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Introduction

> It's bad with the gangs, but worse without. An unhappy but necessary marriage.
> —Alba Zaluar, *Condomínio do Diabo* (1994, 11)

> The gangs today don't understand why they're fighting. They know they're angry and willing to fight but they don't know what they're actually fighting for.
> —José, a lifelong resident of Complexo da Maré

THE PUZZLE

I had been living in Nova Holanda (New Holland) for several months when Carlos, my research assistant, introduced me to Severino, a member of the local *Comando Vermelho* (Red Command, hereon CV) affiliated gang.[1] Severino did not raise his eyes to meet mine when we shook hands. "Hello!" I said, "It's nice to meet you. I'm a researcher from the United States. I'm interested in …" Severino stopped me immediately with a wave of his hand. "I already know," he said. I looked at Carlos, who shrugged. "I've seen you around," Severino explained. The corner where we were standing was only a minute's walk from my apartment. In fact, Severino had seen me nearly every day for the past few months. I, on the other hand, had never noticed Severino. He was a full head shorter than me, skinny, with light brown skin. That day, he was wearing an oversized red t-shirt, baggy athletic shorts, and a pair of what used to be white Havaiana sandals. A baseball cap with a logo I did not recognize covered his closely shaved head. Unlike most of the other gang members I saw on the streets, Severino was not carrying a gun. Despite his rather unassuming

[1] CV is a prison-based drug-trafficking faction (*facção*), which connects hundreds of gangs throughout the city and, in recent years, has spread to nearly every state in Brazil. For more on the history and makeup of Rio's factions, see Chapter 4.

appearance, he had been in the gang for more than fifteen years over which time he had held various positions: *aviãozinho* (messenger), *olheiro* (lookout), *soldado* (soldier), and *vapor* (seller). When I met him, Severino was working directly for the gang's *gerente de crack* (crack manager) as a *sub-gerente* (sub-manager).

Carlos walked over to a small convenience store on the corner, leaving the two of us alone. Severino was still looking out at the intersection, and I began to feel a bit uncomfortable just standing in front of him, so I turned to face the bustling traffic. After a few moments of awkward silence, I felt I needed to say something. "Shit, it's really hot today, isn't it?" was all I could come up with. "Very," he replied. I decided to get straight to the point, "Do you have some time to talk?" I asked. He nodded and we went over and sat down on the curb, out of earshot of any of the passersby.

I started by reciting my oral consent script.[2] I told him that my research was focused on understanding the relationship between the gang and the community, that he did not have to answer my questions, and could stop whenever he wanted. I promised not to use his name – Severino is a pseudonym – or divulge any identifiable information about him.[3] I concluded by asking if it was alright if I took notes. "Of course," he said, "there are no secrets here. Everyone knows everything." I reached for my notepad, but before I could take it out he asked, "Why do you think I hang out on this corner?" I took a closer look at the intersection.

Unlike many other favelas (informal neighborhoods), Nova Holanda's streets have a checkerboard layout because it was originally built as a temporary housing project in the early 1960s. The larger of the two roads that comprised the intersection was one of the busiest in Maré. A constant stream of cars, trucks, motorcycles, and pedestrians moved past the shops, bars, and restaurants that lined both sides of the street. The intersecting street was less busy and much narrower, barely wide enough for two cars to squeeze past one another. A small barbershop was located on the corner closest to us, just a few steps away. I spotted Carlos eating a Snickers bar and chatting with the owner of the small convenience store on the opposite corner. The other two corners were home to a beverage shop and a hardware store. This intersection did not have one of the gang's *bocas de fumo* (literally, mouths of smoke), open-air drug markets where the gang sold varying quantities of marijuana, cocaine, and crack. Without a boca and no heavy gang presence, it seemed like an unremarkable intersection to me.

"I don't know," I admitted.

[2] This was a paragraph-length description of the project, developed with the Institutional Review Board at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, to ask for the consent of the "research subject" to conduct the interview and be included within the study.

[3] Where necessary, I have not divulged or slightly changed some specific details about Severino (and my other interlocutors) and our interactions to provide a further level of anonymity.

