvements in the quality of life of people who live, work and frequent the Cracolândia region will only be possible when the way in which the issue is dealt changes radically. The big problem in *Cracolândia* is not just crack, and the excessive focus on combating the substance and its supposed territory diverts attention from central issues such as poverty and extreme vulnerability of living conditions of the large number of people who frequent drug use scenes. These issues

are intensified and worsened by the historical processes of dispossession and violence that have been perpetuated.

The territorial dynamics in *Cracolândia* provide sufficient clues that the production of conflict can be a central part of planning, allowing a reflection on the contradictions in disputes over urban spaces. The State, there, acts not in the key of mediation or "problem solving"; – as stated in the speech – but in the systematic maintenance and reproduction of conflict as a driver of the dynamics of control, dispossession and extermination. Simplistic strategies that operate by disaggregating local organization and keeping the lives of resident populations (both drug users, homeless people and poor residents, as well as middle-class residents and merchants) on the edge of the unsustainable, and which desperately legitimize the continuity and deepening of the same policies based on violence, in its multiple dimensions.

The policy of dispersion and the multiplication of drug use scenes reveal how the war on drugs policy, in addition to not offering support and attention to people who have problems related to consumption, increases negative consequences in complex situations such as *Cracolândia* in São Paulo. However, intervention based on policing actions, "destined to always fail" (Parra et al., 2022), has been efficient in controlling spaces and populations, delimiting places that become the target of extralegal interventions. The current *Cracolândia* in São Paulo explains the State's effort to monopolize violence (Tilly, 1985), both in the literal and concrete sense of police operations and in the social dimension of the processes of exclusion, suffocation and fragmentation of political and community participation in processes of production of the

urban and fight for the right to the city. The violence of arbitrary actions is daily inflamed by the morality surrounding the illegality of drugs, demanding urgent responses, and, thus, making what is permitted or not, negotiated at all times. This ambiguity inherent to the territory is fertile ground for the production and use of political commodities through clandestine economies entangled in the arms of the State. A scenario in which the use of violence and coercion, as it comes from the State, has its legitimacy socially facilitated, and popular support for extermination gains strength in common sense and in new oppressive responses from the State itself (ibid.). A dehumanizing cycle.

What other approaches would be possible for more sensitive public policies that value the uniqueness and particularities of people who use drugs? And thus avoid the close and reductionist relationship between substance use, crime and disqualification. International experiences based on housing first policies, which aim to guarantee access to housing as the first step in a care process; and safe rooms for substance use combined with consistent health care measures, indicate that multidimensional policies that guarantee rights, such as housing and work, can bring better results; and that brutal and police-like confrontation only tends to generate more conflicts and produce contexts of violence and vulnerability.

Proposals from the perspective of Harm Reduction and guaranteeing rights were prepared within the scope of the *Mundaréu da Luz* Open Forum, which developed the Campos Elíseos Vivo,²³ an alternative plan with

the active participation of residents, workers and collective organizations in the territory. To implement these and other measures, however, it is necessary that the public debate is aimed at understanding the dynamics and complexities that involve *Cracolândia* and, above all, makes it clear that the measures currently taken multiply the challenges to be overcome in order to the production of the city and care from the perspective of guaranteeing rights. If before there was one, today there are several through a pulverization of *Cracolândias* in the central area of São Paulo.

Thus, over the years, the “electoral agenda” publicizes *Cracolândia* when it matters, as political-economic interests and benefits persist in this movement of “eternal failure” to deal with the issue – favoring external actors, in multiple ways. If in the same territory, the Open Forum *Mundaréu da Luz*, dialoguing with the idea of conflict planning (Vainer et al., 2013), constituted and articulated collective political group, in the opposite sense, the permanent mobilization of conflict has also been systematically used by State as a strategy for disarticulating and weakening these same people, their organizations and alternative political projects.

This is yet another disastrous reflection of prohibitionist policies that, in addition to strengthening organized crime, cause the State to essentially mix with its characteristics, by creating space for clandestine economies in urban production that fuel the maintenance of control over bodies, subjectivities and territories based on the arbitrary use of violence under the supervision, responsibility and authorship of the State.

