



## Policing or perpetuating violence? State-sanctioned *milícias* and police in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

A review of the book: Paes Manso, Bruno (2020). *A República das Milícias: Dos Esquadrões da Morte à Era Bolsonaro*. Todavia, 304 pages.

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As protests swept nations in mid-2020 after the murder of George Floyd, the public dialogue about police use of force accelerated with renewed vigour. Protests erupted in support of Black Lives Matter in the United States, Europe, and South Africa, accompanied by '*Vidas Negras Importam*' in Brazil, the country with the highest rate of police killings in the world. Police in Brazil assassinate an average of five people per day, are known to be associated with the *milícia* extortion-based criminal rackets, and are linked to the 2018 assassination of human rights advocate and politician Marielle Franco. Amidst global calls for police reform, some scholars are urging policymakers and the public to consider how the history of crime and violence has shaped the way violence is used by the state today.

One such scholar is Bruno Paes Manso, a journalist and researcher at the University of São Paulo's Centre for the Study of Violence (USP-NEV). Paes Manso is also the author of the book *A República das Milícias: Dos Esquadrões da Morte à Era Bolsonaro* (in English, *The Milícia's Republic: From the Death Squads to the Bolsonaro Era*). There is possibly no more complicated case than that of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to study how violence has permeated politics and public security. Here is a city where multiple criminal organisations jockey for control of territory and the drug trade, where criminals and police

alike are heavily armed, and where politicians – including the country’s president, Jair Bolsonaro – advocate for the use of violence with such extreme statements as, ‘A good criminal is a dead criminal’. Paes Manso doesn’t shy away from the complexities; in this narrative spanning seven decades of history, he sets out to examine how the landscape of crime in Rio de Janeiro and the growth of the city’s *milícias* can help to explain Jair Bolsonaro’s election in 2018.

Paes Manso argues that Bolsonaro came to power because many Brazilians were seduced by the idea of *redemptive violence* – violence as a means to resolve lingering disputes (as Rio de Janeiro’s death squads and *milícias* have done for decades) – when democratic justice institutions no longer seemed to be working. He draws on in-depth interviews with members of these vigilante *milícia* groups and archival work to explain how *milícias* and death squads have been resolving disputes with violence in the shadow of the law dating back to Brazil’s military dictatorship. One important set of actors in Paes Manso’s theory is treated rather generally in the book, yet plays an important role in his explanation of the *milícias*’ rise to power: regular citizens. Paes Manso argues that in the 2018 election, voters ‘chose an executioner to govern them. As if the country decided to abandon their democratic institutions’, yet his evidence is too general to shed much light on the mental model of the voters as they were making this decision at the ballot box (p. 294). This is made up for by the in-depth insights explaining how today’s *milícias* arose and gained political and coercive power. As Paes Manso shows, identifying and rooting out violence is nearly an intractable problem when the perpetrators of violence are embedded in the state.

Paes Manso begins with the important observation that the *milícias* we see in Rio de Janeiro today are the product of decades of choices that prioritise solving policy problems informally with violence rather than with difficult structural reforms. He explains how today’s *milícias*, which have many of the defining features of vigilante groups (Bateson, 2021), and who finance their operations through mafia-like extortion and protection rackets (Cano & Duarte 2012; Hidalgo & Lessing 2015), have roots that can be traced back to the 1950s. On one hand, we see the violent origins of today’s *milícias* in the death squads that originated in the 1960s during Brazil’s military dictatorship; these were comprised of off-duty police, firefighters, and members of the military. Like other vigilante groups (Bateson, 2021), these death squads were originally formed to take justice into their own hands. They targeted ‘marginals’ (usually poor, Black young men) that they suspected of being thieves or criminals and brutally murdered them, often leaving the body in public with their squad’s insignia to stoke fear among other ‘marginals’. Paes Manso details these grotesque acts and, importantly, the lack of state action to discipline the death squads. There were often few consequences, because those disciplining the death squads were likely to be members, or know a member personally.

We then see the economic origins of today’s *milícias* in the earliest neighbourhood association in the Rio das Pedras district, which was created in 1964. Paes Manso explains how the waves of urban migration – primarily of poor, agricultural laborers from Brazil’s northeast – created population bulges in semi-rural communities on the outskirts of the city that, when organised, were politically powerful just by virtue of the sheer size of the community. A value that neighbourhood leaders held in high esteem was the absence of ‘marginals’ in their communities, which stood in stark contrast to the violent, inner city *favelas* (informal settlements). Eventually, groups like the death squads and neighbourhood association leaders realised there was money to be made by charging residents for this security and peace of mind, and the assurance that ‘marginals’ (and eventually, drug traffickers) would not enter their community. And so the informal private provision of security began.

