Grappling with complexity in research with the Military Police: The far-right and anthropology's civilizing mission

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Abstract:

This text examines the challenges of carrying out fieldwork with the Military Police, an institution responsible for systematically targeting Rio de Janeiro's favela populations with extreme levels of racialized state violence. It discusses how anthropologists can describe police officers in ways that avoid the pitfalls of binary thinking: of reproducing a cosmology of war that assumes a strict division between good and evil and instead produce accounts that hold space for complexity and change, without assuming a moral relativist position.

Keywords: Brazil; Research ethics; Moralization; Perpetrators; Police violence.

Abordando la complejidad en investigaciones con la Policía Militar: La extrema derecha y la misión civilizatoria de la antropología.

Resumen:

Este texto examina los desafíos de conducir trabajo de campo con la Policía Militar, una institución que ha sometido a la población de las favelas de Rio de Janeiro a niveles extremos de violencia estatal racializada. Discute cómo antropólogos pueden escribir sobre la policía de una manera que evite caer en lógicas binarias: de reproducir una cosmología de guerra que asuma una división estricta entre el bien y el mal y en su lugar produce relatos que contemplan complejidad y transformaciones sin asumir una posición moral relativista.

Palabras clave: Brasil; Ética de investigación; Moralización; Perpetradores; Violencia policial.

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The Far-Right and Anthropology's Civilizing Mission

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Introduction

June 2015. 'What can be harder than talking about Human Rights to the Soldiers from Alemão?' The police officer at the front of the room smiles nervously. A few of the men laugh at his feeble attempt to lighten the mood with a joke. Do they find it funny or are they being polite? Their teacher measures every word: something about how important it is for the police to 'demystify' human rights. I'm in the meeting room at the Pacifying Police Unit (*Unidade da Polícia Pacificadora*, UPP) of Adeus, one of four police stations established in the favelas of Complexo do Alemão—the frontline of Brazil's war on drugs—to guarantee security concerns in Rio de Janeiro ahead of the 2016 Olympics. Building on earlier attempts to modernize and demilitarize Rio's Military Police, the implementation of the first UPPs in January 2009 (during Lula's presidency) were part of the attempt to position Brazil as a progressive global power. To the public, the UPPs were presented as a softer and more gentle police, responding to what was broadly perceived as an outdated, inefficient, and violent model of policing (Salem & Larkins 2021: 66).

The UPPs were the backbone of the *pacification project*. Established within many of Rio's favelas, they aimed to reduce the level of armed violence in Rio de Janeiro. Scholars and police leaders also saw the project as a pacification of the police, seeking to bring police action in line with human rights and challenging representations of policing as a war against crime and drugs. This reform sought to create a modern and efficient police force fitting of a liberal democracy built around egalitarian principles. However, the project failed to achieve these goals and was discontinued in 2018. In 2015, at the time of research, the UPPs were in crisis. Everyday patrol activities reproduced highly militarized and war-oriented practices of policing while the institutional implementation of the human rights framework was resisted by the rank and file.

Throughout Brazil's democratic period, the country has seen consistently high levels of violent deaths, with some of the world's highest rates of police killings and victimization. Rio de Janeiro's Military Police is paradigmatic in this regard and is often referred to as 'the police that kills the most and dies the most' by police and the city's residents alike. On an institutional level, the human rights violations of Rio's Military Police forces are thoroughly documented, and scholars drawing on postcolonial perspectives increasingly understanding police actions as central to a genocidal project towards Brazil's black communities (see, e.g. Nascimento [1978] 2016; Cardoso 2018; Vargas 2023).

However, understanding the police officers that I accompanied during my time in Rio as 'perpetrators' and 'active participants in state institutions and repressive organizations or informal associations and networks who carry out genocide, mass killings, or violent acts for the presumed greater good of the state, a people, or an ideology' (Robben & Hinton 2023), glosses over complexities and divergences among men and women of a highly contested and heterogeneous police force. While some police officers had 'killed in the hundreds' (in the words of officers I spoke with) others were either invested in reforming the police, in a mission to serve and protect, or sought to remain removed from violent policing activities. I will discuss these differences in the following, but let me first return to Adeus to show some of the assumptions that underpinned far-right

worldviews. There, a group of patrol officers from the UPP at Alemão (where I did most of my fieldwork) were schooled in human rights by a colleague as part of the attempt to bring the UPP project 'back on track'.

