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Book Review

Book Review – Policing the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro: Cosmologies of War and The Far-Right

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Book: Tomas Salem, *Policing the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro: Cosmologies of War and The Far-Right* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024). ISBN: 9783031490262 (hardcover); 9783031490279 (e-book)

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The publication of Tomas Salem's *Policing the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro: Cosmologies of War and The Far-Right* comes at a crucial moment for reflection on public security and democracy in Brazil. For someone like me, who writes from a dual standpoint, that of a PhD candidate in Social Sciences and that of a police officer who served for over two decades in Rio de Janeiro, experiencing the rise and fall of the Pacifying Police Units (UPPs) project, Salem's work is not just an object of academic analysis. It is a mirror that reflects with unique ethnographic clarity the reality that shaped my own trajectory and that of thousands of my colleagues in police institutions. This is a substantial work, and its reading is indispensable for understanding not only the complexity of favela policing but also the roots of the crisis that culminated in the rise of the far-right in the country.

The Central Argument: The Cosmologies of War

Salem's main argument is that the dynamics of policing in Rio de Janeiro, and by extension state violence in Brazil, can only be understood through what he terms "cosmologies of war." This is no mere euphemism. The author transcends the debate over whether the situation technically constitutes war to posit that "war" functions as a cognitive framework and a moral universe that structures reality, subjectivities, and the practices of all involved. For those who have been on the front lines, patrolling the alleys and lanes described in the book, the concept of "cosmologies of war" is not a theoretical abstraction but a precise description of lived reality. This approach directly engages with the long tradition of critical public security studies in Brazil, which, as Luiz Eduardo Soares points out, has long identified the logic of war as the pillar of a failed policing model.¹

Salem unfolds this cosmology into two complementary strands. The first is that of "colonial war," which highlights the historical continuity of a racialized necropolitics. The favela is framed as a territory of exception, and its inhabitants, predominantly Black and poor, as a "disposable population" upon which the state exercises its power of death, in a logic of predation. The second is that of "cultural war," fueled by a conservative and religious moralism that divides the world into a Manichaeic dualism between "good" and "evil." The synthesis of these two logics is brilliantly articulated through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "war machine," which helps explain the complex and sometimes symbiotic relationships between the state, police, gangs, and militias, including the intricate web of "political merchandise" analyzed by Michel Misse.²

Contributions to the Fields of Security and Law Enforcement

The contribution of Salem's work to the fields of policing and public security is multifaceted and profound. Firstly, the book offers a humanization of the low-ranking police officer (*praça*) that is rarely found in academic literature or media coverage. Salem goes beyond the stereotype of the violent and corrupt officer to show us the human being behind the uniform: his contradictions, fears, moral dilemmas, his feeling of abandonment by the state, and his deep frustration with a system he feels uses him as a "maneuvering mass" or, in the powerful metaphor shared by one of his interlocutors, as one of the "last slaves of Brazil." To read the descriptions of the environment at the Alemão base is to recognize a universe of moral and institutional dilemmas that ethnographers like Jacqueline Muniz and Elisabete Albernaz have so well explored in their work on the UPPs.³

Secondly, the work establishes a masterful connection between the micro and the macro. The detailed ethnography of the daily life and worldview of the police serves as a magnifying glass to understand the rise of Bolsonarism. Salem demonstrates how the resentment, moral conservatism, victimhood narrative, and belief in violence as the only solution, which were the "air one breathed" in the battalions, became a national political project. The book convincingly elucidates why Jair Bolsonaro was seen by so many of my colleagues as the only politician who "cares about us."

Finally, the work offers a scathing critique of police “modernization” projects like the UPPs. It shows how these top-down reforms fail by not confronting the deeply entrenched institutional culture of war. The chapter “Modernizing Warriors” is exemplary in describing how human rights training was viewed with disdain, while tactical training with Special Forces reinforced the combat ethos the reform intended to mitigate.

