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**Article**

## Pioneers: The PCC and Specialization in the Market of Major Robberies

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RESEARCH

# Pioneers: The PCC and Specialization in the Market of Major Robberies

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Having studied sociality among robbers, mainly the pioneers of the PCC [*Primeiro Comando da Capital*, or First Command of the Capital], in Brazil, I argue that contrary to popular belief, individual entrepreneurship provides the foundation for major robberies of banks and other financial institutions in Brazil. Based on 18 years of research on robberies and robbers in Brazil, this paper explores the specialization of an illegal market, thus breaking on the one hand with the idea of urban violence as a lack of rules, civility, and modernity, and on the other hand with pure economism. By establishing a dialogue with the Brazilian ethnographic literature on the crime universe, it examines how the PCC is strengthened even though its members are fiercely independent and work on the basis of short-term projects.

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**Keywords:** major thefts; financial institutions; PCC; robbery

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## Introduction

The market for robberies of banks and other financial institutions currently plays key role in structuring the main criminal factions in Brazil, including the PCC. Chiefs of police and crime reporters alike often refer to those robberies, from the most low-profile to the most high-profile, as ‘Hollywood-style.’ It is hardly an inappropriate adjective. One of my interlocutors, a perpetrator of major bank robberies, says he is a fan of the Corleone family from Francis Ford Coppola’s 1972 movie *The Godfather*.

While interviewing other robbers, I have repeatedly heard them praise the 2001 blockbuster Ocean’s trilogy, starring George Clooney and Brad Pitt. An interviewee points out the BC [*Banco Central do Brasil*, or Brazilian Central Bank] burglary in Fortaleza in 2005, the second largest ever in Brazil, was inspired by Woody Allen’s *Small Time Crooks*, released in 2000. In 2006, a bank heist in the state of São Paulo used the modus operandi shown in Spike Lee’s *Inside Man* a few months after the movie opened. Robbers and hostages were dressed in identical clothes, so the police, when they arrived, were not able to distinguish between them. The fictional robbery of the Royal Mint of Spain, about which the 2017 Netflix series *Money Heist* revolves, also reproduces the same technique, with ‘victims’ and criminals dressed in the same way. The transnational cultural repertoire is reflected in practices used in the crime universe as well.

The academic literature on major robberies is mostly restricted to criminology (Matthew 1996; Matthew 2002; Paes Machado and Viodres-Inoue 2017), and empirical studies are still scarce in Latin America (Nascimento, 2003; Aquino, 2010; Caminhas, 2018). The prevailing view on the matter sees extremely sophisticated and heavily hierarchical organizations behind impeccable criminal acts. Contrary to this view, I argue the starting point of those robberies—even though they are extremely sophisticated, Hollywood-style operations—is the individual entrepreneurship of people joining forces in one-time projects without a hierarchy. However, that individual specialization favors, and is favored by, criminal factions because it is a win-win game for both individuals and groups. I have been researching those criminal acts and their protagonists since 2000 by means of interviews and ethnographic incursions among robbers, their relatives, and their friends; interviews with police officers and chiefs of police; articles running in print media and online news portals; and legal proceedings in which the defendants are involved in this illegal activity.

I have been pointing out major robberies are engendered by groups of robbers in different phases, such as creating the group, planning the operation, distributing tasks, creating the infrastructure, robbing the target place, running away, splitting the money, and disbanding (Aquino 2004; Aquino 2015, 2017.) I have also been arguing those robberies constitute a specific branch of illegal markets, with carefully planned criminal undertakings involving a sizeable investment in logistics, usually recovered multifold after the operation (Aquino, 2015, 2017).

In the first part of the paper, I focus on the sophistication and diversity of the *modi operandi* used in those criminal acts. In the second part, I examine groups of robbers, mainly the so-called interstate gangs. In the conclusion, I argue major robberies constitute an important segment of illegal markets in Latin America in view of their specialization, planning, and logistics. In addition, the PCC should be considered a pioneer in this business activity, which now reaches beyond national borders.

This reflection is the result of two points of my 18-year field research. I ventured into the world of bank robberies for the first time in 2000. By 2009, I had interviewed or talked informally with 41 robbers. Around 2003, I started hearing stories about the PCC, which became more and more common in the following years. At first, they seemed fragmented and inaccurate to me; however, those accounts became clearer over time.

Important studies investigated the PCC and its inner workings thoroughly in the following years (Biondi 2010; Biondi 2017; Biondi 2018; Dias 2012; Feltran 2011; Feltran 2012; Feltran 2018a; Feltran 2018b; Hirata 2010; Malvasi 2012; Mallart 2012; Padovani 2015.) Having reviewed that literature, I made more sense of the statements and comments collected in my field and was able to grasp how those men conducted their illegal activities. I was mainly struck by how freely they managed to spend the sums they obtained even though they were PCC members.