Their teacher explains that he wants the police officers to understand the historical context in which the human rights emerged: 'In the Middle-Ages, society was regulated by strict moral rules,' he begins. People were afraid of offending God. But today, 'the fear of God has decreased, and we must protect society since the moral laws are no longer effective, and since there are also international laws that control the power of the states' [sic]. Human rights, he says, appeared in 1948, in a context where communism was on the rise. Religious people carried this codex with them already: they are foundational, natural rights that every person has.

'But who is relying on the human rights today,' he asks. 'The political left,' he says, noting the contradiction that 'human rights were not born as left-wing discourse.' on the contrary, they emerged as a reaction to communism and the Soviet Union, 'who didn't sign the treaty' he specifies: the countries that the Socialist Party (PSOL) supports! It's important that the officers understand that the problem is that for the left, *everything* has become a matter of human rights: 'The question of abortion, the right to do all kinds of *besteras* (bullshit)!' The police officers should know that human rights are not what the left claims them to be. Their interpretation of human rights is that the police are not allowed to do this or that, he says before concluding: 'We have to create our own discourse of human rights!'

The men in the room have long lost interest in what he is saying. They are chatting, joking, and showing no interest in redefining human rights. Some are probably tired after the week-long course in urban warfare tactics with the Special Forces that they have just attended. A few officers at the back of the room are sleeping, one of them is even snoring. The teacher sees that he is losing their attention and seems nervous. He provides them with an example: the tactical training they've just received is also about human rights! 'The state can't give a weapon to a person who has not been trained in the use of weapons.' He continues to say that implementing human rights means that the police must receive more tactical training so that they don't kill innocent people or harm their colleagues.

His voice is getting shrill: 'Human rights,' he says, 'have been politicized by the left to win votes. They have forced upon us their own interpretations and taken control over human rights!' 'Yes,' he adds, 'even our own— even among the Military Police there are Colonels who have been polluted by this discourse!' It seems like a bold rhetorical move to gain his students attention in an institution where critique is sanctioned and where officers who criticize the police or fail to comply with their superior's orders risk confinement or expulsion. 'Since we have been polluted by the ideological discourse of the left, we believe that the officer who defends human rights is the one who teaches music to kids—and that isn't the case. Instead, it's the *operational* (i.e. war-oriented) officer who guarantees human rights.' One of the men in the room objects, his voice is loud and angry: 'Why don't human rights count when police officers are killed?' The other officers agree: 'The police are not treated as human beings!'

Studying the Military Police in a context of political polarization

In this text, I reflect on some of the dilemmas anthropologists, historically embedded in modernity's civilizational project and invested in the egalitarian ideal of 'speaking truth to power,' face when studying subjects that represent worldviews that are not just radically different from our own (liberal and progressive) but opposed to them, expressing conflicting normative orders such as liberalism and illiberalism (see Shoshan 2014). Recognizing how scientific production is always political and can sometimes contribute to polarization, I will discuss the potentials, pitfalls, and possibilities of carrying out ethnographic research in contexts where ethnographers are forced to take a political stance, usually by peers, sometimes to the point of openly condemning our research participants.[1]

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1   The positions I defend in this text are the result of a long-term collaboration with and discussions in the context of Luis Fernando Dias Duarte and Marco Martínez-Moreno's (2023) postgraduate course in cognitive anthropology at the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro.

The police officers I met when I arrived in Rio in December 2014 were at the tail-end of a modernization process that started with the democratization of Brazil in 1985. This process gradually came to a halt as tensions over the country's future emerged, especially following the mass protests in 2013 and onwards. In the years that followed, political divisions between 'the left' and 'the right' were reified, with social and political tensions increasingly framed as a conflict between two opposing bands. From this polarization, a Brazilian far-right emerged, promising national redemption through a moral purification where 'the left' was increasingly framed as being elitist, corrupt, aligned with criminals, and pushing an agenda of sexual and gendered indecencies that threatened the traditional nuclear family. Meanwhile, on the left, right-wing voters were characterized as authoritarian, anti-democratic, and ignorant religious fanatics who support police and state violence. Gregory Bateson (1958) refers to this process of polarization as *schismogenesis*: A process whereby group identities are defined in opposition to each other. In such processes, right and left are less defined by internal criteria for group identity, and increasingly by that which the other is not (Duarte & Martinez-Moreno 2023).

Analytically, the notion of *cosmologies of war*—that is, different theories of the world that understand social dynamics, including political differences, as a battle between good and evil—is useful in accounting for the historical and emergent forces that have fueled the recent polarization in politics. In Brazil, we can trace such cosmologies to at least two genealogies. On the one hand, practices of 'colonial warfare' (e.g. practices of 'pacification') have consistently divided populations along racial divides, legitimized a national civilizing mission, and sustained predatory forms of human and material resource extraction. On the other hand, Cold-War-imaginaries of a 'cultural war' have contributed to notions of a battle between communists and conservatives, between democratic and authoritarian political projects, or between humanism and religion—recently invoked through the Pentecostal notion of 'spiritual warfare' (Salem 2024).