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Notes

- (1) "War on drugs" refers to prohibitionist policies in relation to the production, trade and consumption of certain psychoactive substances. The term was coined and disseminated mainly by the USA government during the administration of Richard Nixon (1969-1974) and expanded during the administration of Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), a precursor to policies based on the idea of "zero tolerance" that were quickly reproduced around the world.
- (2) De 'Braços Abertos' (Open Arms project) was an intersectoral pilot program run by the city of São Paulo between 2014 and 2016. A policy based on the perspective of harm reduction by offering shelter, paid work and psychosocial care.
- (3) The authors actively participated in the formation of the *Mundaréu da Luz* Open Forum, an organization that involved urban planners, anti-prohibitionists, territorial workers and residents.
- (4) However, these strategies also occur simultaneously, but in the last ten years we have observed moments in which dispersion intensifies. Taniele Rui had already identified these population management technologies: "two techniques stand out: 1) the continuous patrol, on foot, by car or with horses, which means that users have to spend the entire time circulating, in a tireless "game of cat and mouse" in the nearby blocks; and 2) fencing, which consists of surrounding a block, boosting the concentration of users, leaving them confined to a certain delimitation and, thus, capable of having their actions monitored. [...] The second tactic (enclosure) is never admitted in public speeches by the senior official, who prefers to say that the concentration of users in just one part of the street, or in a single street, occurs spontaneously, fundamentally by internal regulations" (Rui, 2014, pp. 231-232).

- (5) The term appears in parallel with the appearance of countless small portable speakers that play funk music for people living on the streets, dialoguing with the “flows” of funk parties in peripheral regions of the city. Thus, social practices brought from the margins also give new meaning to central territories. Furthermore, the term has a precise identification, as it draws attention to the territoriality of crack use scenes, in constant displacement, in a constant flow, flux, almost always expelled by violent police operations.
- (6) Native term related to types of precarious housing in the interstices of the city, such as under bridges, vacant lots, among others.
- (7) “Charon” in Greek mythology is the boatman who crossed souls from the world of the living to the world of the dead.
- (8) Established by the National Primary Care Policy in 2011, the ‘*Consultório na Rua*’ strategy aims to increase access to health services for the homeless population. It consists of multidisciplinary teams that provide care on an itinerant basis and in partnership with teams from Basic Health Units in the territory.
- (9) Cracolândia... (2022).
- (10) Psychosocial Care Center - community care proposal integrated to social life.
- (11) Excerpt from an interview with detained people carried out by DPESP research (Public Defender's Office of the State of São Paulo).
- (12) Três ficam feridos... (2017).
- (13) Company that provides Energy.
- (14) According to information from the representative of the Brazilian Hotel Association at the public hearing on 8/22/2023, regarding Bill no. 448/23 which provides public discussion for exemption of urban land tax in the area. See below.
- (15) Event to publicize the results of the research entitled “Operação Cachimbo (Pipe Operation): reports of the mass arrests carried out in Cracolândia”, carried out by the Specialized Center for Citizenship and Human Rights of the Public Defender's Office of the State of São Paulo.
- (16) Housing, work and treatment.
- (17) Heteronomy resulting from the animalization and naturalization of these bodies as lacking autonomy and will.
- (18) Article from the *Fantástico* TV Program, on Rede Globo de TV, on November 26, 2023 (Agressões..., 2023).
- (19) Insurance company.
- (20) PL n. 448/23 was approved on October 4, 2023 and provides for urban land tx exemption for specific residential and commercial properties in the Cracolândia region.
- (21) *Ostensive Rounds Tobias Aguiar* – battalion of the Military Police of the State of São Paulo, subordinate to the Shock Policing Command.
- (22) The State has always operated in a way that favors certain class fractions. With neoliberalism, this selectivity is accentuated – including the use of violence to the detriment of social policies.
- (23) Campos Elíseos vivo... (2018).

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