"Look around," Severino said and motioned down the smaller street. I turned and looked where he had gestured. In the distance, I could see all the way to Avenida Brasil, Rio's busiest highway, some 500 yards away. Then he turned and looked in the other direction. I followed his gaze. Just a couple of hundred yards away, I could see a section of the fifteen-foot concrete wall that surrounded the 22nd Battalion, an imposing police station built on the edge of Nova Holanda in 2003. I could just make out the razor wire that ran along the top of the wall, but the gun turrets and the large double doors through which the enormous, militarized vehicles would pass when the police conducted their operations were just out of sight. We then turned to look down the larger street. I saw cars and pedestrians crossing the Ponte da Amizade (Bridge of Friendship) into Parque União (Union Park), a neighboring favela controlled by another CV-allied gang. A few hundred yards in the other direction, I spotted the beginning of Baixa do Sapateiro (Cobbler's Swamp) and Morro do Timbau (Timbau Hill) rising in the distance, two favelas controlled by a gang connected to CV's longtime rival, *Terceiro Comando Puro* (Third Pure Command, hereon TCP), another prison-based faction (*facção*). Severino then looked at me, our eyes meeting for the first time. "You always have to pay attention to what's going on in the community," he said. "This is a great spot to do that."

Over the next year and a half, I found Severino hanging out on this corner most days. He was often accompanied by an assortment of young men, some with pistols tucked into their shorts, others carried semiautomatic rifles. Severino would sometimes wave me over, and we would strike up a conversation about community events, politics, football, family, or any one of a variety of other topics. He would also tell me if anything important was happening regarding the gang or the police. Over time, I noticed that various residents approached him: an elderly man requested help buying medicine, a single mother carrying an infant asked for money for diapers, a young man wanted to know where he could find his former neighbor, and a middle-aged woman wanted to resolve a domestic dispute with her husband. Although he would not solve every problem, Severino often provided information, handed out small amounts of money, told residents who to talk to, and passed the most serious problems up the chain of command.

At first glance, Severino's services may seem rather banal and inconsequential, but the longer I lived in Maré, the more I came to realize that his behavior was part of a broader set of gang activities and relations which included not just financial assistance but a series of more programmatic policies intended to control space, gather information, and ingratiate the gang with the local population. Severino was just one of the Nova Holanda gang's 150 or so members, many of whom were engaged in similar activities that included monitoring the streets, enforcing a set of rules, throwing parties, offering forms of welfare, and providing access to illicit and informal economies. Together, these activities constitute what I refer to as *criminalized governance*, or the

structures and practices through which gangs control territory and manage relations with local populations.

Criminalized governance is not uncommon in Rio de Janeiro. More than 1,000 favelas dot the city's sprawling urban landscape. In most of these communities, social services are limited, public infrastructure only partially provided, and schools and basic utilities fail to meet the needs of the population. Police only appear to engage in aggressive militarized operations. In the absence of a reliable state presence, drug-trafficking gangs have been the dominant political authority in hundreds of these neighborhoods for more than three decades. Their governance activities have irrevocably shaped the social dynamics within these communities, determined the physical security of residents, influenced local levels of development, and even affected the functioning of Rio's democratic institutions.

This book seeks to explain the origins, evolution, and variation in Rio de Janeiro's criminalized governance arrangements across space and time. To do so, I seek to answer a series of interrelated questions. First, what exactly are the "structures and practices" which criminalized governance entails? What are its primary dimensions and activities? Second, why do gangs govern at all? Why would organizations that seem most interested in accumulating wealth from the drug trade, spend valuable time and resources to implement reliable systems of order, adjudicate disputes, provide welfare, or distribute gifts and other benefits to residents? Finally, I seek to explain how and why these governance practices vary. Why do some gangs rely on violence and threats to dominate local populations while others refrain from such coercive behaviors? Why do some gangs provide significant benefits to local communities while others offer little or nothing? And how and why do these practices change over time and even vary within a single gang's turf?