These cosmologies inform the Brazilian police's war on drugs. Like processes of militarization elsewhere, they have sharpened distinctions between us and them, friend and enemy, good and bad, white and black, civilized and savage. Importantly, they have given shape to a moral universe shared by the police and the Brazilian far-right structured around traditional family values, religion, respect for authority, anti-communism, and a conservative strongman-ideology (Salem & Bertelsen 2020; see Kobes du Mez 2020). The police's interpretation of human rights described in the introductory vignette must be understood in this light. It reflects the social dynamics that emerged at a moment of increasing polarization between those who adhere to a right-wing, conservative morality, and the defenders of a progressive political project that often uses the categories of race, sex, and gender (rather than class) as a tool to challenge specific power formations.

On the left, the progressive and 'woke' pursuit of a specific notion of 'social inclusion' that assumes the universality of the individual as the locus of politics, has increasingly been used to criticize and attribute responsibility to people who are perceived as unaware of how they (as individuals) contribute to the reproduction of structures and processes of exclusion (see Fraser 2019). While this shift in the base categories for political mobilization (and the emphasis on individual responsibility) defies traditional class-based politics and divisions between the right and the left, the political landscape continues to be defined in these terms, so that political projects organized around so-called 'identity politics' are typically understood as more egalitarian and left-leaning than those organized around conservative family values, gender norms, and ideas of national unity, which are increasingly referred to as different instantiations of 'the right' (far-right, alt-right, extreme-right, conservatives, authoritarian, etc.) (Duarte & Martinez-Moreno 2023).

However, the downplaying of class difference and individualization of responsibility, as well as the reliance on multiple categories of identification, has produced shifts in the traditional political landscape. On the one hand, it has led to an understanding of power-relations that is generally less straightforward than we usually conceive and often difficult to grasp through simple distinctions such as victim and offender; on the other, it has reconfigured moral hierarchies and -projects. The police officers that I studied could not be straightforwardly

located within such binaries. Most patrol officers came from low-income communities where violent crimes were commonplace. Many were black and experienced racial discrimination and exclusion. Few of them had any formal education beyond high school-level. Located at the bottom of a militarized institutional hierarchy, they were subject to a draconian disciplinary code of conduct and suffered different forms of abuse from their superiors. Set to patrol in areas with high levels of armed violence, many officers suffered mental health issues like those of soldiers in active warzones. But they also systematically participated in (well documented) unlawful practices, such as summary executions, torture of suspects, excessive use of force, sexual harassment and abuse, theft, and extortion—to name a few (see Salem 2024).

The difficulty of neatly locating officers within a victim-offender binary has important implications for the anthropological endeavor, which has (at least since decolonization) been concerned with representing the voice of 'the little man'; the suffering subject; or of siding with the underdog—largely due to the moral anxiety of anthropologists aware of how our discipline has been embedded in the colonizing projects of the West (see, e.g. J. Robbins 2013). The realization of how geopolitical inequalities have shaped the discipline and often paid lip-service to imperial powers has shaped concerns among anthropologists to be on the 'right' side of history and take a clear stance *against* structures of power—particularly those that are imposed through different forms of violence. Furthermore, it has transformed ethnographers into deeply moral subjects who are expected to assume a clear political stance in their analyses—potentially at the cost of analytic nuance (see e.g. Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco 2021).

Thus, in a complex reality where different categories of exclusion overlap, the imperative to make research explicitly political and side with the 'right' kind of disenfranchised can, despite its intention to challenge structures of power, reinforce them. Paradoxically, as anthropologists have tried to distance themselves from the Western, imperial, civilizational project, they have sometimes ended up creating new enemy images and new 'savage others' that need to be brought into the fold of progressive liberalism (Martinez-Moreno 2024). In a political context where science is 'under attack' and accused of being biased, making ethnographic production overtly political, for example by condemning research participants, might lead to a further polarization and reification of 'the other' as bad or evil on both sides of the political divide.