Biondi's studies (2010, 2017, 2018) show the CCP has no individual leaders or leadership positions, unlike the CV [*Comando Vermelho*, or Red Command] and other major criminal factions in Brazil, which have hierarchical structures (Barbosa 2001, Grillo 2013.) Instead, it is organized in *sintonias* (translated as *tuning*, but used to refer to leaderships), which work as groups in charge of specific tasks. From a perspective similar to that adopted by Biondi, Feltran (2018a, 2018b) points out the PCC has no owner or head and constitutes a 'fraternal secret society.' He states the *sintonias*, although implying some hierarchy, exercise authority in an impersonal manner. He explains the PCC's operation by making an analogy with Freemasonry. The fact that a Freemason is a businessman does not make Freemasonry a business, and neither do his qualities or capital allow him to rule others. Because neither Freemasonry nor the PCC have centralized power structures, mutual support prevails among their members, who don't share profits with the group but help strengthen those 'fraternities' by other means (Feltran 2018a; Feltran 2018b.) The data from Biondi's and Feltran's field work and analyses are largely consistent with the information I obtained by interviewing robbers, as seen below.

Supplied with a great deal of information about the PCC's operation from the above-mentioned ethnographies, I continued to the second phase of my research and started inquiring about the PCC's involvement in bank robberies, as well as its role in making them a serious issue in Brazil and neighboring countries. Since 2016, I have been able to meet again some of the robbers whom I had interviewed or with whom I had talked informally between 2003 and 2009. Through them, I met eight other bank robbers who also belonged to the PCC. Based on that research path, I argue major robberies have become a branch of Brazil's illegal markets whose steps and know-how, such as planning, logistics, execution, flight, and profit sharing, have been planned and sometimes executed transnationally after the PCC emerged.

### ***Factions, Politics, and the PCC's Involvement in Bank Robberies***

Bank robberies attracted a great deal of public attention in the years following the 1964 military coup in Brazil. At that time, members of militant groups opposing the dictatorship introduced by the coup robbed banks and kidnapped high-profile political figures. The media referred to them as political robberies. The proceeds from those armed actions were used to fund political activities opposing the military regime (Torres, 2017.)

Later, bank robberies were committed by the so-called ordinary crime. From the 1980s, the most notorious bank robbers were members of the CV, a criminal organization created in the Ilha Grande Penitentiary, on an island off the coast of Rio de Janeiro State, in 1979 as a consequence of the close contact between ordinary prisoners and the dictatorship's political prisoners. During that decade, CV members robbed banks, armored cars, and jewelry stores in different regions of Brazil. The proceeds were used to organize prison breaks and boost drug trafficking in the periphery of Rio de Janeiro (Lima 2001.) After the CV established

itself in drug distribution and trafficking in the 1990s, its leaders stopped organizing bank robberies, which ceased to be a relevant activity for the faction.

Just like the CV, the PCC was founded in a penitentiary, the Taubaté Custody Facility, in the state of São Paulo, in 1993. It expanded quickly, at first inside the prison system and then in the periphery of the city of São Paulo and throughout Brazil from the 2000s. Police investigations in different states have revealed drug imports, distribution, and exports are the PCC's main revenue sources. Nevertheless, PCC members have also been robbing banks—in operations attracting extensive media coverage and often described as 'Hollywood-style'—continuously since the PCC was created. Although non-PCC members<sup>1</sup> are behind most of the bank robberies in Brazil, those committed by PCC members, mainly against armored transport companies, involve the largest amounts and highest degree of specialization. If the proceeds from individual bank robberies never reached a six-figure amount before the PCC, they have amounted to millions of reais since PCC members started committing those crimes.

During the 1990s, Brazilian banks started improving the security systems of their branches by installing cameras and revolving doors with metal detectors and alarms. In response to increased security, which makes it difficult for people carrying guns to enter banks, PCC members started using a new technique quickly adopted by robbers not connected with the faction. They started kidnapping branch managers' family members to rob banks. With his or her family members threatened at gunpoint and held in captivity, often in their own homes, the manager was forced to let the gang into the branch and grant it access to the vault. Even though robbers refrain from physical abuse in those operations, they use intense psychological abuse to threaten the hostages as I have shown in previous papers (Aquino 2010.)

As early as the 1990s, PCC members started kidnapping family members before robbing armored transport companies as well. Police investigations attributed to the PCC eight robberies of those companies in 1999 alone. Entrusted with the safekeeping and secure logistics of considerable cash amounts, armored transport companies almost always handle more money than banks, and their headquarters have strong security systems, comprised of armed men and equipment such as electric fences, cameras, sensors, and alarms. When those companies started being robbed, law enforcement authorities from different regions of Brazil went on alert.

