

A DREAM OF A NEW POLICE FORCE

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ABSTRACT

In Brazil, where history and reality are marked by slavery, racism, inequality and violence, the police function as a death machine. The blatant use of lethal force by the police in the country exposes the urgent need to revamp the structure of the public safety system itself. One police colonel from Rio de Janeiro dreams of humanising the police. He argues that police work is, in fact, care work and believes that it can be adapted to ensure that it is based on a commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights.

KEYWORDS

Necropolitics | Police | To humanize | Human rights

[...] there is a need to give the police back the 'head' and 'heart' that were removed during their training. There is a need to allow them to 'think' and 'feel'. So they can 'act' from a place of human integrity.¹
Carlos Magno Nazareth Cerqueira

At the time I was born, monks were setting themselves on fire in a protest for recognition and dignity. My mother told me this story. She saw those religious men in Saigon as a terrible grandiose indication of the extremes to which human beings will go in search of some happiness in this world. Early on, faith presented itself to me as a fundamental dimension of life that compels testimony. In my youth, I discovered in Liberation Theology a commitment to the good news of a kingdom of peace and justice where despair and humiliation had no place.

Just before my twentieth birthday, burdened by necessity, I decided to apply for a place at the Military Police Officers' Training School in the State of Rio de Janeiro. It was the beginning of the 1980s. Brazil was governed by a general, but the dictatorship was on its way out. It was a time of change, of re-democratisation and this was also affecting the Military Police. The challenge at that time was to extricate the Military Police from the theoretical and operational hallmarks of national security doctrine.

I would like to say something here about the promise of the Democratic State. We pledged to create an operational policy for the Brazilian police force that was not within the bellicose model. However, further investigation of this matter would take us too far. I am forced to adjust to the narrow limits of this article. I would like to raise some points and reflect on the use of force in the militarised context of public security. I wish to speak about war and (in) humanity. I have no intention of offering solutions. Succinctness has never been my strong suit. Moreover, after living for half a century, I find I am becoming less and less prone to certainties and more and more prone to questioning.

One of these lines of inquiry leads me to my joining the Military Police. In our lives some occurrences manage to escape the quick sand of oblivion. My first class on the officers' training course in 1983 is one of these moments. I joined the Military Police on 1 March of the same year and was introduced to the ideas of a police officer called Carlos Magno Nazareth Cerqueira, who was Commander General and Secretary of the Military Police during the terms of government of Leonel Brizola. This meeting was a landmark on my professional path.

The Military Police has a time frame. The past impacts on its present, which is true of all existence. As with humanity, in institutions time also makes itself known through its momentum and in the form of trends. Its past originated in the Military Division of the Royal Guard of the Police, created in 1809 by the prince regent. Until then the Force had been headed up by just six officers from its own ranks. The rest were from the Brazilian army. Nazareth Cerqueira was the first black man to occupy this position in the 174 years of its history.

When he arrived in the auditorium of the School we all rose to our feet, as one soldier. He was a tall, slim, elegant man. He moved slowly and spoke so quietly he was almost inaudible. Even with a microphone and a sound system in good working order, listening to him required a certain effort. He was not a good speaker. He would stop mid-sentence to choose his next words with care. This break in the flow of an idea would sometimes last several seconds. Nazareth Cerqueira was a thinker. It made you want to do the same. He was a unique speaker and used to choose provocative subjects: “Hated by the marginalised sectors of society, the Military Police holds neither the confidence nor the trust of the people. Why?”.

I used to make sure I had a notebook with me and would take notes on the main issues he touched on which were always a source for reflection. Classes and instigation. People’s discomfort was apparent. The Commander General asked us to think about why the public were scathing about the police and linked loss of respect to police violence, above all in their treatment of the underprivileged. It was on that day that I heard the expression “Nova Polícia” (New Police), as a challenge to build a police institution aimed at ensuring and promoting human dignity. Years later, Nazareth Cerqueira was to explore this same subject in articles published by the Carioca Institute of Criminology.