These questions are enduring puzzles not just for scholars of Rio de Janeiro but also a growing swath of the global urban terrain. Most contemporary cities are wracked by poverty and inequality, sparse investment in public housing, uneven infrastructure, and inadequate social services. They are mostly governed by corrupt and inefficient political institutions and bureaucracies, ill-equipped to handle the massive waves of urbanization that continue to reshape human societies across the globe.[4] As a result, a vast multitude of slums (Davis 2006), shantytowns (Goldstein 2003), hyper-shantytowns (Auyero 2001), ghettos (Venkatesh 1997), and hyperghettos (Wacquant 2008) have emerged on what has been termed the "urban periphery" (Leeds 1996) or the "urban margins" (Auyero, Bourgois, and Scheper-Hughes 2015). Together, these communities are home to an estimated one billion people worldwide (UN-Habitat 2016). Gangs and their governance activities are a fact of life for many of these communities.

[4] According to a recent UN report (2019), 55% of the world's population already lives in urban areas, up from just 30% in 1950, and is estimated to grow to 68% by 2050.

A growing number of scholars have begun to recognize the prevalence of criminalized governance in the contemporary world. The phenomenon is particularly prominent across Latin America and the Caribbean, where hundreds of cities have witnessed the incredible proliferation of gangs and other *organized and criminalized groups* (OCGs) – drug-trafficking organizations, cartels, mafias, smuggling networks, and protection rackets among others. Today, a staggering 77 to 101 million people (≈14 percent) across the region are estimated to live in areas where OCGs operate (Uribe et al. 2024). In São Paulo, Brazil, for instance, a prison gang, the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (First Command of the Capital, or PCC), "sits at the heart of the governance of the urban conditions of life and death" (Denyer Willis 2015, 9), where they have developed an alternative system of law and justice for imprisoned populations and marginalized communities (Biondi 2014; Feltran 2010b; Lessing and Denyer Willis 2019). In Medellín, Colombia, *combos* (street gangs) have developed a dizzying array of arrangements with drug cartels, paramilitaries, and insurgent groups as they vie for control of impoverished neighborhoods across the city's periphery (Abello-Colak and Guarneros-Meza 2014; Arias 2017; Blattman et al. 2021; Lamb 2010).

In Central America, gangs are abundant. Nicaraguan *pandillas* impose their own form of order in urban areas, creating strong neighborhood-level identities and allegiances in the process (Rodgers, 2006a, 2006b, 2009, 2017). Across the Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, *maras* dominate poor, marginalized neighborhoods in the major urban centers where they have been known to extort residents while also providing order and protection from rivals (Córdova 2022; Cruz 2010; Cruz and Rosen 2024; Van Der Borgh and Savenije 2015). Across urban Mexico, street and prison gangs compete and collaborate with drug cartels for the control of illicit markets while imposing various forms of order in local neighborhoods (Correa-Cabrera 2017; Magaloni et al. 2020; Trejo and Ley 2020; Wolff 2018).

The Caribbean has witnessed a similar expansion of gangs in recent decades. In Kingston, Jamaica, gangs linked to political parties dominate the sprawling towns surrounding the capital and are often considered de facto sovereigns while providing order and a variety of public goods to local communities (Arias 2017; Jaffe 2013, 2015). In Port-au-Prince, Haiti, gangs linked to political patrons have long dominated areas of the capital, engaging in a complex mix of predation and protection (Mobekk and Street 2006; Olivier 2021; Schuberth 2015). Nearly each and every island in the region contains examples of criminalized governance (Bobea 2013).

Governance is also an oft-noted dynamic of gangs in the United States. Across many marginalized and impoverished urban neighborhoods, gangs can provide individuals and communities some level of security amidst chaotic and volatile circumstances (Ortiz 2018; Sobel and Osoba 2009), occasionally even constituting the dominant local authority (Sánchez-Jankowski 1991, 2003; Venkatesh 1997, 2008). Prison gangs also control much of the US penitentiary

system; some of these organizations have managed to extend their governance beyond the prison walls to entire illicit markets (Skarbek 2014).

