

## Divided Society

– A legend of good and bad gangsters

**A few weeks before the kick-off of the World Cup reports accumulate in the international press about violent riots in the cities of Brazil, especially Rio de Janeiro. Being a bizarre normality, the recent incidents also represent a novelty.**

The German journal "Der Spiegel" published an article "Death and Games", another German publication by FAZ contained "Staying with chaotic people". In the meantime even optimists doubt that Brazilians' impressive ability to improvise will be enough to compensate for their lack of planning skills. Almost daily new reports of riots and shootings reach the media.

For a long time the peripheries of the city were the only venues for violence. That changed in the end of April. In the middle of Copacabana, where, at this point, the largest density of international journalists across the country could be found, Brazil once again delivered the perfect backdrop for international reporting in the run-up to the 2014 World Cup. Gun fire and pistol shots came from the hill Pavão-Pavãozinho, shortly followed by burning barricades and complete chaos. A young dancer had recently been found dead and that incident had sparked protests from angry residents.

### A bizarre story of everyday life

In many parts of the city, an urban war has been taken place for decades. Since the 1970s the majority of the favelas has been occupied by one of the various drug gangs in the city. The oldest of these cartels is the so-called Red Command (Comando Vermelho) which has its origin in the era of the military dictatorship of Brazil. At that time, political prisoners

were imprisoned together with common criminals. Much free time and congested space in prison led to the ideas of imprisoned left-winged intellectuals mixing with those of the ordinary prisoners. So the military junta became the obstetrician for a kind of Robin-Hood-Cartel, which, barely released, took command of the numerous favelas of the city. The vacuum in social policy left by the state was filled by the Red Command with drug-funded substitute care. Legends of "the good gangster" who supplied the poor population of his very own favela with medicine or gas for cooking are still told and are even sold as literary bestsellers. Where the state is still not present, the function of the good gangster continues, not because of faith in a Marxist model but to keep the inhabitants of the miniature dictatorships in the favelas content. So the chief of the hill ensures order by punishing robberies or other acts of violence with draconian penalties, even execution. Financial loss due to theft, illness or natural disasters are often reimbursed by the multi-million dollar drug budgets, no matter if the person is involved in the drug trade or not. It is repaid through loyalty, turning a blind eye and with respect for the rules that are dictated by the local gang.

Until a few years ago, heavy clashes between the cartels and the police were a daily occurrence. This had led to about 1,000 deaths per year solely due to collateral damage by bullets. Bright red flashes from machine gun fires was always seen in the night sky when the bosses of the hill celebrated festivals: Shots at Christmas, birthdays or any of an infinite number of days commemorating the death of a fallen "warrior" were

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just as normal as groups of teenagers that went in broad daylight, armed with rifles, through the streets and alleys of the favelas, determining the rules of everyday life for the inhabitants. At the height of the cartels influence, which are identified by different colours, a wrong T-shirt could already be fatal. Even today, uninvolved residents of the favelas are risking their lives just by entering areas which are in the hands of one of the opposing groups. For decades the society remained in a bizarre normality to which the rich elite adapted through bulletproof cars while the residents of the slums had to collaborate with the cartels. The police presence was limited to occasional operation under war-like conditions, just to leave the scene a few hours later; until December 2008.

#### **Success case UPP**

The change came in the shape of a hundred policemen who one morning, heavily armed and supported by the masked SWAT BOPE and numerous helicopters, stormed a favela, this time to stay. The pacification unit UPP (Unidades da Polícia Pacífica Dora) "Santa Marta" in southern Rio brought a paradigm shift. First regarded with amazement, the belief in a different normality grew stronger with every occupied favela. Murder rates declined drastically in the pacified areas. And also the people who found themselves without the questionable care of drug bosses, became aware of a new quality of life. Bizarre side effects, such as the possibility of romantic relationships between people of formerly hostile favelas, appeared in the media. Soon, numerous hotels and restaurants opened on the steep hills of Copacabana and elsewhere. With the guards of the drug lords, a barrier which had for so many years separated the population of the favelas and the people of the near residential complexes, also had disappeared.