The violence of 'respectable society'

Processes of militarization that adopt a war-rhetoric are especially prone to polarizing dynamics that leave little or no space for a middle ground: either you are with us or against us. War re-signifies meanings, changing our understanding of what is right and wrong (see Salem 2024). In *Bala Perdida* where several intellectuals discuss the problem of police violence in Brazil, Colonel Íbis Pereira (one of the reform-oriented leaders at the Military Police at the time of research) cites the French philosopher Frédéric Gros:

> Belonging to a band of armed men is constituting. Being under the constant possibility of armed conflict presents itself as a mode of being. The everyday realities of war transform the human soul to stone, produces a kind of suffering capable of altering the framework of reference that banalizes the sense of morality, because it modifies the relation with death and, at the extreme, leads to excess and crime. In those circumstances, when it is possible to make [someone] suffer without condemnation, brutality imposes itself as an axiom. Here we have the manifestation of a terrible power: that of reifying both the victim and the butcher (Frederic Gros in Pereira 2015: 42. Translated from Portuguese)

A controversial news-story from 2010 comes to mind. It was a report on the Norwegian soldiers participating in the war in Afghanistan (2001-2021). The title was printed in bold and read **WAR IS BETTER THAN SEX**. Below, there was a picture of a Norwegian soldier looking through his gunsight. The soldiers in Afghanistan were quoted: 'Being in combat is worth the three months without getting laid. It might sound stupid, but it's

better than fucking [sic]. When you're on the battlefield, it's you or the enemy, and when you get 'red mist' in your sight… (indicating a mortal hit) It's indescribable. *That's why we're here*' (my emphasis).

In Norway, the report has repercussions. A different newspaper prints an interview with a military psychologist: 'Norwegian soldiers aren't chosen for their lust for war. They are a group of fine young men who are willing to sacrifice their lives and health to change the world. But of course, they aren't beyond influence. War does something to people. It always has.' The journalist objected: 'But we like to think that Norwegian soldiers are more decent?' 'The common denominator is that they're all human beings. When we are subjected to hatred, grotesque acts, and injustice, we start questioning what's right and wrong in the world. Soldiers start looking for revenge and killing more than they need to. But they haven't been selected for being that way. We have sent out or best ambassadors. Sadly, a development like this is historically the rule rather than the exception.'

Clearly, when war is evoked, the dividing lines between liberal and illiberal state practices become blurry. The presence, actions, and statements of Norwegian soldiers in Afghanistan are a clear example of how liberal democracies legitimize imperialist warfare in the name of (national) security and challenge *a priori* assumptions that liberal democracies are less violent than illiberal states.[2] It is with this long history of Western imperialism in mind that Bruce Kapferer and Bjørn Enge Bertelsen (2009) argue that instead of assuming the moral superiority of liberal state formations, we should, as scholars, focus on how different state formations deploy and legitimize violence.

This position differs somewhat from Gros' position on the banalization of morality—what Hannah Arendt ([1963] 2006) described as a *total moral collapse*. In her reports on the trial of Eichmann following World War II, Arendt notes that the perpetrators of Holocaust did not have to silence their consciousness because they thought that they were doing good. After all, they counted on the support of *respectable society*. We observe something similar in the case of the Norwegian soldiers, who according to the military psychologist interviewed by the press have not been selected for their thirst for blood. Rather, Western states argued that they invaded Afghanistan to free the Afghans from Taliban and bring peace and democracy to the country.

Let's, for a moment, return to the opening vignette and see what conclusions we might draw from this case if we assume an analytical relativist position: if we suspend the passing of judgement during the research process as a tool to prevent ethnocentrism and to understand the social dynamics at play. First, we observe how the human rights lesson attended by the officers to modernize the police and adopt a liberal (albeit militarized) framework of policing was subverted even by those who were supposed to put it into practice. The officer who held the lesson had been given a difficult task: in Brazil the fight for human rights has generally been voiced by minoritarian groups and monopolized by the political left and is closely associated with the critique of military rule and of Military Police's actions in the favelas (see Eilbaum and Medeiros 2015).

Among police officers, this meant that appeals to human rights were usually interpreted as a defense of criminals and as part of the cultural war of the 'communist' left—a sentiment that is broadly shared by large segments of the Brazilian public (see Caldeira 2001). In a worldview where people were either friends or enemies, the defense of human rights was thus grouped together with other attributes of 'the left' and seen as part of a concerted attack on police authority by people classified as criminals, their alleged political supporters, and people ascribing to a communist ideology—seen as the root of all evil.

Thus, the emphasis on how human rights were a reaction to totalitarianism like that of the Soviet Union was an attempt to dissociate human rights from the left. For the liberal reader, it might be easy to disregard the instructor's idea of creating a 'police discourse' on human rights as nonsensical (since the purpose the human rights is to protect the individual against state violence and authoritarianism) but his suggestion brings the cosmological dimensions of the police reform to the fore. If we follow recent calls to take the 'illiberal

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2   Rather, like the sexual relations that are evoked, the relation between liberalism and its opposite is characterized by antagonisms but also by complementary: one needs the other to affirm its own identity.