The phenomenon of criminalized governance is not exclusive to the Americas. In South Africa, gangs have a long history of dominating impoverished townships on the outskirts of the major urban centers (Jensen 2008; Kynoch 1999, 2005; Lambrechts 2012; Pinnock 1984, 2016). Slum-based gangs in Nigeria and Kenya have linked themselves to political parties and elites through which they have managed to accumulate significant local authority (LeBas 2013). In India, youth gangs are known to provide order in urban slums by punishing criminals (Sen 2014), while some have even become major players in lucrative real estate markets (Weinstein 2008, 2013). In Bangladesh, gangs control access to infrastructure and services, determine property rights, and distribute employment opportunities to impoverished communities (Jackman 2019; Khan 2000). Meanwhile, in urban Pakistan and Indonesia, gangs have long competed for control of protection rackets and illicit markets while providing some public goods, developing close relationships with a variety of political parties in the process (Siddiqui 2022; Tajima 2018).

And yet, despite the prevalence of criminalized governance in the contemporary world, gangs and other OCGs have been mostly ignored as consequential political actors. The discipline of political science has long been interested in how a variety of armed actors (states, insurgents, paramilitaries, and terrorists) control territory and govern populations, but these same behaviors by gangs and other criminalized groups have been almost completely overlooked. Why?

Historically, this oversight was justified by their lack of overt political ambitions pertaining to the state and, as I often heard from audiences when presenting this project early on, the belief that gang members "are just criminals." Such a perspective is thoroughly biased in two ways. First, political science as a discipline has incorrectly assumed that modern states, unless in the midst of war, successfully monopolize legitimate violence within their territories. This hegemonic assumption stems from Weber's iconic definition: "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence within a given territory" (1965). Drawing from the early twentieth-century European experience, Weber's idealized state shares little in common with the vast majority of states in the modern world (Barkey 1994; Centeno 2002; Davis and Pereira 2003; Herbst 2015). Seldom have states outside of Europe – or even European ones, for that matter – been able to monopolize "legitimate" violence within their borders.[5] In fact, many high capacity, democratic, and

[5] The very inclusion of the term legitimacy is problematic because, as Wedeen expertly points out, it can easily be conflated with "acceptance, acquiescence, consent, and/or obedience" (2015, xiv). This critique is reminiscent of Tilly's famous argument: "The distinction between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' force … makes no difference to the fact. If we take legitimacy to depend on conformity to an abstract principle or on the assent of the governed (or both at once), these

seemingly "peaceful" states will often contain a variety of non-state armed groups that operate and sometimes govern specific areas within their territory. While gangs and a variety of other criminalized groups may not consider themselves rivals to the state, their use of violence and governance practices have made it abundantly clear that we can no longer ignore their origins, motivations, and behaviors if we are to understand contemporary politics in a great many locations throughout the world.[6]

The other source of bias is racial and of class. Political science has long regarded the "ordinary strategies that the black [and brown] urban poor embrace … as apolitical" (Alves 2018, 197). This book, rather, contends that "black [and brown] youths' deviant behavior (of which the figure of the gangster has become an icon) should be understood not only as counterhegemonic protest against racism and discrimination but also as a radical refusal to comply with white civil society" (p. 197).[7] Thus, joining and becoming a gang member, instead of being seen as an act of mere deviance or criminality, should be considered a *political* one. Moreover, the residents of the communities where gangs operate – favelas, ghettos, housing projects, etc. – are overwhelmingly underrepresented in higher education, much less the research community. For anyone who grew up in a neighborhood where gangs operate, the political nature of these organizations is self-evident, though often contested and disliked. The discipline has mostly overlooked the political nature of the violence that these communities have suffered and continue to endure, in part because incredibly few political scientists come from such neighborhoods. For these reasons, criminalized governance remains a significant blind spot for the discipline. By developing the conceptual and theoretical language to describe how and why gangs govern in the contemporary world, I seek to add to our understanding of the politics of the most marginalized within our societies.

THE ARGUMENT

I argue that gangs govern not because their members are motivated by governance (it is a difficult and time-consuming task) nor by a desire to remake the political order that has placed them at the bottom of society. Instead, gangs govern because they inhabit an extremely dangerous world and need the obedience and support of local communities if they are to survive. To gain the type

conditions may serve to justify, perhaps even to explain, the tendency to monopolize force; they do not contradict the fact" (1985, 171).