In colourful anecdotes that implicate several former and present-day politicians in Rio de Janeiro, samba schools, and the illegal gambling racketeers (*jogo do bicho*), Paes Manso walks the reader through the joint evolution of the provision of private security and sanctioned violence. The constant

presence of a 'common enemy' – whether it was the 'marginals' or the contemporary drug trafficking gangs – helped to legitimise the extra-legal violence committed by the death squads, their allied gambling racketeers, and, finally, today's *milícias*, he argues.

Paes Manso's indictment of the state's role in extrajudicial violence leads him to a second critical observation: the policies favoured by Jair Bolsonaro and his allies show the same attitudes towards violence and justice. There is a common thread running from the hard-line leaders of the military dictatorship (who, as Paes Manso documents, Jair Bolsonaro identifies as role models) to Bolsonaro himself and even his sons, who view police violence and vigilante violence as justifiable when used against any citizen likely to be 'marginal' or a criminal. Paes Manso shocks with anecdotes that have occurred over the last few decades about police sniper attacks on supposed criminals from helicopters (those fired at were actually churchgoers), the state government awarding bonuses to police officers that were contingent on how many civilians they shot, and Bolsonaro's son awarding prestigious honours for public service (the 'Tiradentes Medal') to police officers following brutal massacres of civilians. He concludes by arguing that Bolsonaro's rise to the presidency is the culmination of these choices by the state, over and over again, to choose to reward – or at least look the other way in the face of – state-sanctioned violence.

One strength of the book is the explanation of how complex the state's relationship with violence can be, and how this complicates violence reduction policies. Paes Manso explains how reducing violence isn't simply a matter of more funding, labour, or equipment, when the state's security forces are incentivised to prioritise fighting some types of criminals over others. Paes Manso shows how the state's laser focus on cracking down on 'marginals' and drug trafficking enabled a different form of criminal activity to come closer, and even enter into the state itself, in the death squads, gambling rackets, and *milícias*. Reducing violence and investigating acts of violence becomes intractable when the state is complicit, and Paes Manso shows this masterfully through the juxtaposition of the hard-on-crime tactics in favelas with the state's failure to prevent and investigate the assassination of Marielle Franco (the city councilwoman who was assassinated in 2018).

His careful tracing of the Marielle Franco case documents how the *milícias* and some of their allies have permeated several law enforcement and justice institutions at the city, state, and federal level. Paes Manso persuasively shows how difficult it could be for a 'clean' politician, prosecutor, or investigator to uncover the truth, and operate in an environment where so many potential colleagues are part of the scheme. He cites wiretap data, court testimonies, and plea bargains related to the Marielle Franco case, all of which show different powerful actors avoiding blame and feigning ignorance in order to protect themselves. Today, more than two years after the assassination, various justice institutions still do not know (or have not announced publicly) who ordered the hit on Marielle.

Paes Manso's explanation of the interconnectedness between *milícias* and the state paints a dire picture of corrupt elites and their vigilante *milícias* permeating government bodies. He speculates that those in power put hits on their political enemies while vigilantes use violence with impunity, and the poor and marginalised are harassed for merely living in the proximity of violence. The Bolsonaros unequivocally seem to be on the winning end of this arrangement. This final observation, although undoubtedly true, is the least clear in the book. Paes Manso offers an explanation for how Bolsonaro and his sons were electorally successful in Rio de Janeiro, especially among police officers and the communities in which *milícias* dominate. He shows how Bolsonaro's son won a state-level election by campaigning with a former police officer that mobilised *milícia* dominated communities.

Yet there are still some lingering questions about how Bolsonaro managed to scale this electoral influence up to the national level. What provokes citizens to 'abandon their democratic institutions' in favour of a ruler like Bolsonaro? At times, it seems that Paes Manso argues that the economic anxieties

and political polarisation in the mid-2010s in Brazil created the conditions for mass appeal of an anti-establishment candidate like Bolsonaro. But Bolsonaro is not only anti-establishment. Paes Manso could be clearer in explaining exactly why the hard-on-crime, militant candidate was the anti-establishment candidate that won over the citizenry, especially those that live far from Rio de Janeiro's crime (either geographically or materially) and who aren't as concerned with the fear of crime in their day-to-day lives.

This book does not claim to link the Bolsonaro family with the *milícias* or with Marielle Franco's death. What it does offer is a careful, nuanced journey through the history of the Rio de Janeiro state's relationship with violent actors. Paes Manso is successful in his attempt to explain why today's *milícias* have become so powerful and still remain strong. This narrative raises as many questions as it answers about the future of policing and the state's role in violence in Rio de Janeiro. The lessons are relevant for the Brazilian reader who cares to 'not repeat these mistakes again' (p. 36) and for the global reader who may be trying to chart a different path for their country.

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