Strengths, Limitations, and Unique Features

The book’s greatest strength is its exceptional ethnographic richness. Salem’s methodological courage in immersing himself in high-risk environments allowed him to capture with remarkable precision the jargon, dark humor, tension, and moral complexities of police life. His ability to build rapport and give voice to his interlocutors is what makes the book so powerful and authentic. The robust theoretical framework, centered on the “cosmologies of war,” is not imposed on the data but emerges from it, giving the analysis great explanatory power.

Like any work, this one has its limitations. One, perhaps unavoidable, is the predominant focus on the *praças*. While their perspective is fundamental, a deeper ethnographic immersion into the world of the *oficiais* (commissioned officers) and the high command could have revealed other facets of the institutional culture. Furthermore, while the focus on Alemão as the “extreme” end of the pacification spectrum is justified, the practitioner-reader might question the direct applicability of some conclusions to less embattled units, where “proximity” relationships were at times more ambiguous.

Its unique feature lies precisely in how it navigates the minefield of humanization without falling into justification. Salem does not absolve the police of their violence, but he makes the institutional, political, and subjective conditions that produce it understandable.

Usefulness of the Work

Policing the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro is a work of invaluable and cross-cutting utility:

- For students and researchers, it is a masterful example of contemporary ethnography on the state and violence, offering a sophisticated theoretical framework applicable to other contexts of urban conflict.
- For security professionals (police officers), it should be required, albeit painful, reading. The book functions as a mirror that can promote critical reflection on institutional culture, the psychological suffering of officers, and the systemic dynamics that entrap them. It could be an important tool in training courses, if there were institutional courage for such a debate.
- For managers and policymakers, it is a stark warning against simplistic public security policies. It unequivocally demonstrates that any reform that fails to account for the culture and cosmologies structuring police practice is doomed to fail. The book proves that it is not enough to “modernize warriors;” one must question the war itself.

Tomas Salem offers a profound and disturbing diagnosis. Upon reading it, one recalls the testimonies of military police officers who referred to their condition as that of a “slave-soldier:” a piece in a machine of violence that largely transcends individual decisions. The work does not provide simple solutions; however, it confronts the reader with the most necessary and pressing questions regarding the future of public security, justice, and democracy itself in Brazil.

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None.

Disclosures

None.

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Roberto Uchôa de Oliveira Santos is a researcher specialized in organized crime, firearm control, and public security policies in Brazil, with over two decades of experience spanning law enforcement, policy formulation, and academic research. His career began as a civil police officer in Rio de Janeiro and later progressed to the Federal Police, working on firearms trade regulation. He is currently pursuing a PhD in 21st Century Democracy at the University of Coimbra's Faculty of Economics (FEUC) and the Center for Social Studies (CES). His academic background includes a Law degree from the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) and postgraduate studies in public security management and criminal justice (UFF), criminal law and criminology (PUCRS), and organized crime (ANP/PF). Additionally, Mr. Santos holds a Master's in Political Sociology from the State University of Northern Fluminense (UENF) and has undertaken advanced courses on illicit markets at the University of São Paulo (USP). He is also a board member of the Brazilian Forum for Public Security (FBSP).

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Endnotes

¹ Luiz Eduardo Soares, *Segurança Pública: presente e futuro* (Editora Sextante, 2008).

² Michel Misse, "Mercados ilegais, redes de proteção e organização local do crime no Rio de Janeiro," *Estudos Avançados* 21, no. 61 (2007): 139–157. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0103-40142007000300010>

³ Jacqueline de Oliveira Muniz and Elisabete Albernaz, "Moralidades entrecruzadas nas UPPs: Uma narrativa policial," *Cadernos Ciências Sociais da UFRRJ* II, no. 29 (2015): 115–151. <https://app.uff.br/riuff/handle/1/11976>

⁴ Luiz Antonio Machado da Silva, *Vida sob cerco: violência e rotina nas favelas do Rio de Janeiro* (Nova Fronteira, 2008).