[6] In this regard, this book joins scholars that have turned to the study of non-state armed groups that exist and even thrive within consolidated and democratic states, including vigilante groups (Bateson 2021; Moncada 2017; Tapscott 2021a), militias and paramilitaries (Acemoglu, Robinson, and Santos 2013; Daly 2022; Davis and Pereira 2003; Tajima 2018), and even political parties (Albarracín 2018; Siddiqui 2022; Straus 2012; Wilkinson 2004), among others.

[7] While not every gang is black or brown, the statement can be equally applied to marginalized and impoverished populations virtually anywhere.

and degree of support they need from the local population, they must learn to wield power effectively, to deploy the tools – the carrots and sticks, so to speak – at their disposal. In this regard, I conceive of criminalized governance as comprised of two primary dimensions: *coercion* and the *provision of benefits*. On the one hand, gangs have developed a variety of coercive practices in the areas where they operate: they monitor entry and exit to their territories, maintain a physical and sometimes militarized presence on the streets, and can violently punish anyone that infringes on their economic activities or disobeys their rules. A gang that merely predates and dominates a community through coercion alone, however, is not governing. Such contexts are better thought of as *disorder*. To govern, gangs must place some limits on their coercive behavior and will often develop a set of beneficent practices that can include mechanisms for dispute resolution, economic stimulation, as well as opportunities for recreation, among others.

Not all gangs that govern, however, employ the same levels of coercion nor provide the same quality of benefits. In fact, we observe significant variation across these two dimensions. I distinguish between gangs that use low or high amounts of coercion and are responsive or unresponsive to resident demands for benefits. The interaction of these two dimensions produces four ideal-typical criminalized governance regimes. A *social bandit gang* will employ low levels of coercion while providing responsive benefits to the community. A *benevolent dictator gang* will use high levels of coercion but simultaneously offer responsive benefits to residents. A *tyrant gang* also employs high levels of coercion but is unresponsive to residents' requests for benefits. Finally, a *laissez-faire gang* uses little coercion while providing few if any benefits to the community. Some gangs may maintain a particular type of governance regime for decades while others move back and forth across these regimes quickly. Gangs may even vary their governance practices within the areas in which they operate. This book seeks to explain this variation.

Building on three years of ethnographic fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro's favelas, I argue that criminalized governance is an innate strategic response to two kinds of threat, from rival gangs and from the police, that shape what a gang needs from residents.[8] First, a belligerent rival represents an existential threat to any gang organization and its membership because they are capable of conquering and expelling a gang from its territory.[9] In this regard, gang turf wars

[8] Unlike many popular conceptions of gang members as inherently irrational and even psychotic, this theory assumes gang members to be highly strategic actors. Although I make no strict "rational choice" assumptions – that all gang members are ultimately self-interested and will make choices that benefit themselves (see Skarbek 2014, 2–4) – the overarching organizations in which individual members are embedded shape their motivations and incentives, thus encouraging a set of organizational practices and behaviors.

[9] Gangs in Rio de Janeiro do not just compete for territorial control with other gangs. For years, off-duty police and other public security personnel in Rio have formed milícias (militias), their own illicit organizations, which also dominate favelas and set up their own local governance

are an oft-documented phenomenon throughout much of the world. At the same time, many gangs have also found ways to avoid violence and warfare by negotiating, making peace, forging alliances, and developing arrangements to divide territory among themselves.[10] Given this variation in intergang relations, I argue that gangs can face three different levels of rival threat: *active*, *latent*, or *absent*.

An *active* threat is when a gang faces a rival that is intent on taking over their territory, which can include everything from all-out invasions, skirmishes, and drive-by shootings to targeted kidnappings and assassinations, as well as more subtle attempts to infiltrate a territory. A *latent* threat, by contrast, applies to contexts where a gang does not currently face a rival actively trying to take over their territory but due to proximity, a history of conflict, or previous territorial turnover, the possibility of violent contestation is high. Finally, an *absent* threat means a gang faces no competitors for territorial control. This is often due to a group having successfully defeated and absorbed all local rivals, their relative geographic isolation, or the result of stable alliances or arrangements with surrounding gangs. Gangs can shift back and forth across these levels rapidly while, in other cases, rival threat builds slowly or gradually diminishes. Some gangs may experience multiple rival threats at the same time. Others may have never faced a proximate rival.