Convinced of the success, the project was expanded constantly. The demand for police officers and more infrastructure increased enormously and is one of the

reasons why the project began to develop an inflationary characteristic. Soon doubt arose because of corruption scandals within the units and violent attacks by the police on the inhabitants of the favelas. In addition, the mass migration of criminals had led to a rise of violence in other parts of the city and the state. However, an official request to the then Governor of Rio, Sergio Cabral, not to occupy new areas but to secure first the control of the situation until further notice, was rejected.

Meanwhile, the UPPs themselves were full of concern. Attacks on the police outposts or the police patrols are rising rapidly. First interpreted as a natural resistance and act of desperation by the cartels, the increasing clashes now look more like a loss of control by the police.

#### **Security Policy at the zenith**

Meanwhile, hardly a day goes by without reports of injured policemen. Often young and inexperienced, trained in a crash-course and with a salary of less than 600 Euros, the new officers of the UPPs often work under lousy conditions: bad food, night shifts in small containers they use as outposts, always in the crosshairs of the drug gangs, which now, sometimes more, sometimes less obscured, but still armed, monitor the hills.

Everyday life as a police officer in an urban war, which often claims the lives of colleagues, and is hardly acknowledged by society, is responsible for the strange mentality of the police in Rio. Barely legal in its brutality and yet convinced, to sacrifice their own integrity for the protection of the citizens, the police celebrates the dead gangster. Photos of police officers posing with their victims in various conditions, end up in newspapers and social media. Here the reactions are often accompanied by scorn. Commentaries like "One less" or "Bullets for them!" are the harmless type. Reports of injured or dead policeman are followed by an-

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nouncements like “We only go to the funeral of our friend after we have put the enemy six feet under”. Word on the street is that the exchange rate is one to four: One dead policeman is avenged with four dead gangsters. The war is personal. Since January, 31 police officers in the state of Rio de Janeiro lost their lives, about six per week were injured. According to official statistics of the Department of Homeland Security (ISP), 153 people were killed during police operations between January and March.

The situation is exacerbated by an evil that pervades the entire Brazilian society. Corruption is a bridge between the two camps, which negotiate short-term peace agreements with money and weapons. Numerous incidents of monthly payments by the drug lords to units of the UPPs were leaked last year. Before the occupation of several hills in the centre of Rio the police had even helped the drug lords with the removal of their weapons.

At the same time, a criminal parallel structure inside the police, the so-called militia, seems to profit from the same vacuum. Already in the 1990s police officers and fire fighters bolstered the lack of public structure with private security services. However, within a short time, a brutal mafia developed. In the spirit of the masked avenger, one of the most famous leaders is known as “Batman”. After numerous graffiti tags of the superheroes had appeared on the Pavão-Pavãozinho hill, local media speculated that gangs were also active there. Even today, the militia is deeply interwoven within the structure of the police and it is possible that, due to the spread of the UPPs, it might gain new territories.

The judicial system is also part of the problem of Pavão-Pavãozinho in Copacabana. A few months ago the former “chief of the hill” returned and since then, small conflicts are part of everyday life. On the first day of the semi-open imprisonment the crime boss who is well-known by the nickname “Pitbull” had fled. Nevertheless, according to media reports a court con-

firmed his right to semi-open prison. To suspect incompetence as a reason would be the lesser evil here. Meanwhile, the police was engaged in several gun fights but was not able to arrest the fugitive even though some of Rio’s police forces are now very well equipped and trained. In the past, the special task force BOPE has trained Squads in the U.S., a drone is also used. Where priorities are set, the means to achieve selective goals exist.

The risk of major conflict was probably underestimated in this case, or even tolerated due to insider interest. Giving way to a scene with the exact content international media sells the easiest, is definitely a turning point in the security politics of Rio de Janeiro. Previously limited to the peripheries, the government was still trying to speak of isolated gun fire in particularly difficult areas. To have such conflicts in the centre of the city is a novelty that reveals the seriousness of the situation.