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Tomás Salem

other' seriously, we might even argue that the officer was levering a critique that has also been raised by anthropologists (see Asad 2000; Fassin 2011): that human rights have often used to promote political agendas through the universalization of Western liberal values.

The officers' rejection of human rights as a paradigm that they should relate to highlights a worldview that places them outside of, and in opposition to, liberalism structured around the rights-bearing individual (see Martinez-Moreno 2024). Their adherence to a different normative order was also brought to the fore in the affirmation that the police should protect a morally degraded society that has lost its fear of God, signaling how the cosmological order that the police adhere to is characterized by an emphasis on divine authority and the military as stewards of a national moral order (see Larkins and Durão 2022). Analyzed on these terms, the resistance towards human rights among police officers no longer appears as nonsensical but expresses the opposition between humanism and religion that characterizes authoritarian formations elsewhere (see Pasieka 2017): it expresses the tension and negotiation between different cosmological orders in the institutional attempts to modernize the police.

The politics of moralization

The failure of the UPPs came at a moment of national political instability, with the *Lava Jato* corruption scandal garnering public attention.[3] The uncovering of widespread corruption across the political spectrum coincided with economic stagnation and increasing sensations of insecurity. Renewed calls for hard-handed security politics were accompanied by a moralization of politics. The political debate was increasingly structured around ideas of purity and pollution, of good and bad, corrupt, and clean—rather than political solutions. Police officers generally believed that democracy was farcical, and that the decadence of the political system mirrored societal decadence. As one officer expressed: '…an educated population, an intelligent population wouldn't accept the indecencies they are accepting, right?' According to this worldview, authoritarianism and military rule were perceived as necessary evils:

> In the past, when we had a different police, there was respect. Today there's not, you know? The respect that we enjoyed in the past was through authority, often with truculence, but it was what had to be done. Today you've got the human rights that only defend the bandit, you know? They don't defend the good citizens, they go to jail to defend the rapist, not the family of the person who was raped. The inversion of values in our society is very big, you know? I see it more and more.

In national politics, the Pentecostals particularly thrived on this moralization, which drew on interpretations of Brazilian sociopolitical dynamics as a cultural and spiritual war between good and evil forces (see Kramer 2005; Vital da Cunha 2018). Scholars have noted how Pentecostalism reinstates a 'a dualism between good and evil in its wake,' dividing 'the world in two, allowing for no middle ground' (Mafra & de Paula 2002: 61 cited in Vital da Cunha 2018: 5; see also Pina Cabral 2007). In this context, war 'signifies the ever-present spiritual struggle of the church and its members with the devil and the forces of evil' (Kramer 2005: 106-109). Often, the police expressed such views in characterizations of the favelas as God-forsaken and hellish warzones and of favela youth as 'seeds of evil' (*semente do mal*).

Among Pentecostal police officers, Elizabete Albernaz (2015) has noted that the view of police truculence as a necessary evil could lead to unease and fear of giving into devilish temptations, leading to a corruption of their souls. Similarly, the officers I spoke to were often aware of the brutalizing effects of war on their psyche:

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3   In March 2014, months prior to the Presidential election that secured Dilma Rousseff's reelection, an investigation into a money laundering scheme at a car wash unveiled a larger corruption scheme at the federal level. Elected officials across the political spectrum were involved in the embezzlement of funds from state owned companies.

You know that you're going to a place where you can die, where there will be shooting, but you're not afraid anymore. [...] I've gotten used to it. I don't know if it's good, I don't know if it's bad, you know? But I think it's bad, because who would want to get used to that kind of life, right? Of you seeing a man being killed in front of you without feeling anything at all, but if it's one of your colleagues you despair, you want to save his life. [But] you feel no remorse when killing a *bandido* because the *bandido* wanted to kill you. You take someone's life and it doesn't matter, you know?

The violence of war was simultaneously perceived as futile (as soon as one 'bandit' was killed, another one appeared) and as purifying or redemptive. But there was also an awareness that police truculence was one of the main impediments to the effective assertion of police authority in the favelas since it pushed the population away. This was a concern among reformist leaders in the upper echelons of the institutional hierarchy but was also acknowledged among many patrol officers. Ambivalences towards police truculence, the state, and the war are telling of the complexity of police outlooks, and so are views on favela populations. In line with Pentecostal cosmology, officers believed that some criminals could be 'reformed' through conversions to faith but seeing human existence as a spiritual battle could also strengthen antagonisms, with police officers distancing themselves from the people they were supposed to protect (Albernaz 2015: 531).