To view a commitment to the protection and promotion of human rights as an attribution of the police and thus reaffirm the idea of ethical legal policing which for us, means the subordination of policing techniques to ethical legal values. This will require a new formulation of police efficiency and efficacy [...]. The corpses of criminals cannot serve as indicators of success [...].²

I have been working on this theme and have sought to show police officers that the arbitrary unnecessary violence, adopted by them against criminals and suspects ends up damaging their own physical and psychological integrity.³

I was used to seeing faith as a commitment to love. To my ears those words were as heady and precise as the music of Bach. The human adventure takes place in our concern with our fellow men and women, in coming close to others without showing indifference to their suffering. This meant not killing and the vocation to live for others. I realised that for Nazareth Cerqueira, the role of the police involved caring for others. As a practice of caring, police action demanded feeling and the attention that comes with reflection. It was reflection and poetry. After hearing things like this, in a police barracks in 1983, I started to long for that new attitude. My mind had been awakened in the same way that the verses of Siruiz awakened the mind of Riobaldo.⁴

The daily life of Brazilian public security could not have been further from this humanistic perspective which was an apparatus that ripped reflection and poetry to shreds. Over the years, according to Nazareth Cerqueira, the attempt to overcome the militarisation of

police work, through the “democratic construction of public order” failed. How could it be otherwise in a country structured around racism, inequality and violence?

I was to discover this in my daily working life, as soon as I completed my course. There is a need at this juncture, to speak of slavery and its heritage, a point that needs to be revisited often as it still lives among us. In Brazil, the authoritarian manner of handling public order is a modern-day version of ancestral cruelty of a kind that is inherent in the discipline required for a type of social organisation that is structured around the human body being tortured and reduced to a beast of burden. The basis of the slave-based society, that we still live in to some extent, is death labour.

This method of crushing people, that Darcy Ribeiro called “a mill for grinding people down”,⁵ has led to a hierarchical society that normalises inequality and exclusion. This is why we are tormented by the idea of order. Any disturbance of the reality considered “normal”, even if this is based on the most inhuman and intolerable of injustices, is an affront to the way we have established our existence, legitimating the use of punitive power, in the name of radical confrontation of danger, represented in the figure of an enemy. If there is an enemy there will be war and the pretext for instituting an exception and exercising the right to kill.

This mechanism has an engine. I had not, until then, identified it in the order of matters. It was a shock when I did and this happened when I first entered a police station. I had been called in to help some of my colleagues from the civil police with an insurgency. At that time, some districts held provisional prisoners awaiting resolution of their cases in the courts. There were a lot of them. They were rioting about the food that had arrived in an unfit state for human consumption, as I was able to confirm. They were crammed into cubicles that were as filthy as the food they had been given. The smell and the heat were unbearable. They were all black! I was not at high sea, like the poet, but I was indeed in the belly of a slave ship.⁶

It is essential to acknowledge that in Brazil the fuel that drives this ‘mill’ is racism. In essence, racism is a technology at the service of domination. It is a tactic to establish incompatibility between different lives. For one group to exist, the way it does, other groups have to be subordinated. Discarded. They were right there, before my eyes, in that police station. The colonial past of slavery, still alive in our structures and apparatus, functioning and operating in the relationship between the state and human misery.

This historically instituted social brutality, gained an air of science in the 1950s with the incorporation of the National Security Doctrine. It became a philosophy for the forces of order, so to speak, sparking manuals, work protocols, training programmes – a mentality. The permanent state of war, that we had experienced since the early days of colonisation moved up a notch with the military dictatorship, acquiring intellectual and operational fibre. Even under the citizen’s Constitution, police forces continued to be inspired by the discourse and practices of war. We transformed the fight into the subversion of communism

in times of Cold War and into constant mobilisation against drugs. The war on drugs gave militarisation renewed impetus and was introduced as an ideology for the Doctrine of National Security, in the midst of the Democratic State of Law.

When people ask me: “Why didn’t you give up?” I remember Pascal: “The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of.”⁸ The challenge, which still fascinates me until this day, is the idea of humanising essential working conditions and the possibilities for change in police activities. I was an officer though and it would have been more complicated if I had occupied a lower position in the hierarchy. In fact, our model of policing is not very helpful. It has a peculiarity in this sense that needs to be addressed.