### **A population helps itself**

In everyday life, the police gives the population the impression that it has a bigger interest in its personal war than in the protection of the society. After a robbery, besides the stolen goods often the files also disappear in the drawers of the battalions. Police on duty in the squares of the city respond to calls for help often with little more than a tired comment that they do not have permission to leave the square.

Left alone between warring groups, the population has meanwhile begun to react with self-defence to the increasing number of robberies. Cases, in which thieves, who were caught by civilians, were tied naked to street posts or others in which only the intervention of the police saved them from death through beatings, were more and more represented by the media. However, deaths by beatings are not uncommon in Brazil and also happen in the cases of accident drivers or minorities such as transsexuals. In May 2014, an angry mob killed a woman in the state of

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São Paulo only because of a rumour on Facebook and other social media, which implied that she was involved with black magic. Brazilian experts explain the reaction with the assumption that the citizens felt let down by the judicial system. In addition, however, another factor probably plays a role.

Applause for police violence echoes through social media, through barbecues with friends and family, or political speeches. The threshold of the society for the use of force is extremely low and is a symptom of the trauma of decades of urban war and impunity. While it is not uncommon in Europe, that 20-year-olds have never seen a dead man, the inhabitants of the favelas are facing a constant conflict, which takes place not just in front of their door. In the form of ricochets, violent drug dealers or police men, the war is penetrating their houses and claims victims such as family and friends. The residents of the richer districts at the same time are constantly exposed to the threat of attacks or kidnappings, and so barricade themselves behind the walls of the apartment complexes. Those who are not directly affected by violence, at least knows someone who is. A constant feeling of insecurity drives people to constantly monitor the movements of others or start to panic when black children are running through the streets. This is supported by a sensationalist press that shows every day the most bizarre cases.

#### **„A good gangster is a dead gangster“- Divided society**

As early as in school the social classes grow up separated between public and private schools. Social mobility is low, class affiliation still perpetuates itself, even though millions of people have advanced into a new middle class. Nevertheless, prejudices and a lack of social solidarity often legitimize demands for short-term relief of symptoms rather than to act together for long-term reforms. Also in the case of the dead dancer judgments were made quickly. Years of experience have taught the inhabitants

of the favelas what the police is capable of. Statistics of the disappeared, also in the UPPs, give reason enough to believe that another innocent young man who was in the wrong place at the wrong time became another number in the enormous statistics of young black men who fall victim to police brutality. In the first quarter of 2014, 1.758 people disappeared in the state of Rio. While this statistic doesn't consider those people who reappear later, another number speaks clearly: In the same period 185 corpses and 8 remains in the form of bones were found. Where victims are buried, burned, dumped in trash cans or the Bay of Guanabara, or simply carted from one hill to another, statistics degenerate into approximate values. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of the favelas find themselves inside a new structure of the UPPs, which degenerates more and more into a mere facade. The rules of the favelas are now set up by two parties. A simple conversation with police officers can be followed by death threats or execution from the cartels; in the same way suspicion of connections to the drug dealers may result in threats by the police. The structures of the past that offered a bit of security in their own way, gave way to a chaotic state in which the victims are again the residents of the favelas.

“Human rights for rightful humans” it reverberates from the other side of the chasm that has separated the Brazilian society for a long time. Those who act wrong, in the opinion of many Brazilians, lose their claim on human rights. And there is also no mercy for children and teenagers who are used by the cartels because they have not yet reached the age of criminal responsibility. This feeling is caused by the constant state of threat to those, who have any property. Almost nobody is held accountable for crime; the detection rate for homicide is below five percent. The enormous amount of frustration results in the hatred against an entire segment of the population that, for the most parts, is not involved in the criminal activities of the cartels. The resentment of the traditional middle and