The police and the far-right

The worldview of military police officers both shaped and was shaped by the far-right movement that brought Bolsonaro to power. Within the police as well as within this movement, Brazil was perceived as being mired in a crisis of values: a cultural war where politics were imbued with moral concerns and where leftists and, by association, intellectual elites, critical journalists, feminists, and gays were seen as enemies (Solano 2020: 216). The polarizing logic of war and its easy ordering of the world along the categories of friends and enemies, good and evil, resonated among the militarized subjectivities and churchgoers who supported Bolsonaro.

In the aftermath of his presidency, academics have tried to understand how a far-right politician and outspoken defender of the military dictatorship could gain so much support among Brazilian voters. Political philosopher Marcos Nobre (2020) warns that calling Bolsonaro as stupid or crazy immediately shuts down the possibility of understanding the political crisis that brought him to power. He argues that Bolsonaro's presidency must be understood as a war against the democratic system and his government, as a government of war, permeated by a military logic (see also Durão 2020). This militarization of government cast politics as a battle of the Brazilian people against the 'red communists' on the left—seen as 'enemies' alongside *viados* (faggots), *corruptos* (the corrupted), and the broad and vague category of *bandidos* (bandits).

Thus, Bolsonaro rhetorically constructed his Presidency as a civilizational battle that sought to 'rescue' the nation from moral and spiritual corruption. His understanding of politics and the state rejects any notion of a common good or social contract. In classic liberalism, the underpinning idea is that the negotiation of values through the political system will benefit society at large, that it is possible to conceive of a common good, and that liberal democracy and the rule of law are the basic tools through which the common good is realized. Bolsonaro however, framed politics as a process whereby the will of one group—the true Brazilian people—is imposed on the rest (Feltran 2020). In this conception of politics as warfare, this 'rest' needs either to submit to the will of the people, abandon the country, or face 'elimination' by the police. In this sense, Bolsonaro's understanding of the state is rooted in a dialectic conflict—much like that of Marxist philosophy.

Similarly, anthropologists have problematized the bias that results when we refrain from studying the subjects that are often referred to as fundamentalist, authoritarian, or fascist—the 'repugnant others' according to Susan Harding (1991). Harding shows how, in these cases, social scientists tend to retreat into binary thinking, where the non-modern other is associated with religion, magic thinking,

and backwardness, while the modern us is attributed with rationality and civility. Such understandings inevitably create 'the other' as an object of intervention: as someone who must be educated, reformed, tamed or pacified—sometimes through the recourse to military power. In contrast, anthropologists studying far-right subjectivities have advocated the need to take this 'other' seriously, rather than disregarding them as irrational and easily manipulated (Pasieka 2017).

Understanding is not acceptance

Approaching the cultural meanings and social practices that informs the exercise of police authority in Rio and the conservative backlash in Brazil through the notion of different but entangled cosmologies of war avoids the discussion of whether Rio's police forces are at war according to conventional criteria of warfare (see Grillo 2019). Instead, it takes war as a cognitive framework or cosmological force that shapes Brazilian social relations, subjectivities, landscapes, economies, and politics. Acknowledging the longstanding configuration of policing as warfare against racialized territories and populations in Brazil, allows us to unpack the moral universe and cosmological order that is produced through the police's war on drugs and to understand how the conflation of policing and warfare shapes the relation between police and the policed, as well as perceptions of good and evil, right and wrong, or friend and enemy.

Challenging the polarizing dynamics of warfare requires anthropologists to bring nuance and complexity to descriptions of people that are sometimes represented as unidimensional perpetrators and savage others. This produces a permanent tension between analytical attempts to understand and explain the rationalities that inform the practices and values of the police officers I studied with, and a political intention to critique and unveil the police's role and responsibility in reproducing dynamics of violence. Inevitably, my own biases and political views informs the ways in which I characterize my research participants and the situations and themes I focus on. Some might think that my moral judgements get in the way of an incisive analysis while others will argue that attempts to understand or humanize police officers who glorify killing or in extreme cases have 'killed in the dozens' (as some of them have) is not a legitimate academic endeavor (see e.g. Alves 2021). But police officers *are* human. When they commit morally deplorable acts, they are expressing a human potential that anthropologists should be careful to reserve to the 'savage other'—even as we acknowledge that human behavior that diverges from our own notions of right and wrong cannot be reduced to cultural difference.