The particular way the Brazilian police force was designed makes the situation worse, especially with regards to what is known as structural racism. In Brazil, the ostensive police are unable to investigate common crimes which means Public Security Forces are drawn in to look for offenders. As the “brute labour of criminality”⁹ is linked to life in precarious conditions, the combination of a ‘militarised policy’ without an institutional framework to articulate consistent, lasting action within the three spheres of political power, along with a schizophrenic policing model,¹⁰ means the war on drugs and the so-called ‘fight against crime’ has largely mutated into a war on those who are the most likely candidates for criminality: the poor, black youth of the favelas.

As I write this article, we are living through a pandemic that has already taken the lives of 50,000 people in Brazil. In Rio de Janeiro, the Institute for Public Security recently published figures pertaining to violence in the month of April 2020. In the first four months of this year, the Rio de Janeiro police force killed 606 people. In April alone, 177 suspects were killed in police operations. In 2019 this figure reached a shocking 1,814 people, almost five deaths a day.¹¹ National data is not much different. According to the Brazilian Forum for Public Security, 2018, Brazilian police officers killed 6,220 people in the ‘fight against crime’.¹²

There is another aspect to consider. Nazareth Cerqueira always drew our attention to the effect that the abuse of force has on police officers and the impact of producing a person who is capable of killing. Simone Weil, a French philosopher who dedicated many studies to the causes of oppression, also warns us about the subtlety of the power of death work:

The force that kills is summary and crude. How much more varied in operation, how much more stunning in effect is that other force, the sort that does not kill, or rather does not kill just yet. It will kill for a certainty, or it will kill perhaps, or it may merely hang over the being [...]; in all cases it changes the human being into stone. From the power to change a human being into a thing by making him die, there comes another power, in its way more momentous, that of making a still living human being into a thing.¹³

All those who work in the police force should be alerted to this equation – anyone who overreaches him/herself is condemning something in their soul. Something in the killer dies, along with his/her victim. As Marx perceived, the use of power involves a kind of fatality.¹⁴ In the monopoly of violence, in this condition in which some workers are valued over others – in any division of labour that determines that some people will give orders while others will obey – those who oppress are, in some way, also oppressed. I see people like this in many positions of power, not only in the police. I have seen this in human beings who have been changed by a job that has made them alien to themselves.

The great risk to the integrity of police work, in a complex environment such as ours, is the passionate use of force. Avoiding exaggeration is always difficult, because force is seductive. Dominating, giving orders and subordinating another human being engenders a demonic kind of inebriation, a need for death. Force corrupts and promotes tormented kinds of identity and ways of living, of which the *'milícia'* is an eloquent example.¹⁵ Incredible though it may seem, it is also possible to live off violence.

There is a need to create antidotes against this peril. I have tried to do this and have mostly failed, except for once, perhaps. Towards the end of my career I returned to the Police Officers' Training School to run it. One day I assembled the unit for a presentation of poetry and music. My festival ended with a concerto, Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture. I asked a commander to send me officers from the front line. I wanted to share the experience with those souls who were damaged by the streets. They came with their families. I saw some of them crying.

Nazareth Cerqueira was spot on. He realised that only an emotion can defeat another emotion. If sad emotions cause violence we must respond with joyful emotions. Opening police institutions up to art and reflection could help. Hannah Arendt taught us the close relationship between reflection and ethics: "The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly."¹⁶

Government action that neglects police lethality condemns the humanity of these public servants. At the end of the day, brutalisation wins, democracy loses and death starts to reign over everyone as a policy. Necropolitics.¹⁷ The result is the devastating scenario in which our police officers are working. According to the Brazilian Security Forum, in 2018, 343 police officers were fatal victims of violence. One hundred and four of them committed suicide.

Our police officers are sick. They suffer and cause suffering. A lot of warring and little public policy has changed men and women into desperate creatures, although most of them are unable to understand the nature of this Evil. Desperation that is ignored and actions that will turn against the agents themselves. Strange sad labour. As Nazareth Cerqueira says in one of his texts in the 1990s: "The scenario of police violations [...] is creating a police force that is violent and dangerous to both criminals and the public."¹⁸ I would venture to add that it is also ruinous for the police officers themselves.