I argue that the degree of rival threat determines the coercive practices gangs will use against the population within its territory. If a gang loses its turf to a rival, incumbent gang members and their families will either be killed or expelled from the territory. Therefore, when facing an active rival threat, gang members will defend their turf at all costs, diverting any available resources and manpower to prevent their enemy from invading and infiltrating their territory. They will remove any existing limits on their coercive behavior because, in the fog of war, gangs cannot put the concern for resident well-being above the need to defend their territory. In these contexts, I predict gangs will use extreme levels of coercion directed at residents as they demand higher levels of obedience and fear collaboration with their rival. They will question, threaten, and expel anyone they think does not belong, ostentatiously display themselves and their armaments as a constant reminder to residents that they dominate the territory, and will engage in brutal and public punishments of anyone suspected of betrayal. These contexts are best understood as *disorder*. For latent threats, gangs will still closely monitor their borders, maintain an extensive

regimes (Arias 2017; Cano 2008; Cano and Duarte 2012; Manso 2020; Zaluar and Conceição 2007). Milícias are now more numerous than drug-trafficking gangs in the city (Hirata, Cardoso, et al. 2021; Hirata and Couto 2022) and are often rivals to many of Rio's gangs.

[10] See Arias (2017), Aspholm (2020), Cruz and Durán-Martínez (2016), Daly and Barham (2024), Durán-Martínez (2018), The Economist (2012), Magaloni et al. (2020), Sánchez-Jankowski (1991), Skarbek (2014), and Vargas (2016) for a description of some of these various intergang relations.

physical presence, and punish disloyalty but they will refrain from the most extreme forms of coercion and not divert all their attention and resources to the defense of their turf. Finally, an absent threat translates to a gang that will take a more relaxed approach to controlling their territory. They will not monitor their borders assiduously, be less physically present on the streets, and refrain from violent punishments.

I argue that the threat of police enforcement, unlike that of a rival, constitutes only a transient threat to gangs, one that can also vary from *active* to *absent*. Even amid active and highly militarized enforcement efforts, the police almost never represent an existential threat to gangs because they seldom seek a permanent presence within these neighborhoods and do not look to take over local illicit markets like a rival would. Instead, police enforcement the world over mostly focuses on weakening gangs and combatting illicit markets by arresting their members and by confiscating weapons, drugs, or other illicit material. Although gangs may occasionally confront police directly, they generally refrain from such tactics because: (1) they know police will only be present for a short period of time and (2) this will only cause further police attention and enforcement. Therefore, gangs do not defend their territory at all costs like they do against rivals but rather seek to evade enforcement by melting into the population. Not all gangs, however, face active enforcement. Some gangs have developed durable bribery schemes or tacit agreements with the police that prevent or limit enforcement. Other gangs operate in areas where police may seldom go, either due to a lack of resources or because they have decided that enforcement is too costly or unattractive.

I argue that the degree of transient threat from police enforcement determines a gang's willingness to provide benefits to local communities. Where enforcement is active and frequent, gangs will seek greater levels of support from the community in the effort to avoid enforcement. In these contexts, gangs need residents to at least not inform on them and sometimes their direct assistance to evade the police. As a result, they are more willing to resolve disputes for residents, provide economic stimulation, and organize opportunities for recreation. Gangs that face little or no enforcement, however, need the community less and will provide little in terms of benefits.

Although gang-level incentives may seem to predominate, criminalized governance is not merely imposed from the top-down. The role of residents is crucial. This insight has already been baked into the theory as residents are presented with a series of constraints and opportunities for gaining access to scarce resources and providing for their safety within each of the security environments described earlier. How residents respond to gangs within each of these environments shapes the nature of the threats that gangs face and, in turn, the governance outcomes observed. I argue that there are two resident behaviors, in particular, that matter to governance outcomes: *denunciations* and *demands*. On the one hand, residents of gang territories have sensitive information regarding gang members' activities, whereabouts, routines, and