Cognitive empathy, 'the degree to which the researcher came to understand those observed close to how they understand themselves' or the success of research in capturing the native point of view has been suggested as a general criterion for evaluating the quality of qualitative research (Small & Calcaro 2022: 20). Similarly, affective empathy or the capacity to sense a person's emotions and feelings without identifying or merging with the other can further our understanding of political violence (Robben & Hinton 2023). Neither cognitive nor affective empathy requires compassion with our research participants—we do not need to agree or accept in order to understand reasoning and emotions. Furthermore, heterogeneity, or the extent to which people and places are represented as diverse, and self-awareness as 'the extent to which the researcher understands the impact of their presence and assumptions on those interviewed and observed' are also signs of quality in quantitative research (Small & Calcaro 2022: 21). Good ethnographic research then, is not a matter of 'striking the right balance' between analysis and activism but rather to hone quality, even as we acknowledge that our research is always political. This is especially important in situations where we study people whom we hold in disregard. In such instances, social analysis is usually improved when we cultivate cognitive and affective empathy; when we describe our research participants as complex human beings; and when we cultivate self-awareness regarding our own political assumptions as well the impact of our writing.

Studying persons who mainly ascribe to a political ideology that is interchangeably described through concepts such as illiberalism, right-wing populism, the far-right, or fascism made me aware of how both mine and their worldview was shaped by different but entangled *cosmologies of war* that often render us blind to the grey-areas; the darkness within the light; or the light within the darkness. This militarization of the mind polarizes positions and forces us to 'pick a side' or 'write against' in ways that are often anti-ethical to the ethnographic endeavor of understanding. Humanization—the portrayal of the men and women working in the Military Police as human beings concerned with issues of justice, of right and wrong, of good and bad, and of existential meaning—is necessary if we want to develop efficient political strategies that can strengthen our democracies (see Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco 2021), but it is also a truer reflection of the complexities of the human experience, moral or otherwise.

To illustrate these complexities, I want to describe my encounter with Sargent Evandro who worked as shift leader at one of the UPP. Evandro was black and from Northeastern Brazil. Growing up, his father had held a high-ranking position in the Navy, and Evandro's family had therefore lived in a middle-class, mostly white neighborhood, where Evandro had felt as the odd duckling. His classmates lived comfortable lives, vacationing abroad, travelling to Disneyland, and enjoying racial privileges that where not accessible to Evandro and his family. His mother had often reminded him that they were living 'beyond their means' and had a particular responsibility in showing to the world that 'not all black people are thieves'. In conversations, Evandro described a childhood colored by racial prejudice and discrimination—also in encounters with the police.

As Evandro grew older, he developed a strong sense of justice. He joined the police because he wanted to contribute to a better world and fight for a good cause. Once admitted in Rio's Military Forces, he signed up for the demanding tests for the police's special forces, since that was where the action was. He viewed the special forces as doing *real* police work, fighting against Rio's criminals and evil forces. Evandro described the years he served in the special forces as exhilarating and action-packed. Sometimes, his squad would patrol the streets looking for action. Shootouts were terrifying and adrenaline-infused adventures in Evandro's accounts. He described the excitement felt by him and his colleagues when the UPP-project commenced and they were finally able to confront the drug-traffickers directly, as well as the feeling of satisfaction it gave him to see the neighbors from the favela he patrolled get a taste of the 'pleasures of the good life' as they no longer had to live under the thumb of criminals (see Salem 2024).

While Evandro was aware of the shadow of policing—of the business deals between police officers and criminals, and between high-ranking officers and elected politicians—he held on to the belief that the work he did also served a higher good. He took pride in moments when the police had acted with integrity, resisting temptations and attempts at being bribed. He disliked many of the institutionalized practices of 'corruption' but approached these with pragmatism, as something that he had to silently accept and was powerless to challenge. Like many of his colleagues, he experienced the world of policing as a sometimes-treacherous place that left low-ranking officers little space to manoeuvre.

Occasionally, I have been asked to condemn the police. This has raised dilemmas. In a political climate of anti-intellectual sentiments, I fear that such condemnation might further distance ethnographers from the people we study with and politicize science. It might also be experienced as patronizing by a readership who should be able to make their own moral judgements. Furthermore, condemning the officers from my privileged position, enjoying the safety and comforts of life in Europe is easy and allows me to feel morally righteous, but rarely sways political opponents. Taking others seriously, understanding why they think and act the way they do, desisting from positioning them within a simplistic good and evil dichotomy, and acknowledging that many of them navigate complex moral dilemmas of their own does not foreclose political action. It is a prerequisite if we want to undo the cosmologies of war that political violence relies on.