The instigations Nazareth Cerqueira presented on that Tuesday morning are still pending action on our part. Until we reformulate our way of understanding and handling the criminal phenomenon, radically modifying police working conditions, the dream of police officers who are committed to the promotion and guarantee of human rights will continue to be the charming illusion of an exceptional chief of police and many others like him who still admire human beings and to see in our work in the world an opportunity to perfect our humanity.

NOTES

- 1 • Carlos Magno Nazareth Cerqueira, "O Futuro de Uma Ilusão: O Sonho de Uma Nova Polícia," in *O Futuro de Uma Ilusão: O Sonho de Uma Nova Polícia* (Rio de Janeiro: Freitas Bastos Editora, 2001): 111. Carlos Magno Nazareth Cerqueira (1937-1999) was a well-known officer in the Military Police, Commander General and Secretary of State in both Leonel Brizola's local governments (1983-1987 and 1991-1995) in Rio de Janeiro. He studied the Police and was a thinker dedicated to the democratisation, reform and modernisation of the police force during the period of redemocratisation in the country.
- 2 • Carlos Magno Nazareth Cerqueira, "Políticas de Segurança Pública Para Um Estado de Direito Democrático Chamado Brasil," in *O futuro de uma ilusão: o sonho de uma nova polícia*, Carlos Magno Nazareth Cerqueira (Rio de Janeiro: Freitas Bastos Editora, 2001): 82.
- 3 • *Ibid.*, 205.
- 4 • This is a reference to João Guimarães Rosa's novel, *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. In Rosa's novel, Riobaldo, the narrator and central figure, hears the verses of Siruiz's song and develops a taste for 'speculative idea', a taste for reflection. In: ROSA, João Guimarães. *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2006, p. 110.
- 5 • Darcy Ribeiro, *O Povo Brasileiro* (São Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 1995): 106.
- 6 • This is a reference to the poem *Navio Negroiro*, by Castro Alves (1847-1871). See Castro Alves, *Navio Negroiro* (São Paulo: Edição Saraiva, 1960).
- 7 • Francisco Weffort states that Mem de Sá (1500-1572), Governor General in Brazil in the second half of the XVI century, wrote to the king of Portugal: "I found the entire land at war". See Francisco Weffort, *Espada, Cobiça e Fé: As Origens do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2012): 17.
- 8 • Blaise Pascal, *Pensamentos* (São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2001): 140.
- 9 • Alejandro Alagia, Nilo Batista, Alejandro Slokar and Eugenio Raúl Zaffaroni, *Direito Penal Brasileiro: Primeiro Volume* (Rio de Janeiro: Revan, 2003): 46.
- 10 • With this term, I am referring to the Brazilian model's separation of preventative and repressive police work into two different institutions: the Civil Police, who work only on criminal investigation and the Military Police who carry out only ostensive policing. These functions are integrated into one organisation in almost all other countries around the world.
- 11 • "ISP Dados Visualização," Instituto de Segurança Pública, 2020, accessed May 27, 2020, <http://www.ispvisualizacao.rj.gov.br/>.
- 12 • "Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública," Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, 2019, accessed May 27, 2020, <http://forumseguranca.org.br/anuario-brasileiro-seguranca-publica/>.
- 13 • Simone Weil, "The Iliad or the Poem of Force: A Critical Edition" James P. Holoka (Ed) (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2006): 46.
- 14 • I refer here to Marx's analysis regarding

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estranged labour, in the Paris manuscripts. See Karl Marx, *Manuscriptos Econômico-filosóficos* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2018).

15 • “Milícia” is a term adopted in Brazil, at the beginning of the 2000s, to designate a kind of criminal activity in poor communities, based on extortion and the sale of security services, by mobs

that are largely made up of members and former members of the security services.

16 • Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Random House, 2003): 183.

17 • Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019).

18 • Nazareth Cerqueira, *O Futuro de Uma Ilusão...*, 207.



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