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upper classes manifests itself in a general suspicion against the inhabitants of the hills. A template that separates good and evil is practically impossible to create where friendships or family bonds between workers and drug gangs blur the boundaries. The public discourse in Brazil still reproduces antagonistic stereotypes, which was also seen on the hill in Copacabana. As soon as the news of the death of the young dancer found itself to the press, hundreds immediately started to comment in the social media. Some assure the dancer was another victim of the brutal police. Other stated that that the 26-year-old had connections to the local cartel. Few demanded that the police should first look into the case and provide the facts on what actually happened. Hardly anyone asked about the actual legitimacy of the killing of a human being. The Gangster criterion alone decides. "A good gangster is a dead gangster", is the almost uniform attitude. It is said to be better, the bad elements of society were eliminated directly rather than to be put to prison, only to be released on probation after a short while. Better one of them than another dead policeman. In general: One less to worry about. Quoted for many years, the sentence "A good gangster is a dead gangster" served several times as a campaign slogan. Congressman Sivuca, for example, got an enormous response. "Brave" is he, who says what others just think.

### **The safety during the World Cup**

Regardless of the outcome of the UPP project, one thing already remains clear: The certainty that the peace project is possible. The protests in June last year were a clear signal that something is stirring in Brazilian society. Unfulfilled promises about the country's modernization as part of the preparation for the World Cup, mismanagement, corruption and the state negligence were reasons why the otherwise harmony-seeking Brazilians took their anger to the streets.

The transformation of a society, whose middle class is increasingly enlarging,

naturally brings frictions with it. The search for a new model of society raises questions about the role of the elites and the new middle class, which is just learning to articulate its demands in a constructive way. Mostly students took part in the massive protests that brought millions onto the streets. But other parts of the population have now also learned to take advantage of the world's press, who's attention is now drawn to Brazil during the World Cup, and to use it as a megaphone for their own purposes. It is therefore likely, that there will also be protests during the World Cup.

A second kind of turmoil is currently created by the upcoming elections in October. Some potential candidates for the office of Governor of the State of Rio de Janeiro are rumoured to be encouraging protests and attacks on the UPPs to destabilize the current government. The anarchist Black Blocs network also announced that it would cause chaos during the World Cup.

With that, the safety of the fans will probably be less threatened than the country's image. A huge range of the military branches will support the police and protect the city from attacks by the drug cartels, as well as protests by its own people. It is highly unlikely that these scenes will repeat themselves in Copacabana. Also Pitbull, on top of the hill of Pavão-Pavãozinho is hardly able to cause trouble under the presence of the military. When in doubt, Special Forces such as the BOPE, which are trained to take drastic measures - sometimes using questionable methods - are standing by. Also, agreements between the police and the cartels are rumoured to have been used to create peace in the city on short notice.

### **Expectations**

A moment of anxiety always offers the possibility of realignment. An evaluation of the project, from both the security

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perspective, and in terms of the non-intensive investment policies in education and social protection could ensure the survival of the UPPs. The first step has been completed with the current society-wide discussion. The conclusions drawn from this discontent will ultimately decide what development path the Brazil of tomorrow will take.

Dialogue and solidarity between the classes would be a start for a social consensus, rather than remaining in a debate about good or bad gangsters. Both the residents of the favelas, as well as the middle and upper class can take their share of responsibility. Certainly, the ways to fight against the drug lords as inhabitants of the favelas are very limited. And also sociological barriers due to trauma, lack of foresight due to the poor education and other factors inhibit the abilities of the poor. Nevertheless, factors such as the glorification of drug dealers or neglect of education perpetuate the favela's position on the periphery of society. Meanwhile, the flourishing drug trade, which can be sourced, to a large extent, to the consumption of the exact upper middle and upper class who believe themselves to be victims of drug cartels, continues. This completes the circle. The "cocaine-service" of Pavão-Pavãozinho is delivered for free to your home by motorbike taxi. Rumour has it, that the deceased dancer also had one of those.

Whether hosting the World Cup can ultimately be seen as a success in the field of public safety, depends on which standard is applied. Should the sole criterion be the public peace during the event, then perhaps there is still some hope for success. Nevertheless, the image of the country has already suffered damage by preliminary reports. Instead of dispelling the traditional stereotypes of a country between soccer, samba and violence, Brazil provides even more substance for obtaining this image. The biggest opportunity for the UPP project to reconcile both the city and the various parts of society seems to remain elusive.