The pitfalls of ethnographic seduction

On my last visit to the UPP at Alemão before leaving Rio, several of the officers who had helped me during my fieldwork approached me and wished me a good journey home. One of the men, a Sargent and seasoned officer, asked me to forgive his colleagues: if anybody had treated me badly it was only because they hadn't gotten a chance to know me well. Another officer nodded in agreement: at the base, everybody liked me due to my friendly demeanor. I felt the same, perceiving him as a sensitive man who always greeted me with a smile. During one of our interviews, whilst recalling the racism he had suffered through his life, he had been vulnerable and even shed tears. I had bought a cutting board and barbecue-knife for the officers at the UPP, as a token of gratitude for the many barbecues they had invited me to over the last months. The Sub-Lieutenant at the base had ordered a uniform shirt with 'Professor Tomás' embroidered on the chest. When the officers saw the shirt, they scrambled through their pockets for their uniform tags: one read *UPP Alemão*, another one *Choque* (the insignia of the riot police), and one was a tag that the officers had designed themselves. It showed a skull with the text *God will judge, let's organize the trial.*

At one point during my fieldwork, catching a ride in a patrol vehicle with two officers whom I did not know, one of them asked me: 'What will you write about us? Will you write good things?' I was surprised by his question, and immediately felt nervous. I didn't want to lie. The other officer came to my aid: 'He will write the truth!' To some, 'the truth' is easy to discern: good and evil—right and wrong. Most ethnographers find, once in the field, that reality is usually complex. Through my fieldwork, I gained a strange sense of empathy for a group of people that I disliked when I arrived, even while being aware of the violence that many of them were perpetrating in the favelas. At moments, I also felt sympathy and compassion for some of them. To me, these feelings signal the limits and pitfalls of empathy. Robben and Hinton (2023) would claim that I experienced *ethnographic seduction*. I do not share some police officers' view that they are powerless pawns, victims of a system that robs them of their agency and responsibility. But there were moments when the difference between understanding how they see reality and accepting it as a valid point of view was blurred. The challenge, it seems, is being able to both step in but also step out of their shoes.

This implies staying with the trouble: neither assuming quick fixes to the cosmological divides that I have described here and elsewhere, nor adopting the cynical assumption that these can never be resolved (Haraway 2016). It implies dwelling in contradiction and ambiguity, asking why people choose to support authoritarianism despite the existence of democratic alternatives and why they still see war and violence as a solution to their problems, even as their lives are destroyed by the perpetuation of violence. These are hard questions that need to be addressed through incisive analysis rather than condemnation. Hopefully, by offering others a look into the world of the police officers, I have contributed to furthering the same understanding of the cosmologies of war that feed far-right projects that I have attained. And hopefully, I have also shown that the world of warfare that emerged at the UPPs in Rio's favelas challenges the fantasy that democratic peace can be imposed through violence.

Conclusion

In this text I have argued that condemnation potentially shuts down dialogue and reifies positions. As the divide between us and the other grows, this process of polarization produces an image of the other as absolute evil, while the 'us' we create in opposition is increasingly imagined as good, righteous, and pure. Anthropological research that assumes a strict division between good and evil can be analytically lazy, produce ethnocentric and reifying accounts, and leave little room for nuance and complexity—the hallmarks of ethnography. The feeling of righteousness that comes from defining ourselves in opposition to an evil other can make us blind to our own darkness or flaws. While it is true that all knowledge is political, activist anthropology that does not account for

divergent points of view might further undermine the status of scientific knowledge production in a polarized political context. Perhaps we should strive to write in a way that makes it possible for different kinds of readers to recognize themselves in our texts. Analytically, this is a so-called no-brainer: social analysis is improved when we hold space for complexity. Politically, this strategy can be controversial, but also a path forward that narrows the gap between us and the other. This has, after all, been the humanizing project of anthropology.

Ethnography has historically been a way of understanding ourselves by looking at others. Avoiding the pitfalls of a moralizing or woke ethnography can ideally make us more attuned to contradictions in our own understandings of right and wrong and to our own potential for violence and de-humanization of others. My own political position is largely shaped by leftist and anarchist perspectives, and this shines through in my writing. I have only partially been able to follow the suggestions put forth in this text. My research is clearly biased and often explicitly political. Sometimes this informs descriptions of the police that are perhaps excessively shaped by my own values. I have tried to adopt a reflexive approach to the ambiguities of my field; I have tried to depict the police officers as complex human beings; and I have tried to make my own thoughts and feelings explicit—both the feelings of contempt I felt at the start of my fieldwork, as well as the desensitization to cruelty that I experienced towards the end, which in the extreme can enable violence. Avoiding the pitfalls of moral relativism as well as ethnocentrism is especially difficult when carrying out research in contexts of war but perhaps it is exactly in these contexts that ethnographic nuance is most important.

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