It became clear the bank robberies committed by the PCC had reached new levels in terms of planning and sophistication, and the amounts stolen from their targets now totaled millions of reais. One of my interlocutors told me about his decision to start conducting those more ambitious operations.

We thought it over and saw we wouldn't get anywhere robbing dinky banks. We'd just do time and that's it. It was two or three hundred thousand split among four or even more people. Then, some partners and I decided to go to the bases of armored cars (the so-called safekeeping companies) because there was about fifty times more money there. We were sticking our necks out in banks and had to go into action more often. Robbing armored car bases a few times, we raked in a lot of money. The least we got was 5 million.... We got homes, (legal) businesses, assets to help our families, to secure our children's future. (Interview with Bernardo in February 2009)

During the 2000s, PCC members put into practice in part of their attacks another method of committing robberies without direct confrontation and physical abuse: building tunnels to reach the vaults of banks and safekeeping companies. After providing convenient escape routes in prison breaks, tunnels began to be used in PCC operations. Among those operations is the one that has generated the highest proceeds and attracted the most extensive media coverage ever: the burglary of a BC branch in Fortaleza, from which R\$ 164.7 million was stolen in August 2005. The news article below<sup>2</sup> describes the event.

It could be a movie plot, but it is a true story. A house on Rua 25 de março, a 200-plus-meter tunnel and a Banco Central vault in the bank headquarters at the intersection of Avenida Duque de Caxias and Avenida Dom Manuel, in downtown Fortaleza, provide the setting. The plot climax is

<sup>1</sup> Banks and armored cars have been targeted by more and more robbers in operations more modest than those organized by CV members in the 1980s, and by the PCC in the following decades. However, they are more profitable than robberies of other types of targets.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www20.opovo.com.br/ppa/acervo/noticiashistoricas/2017/08/05/noticiasnoticiashistoricas,3680819/assalto-ao-banco-central.shtml>.

the theft of about 150 million reais, the largest ever in Brazil and one of the largest worldwide.... The BC did not officially report how much money was in the vault at the time of the burglary, but confirmed five containers with 50-real bills had been broken into. The bills had been withdrawn from circulation, and their physical condition was going to be assessed ... After the assessment, part of the bills would be returned to circulation and part of them would be incinerated. To reach the vault, the burglars dug a 200-meter-long tunnel ... from a house on Rua 25 de março to the bank.... Confederation of Watchmen and Service Providers The crime is thought to have occurred over the weekend, but the Polícias Civil, Militar and Federal were called only yesterday morning, when the crime was discovered. The vault has motion sensors and surveillance cameras, but the alarm system did not go off during the burglary.... According to an investigator from the Polícia Federal ... the hole was made in the only part of the vault not equipped with security cameras. The house on Rua 25 de março that served as the gang's base of operations was rented three months ago. On the façade [there is] a sign of a company making artificial turf. (*O Povo* newspaper, 09/05/2005)

By using the artificial turf store in the rented house as a facade, the burglars carried bags of debris from the tunnel excavation every day without raising suspicion among neighbors.

A burglary committed in São Paulo in December 2009 and also attributed to the PCC by the police bears considerable similarities to the BC burglary in Fortaleza. The news article<sup>3</sup> below describes the event.

Burglars ... stole millions in São Paulo during the Brazilian championship games on Sunday ... The criminals dug a tunnel from a modest house across the street ... [The tunnel] extends 150 meters under a square and reaches under the shipping company's vault. The burglars broke through the vault floor about 5:00 p.m. on Sunday, just as the Brazilian championship finals began, and off with the money. The security guard told the police he had heard a noise, but thought it was soccer fans setting off firecrackers. The house used as a base of operations even has Christmas decorations and was carefully prepared not to raise suspicions. When it started occupying the house four months ago, the gang covered up the yard and started digging the tunnel, which the neighbors was just a renovation. The earth removed was put into bags or stored at the back of the house .... In order not to leave any fingerprints, the criminals painted the house after stealing the money.... The shipping company's owner says his loss may come to 20 million reais. (*Jornal Nacional*, December 07, 2009)

PCC members have dug tunnels in many other operations. At least three PCC members I interviewed pointed out that despite the advantage of not involving confrontations or hostages, this strategy required considerable investments and the participation of people with civil construction expertise.

Another robbery involving millions of reais and committed in a discreet and precise manner—the police investigations into which also indicated PCC members as perpetrators—occurred in the wee hours of the morning in August 2011. The target was the safe deposit boxes of a Banco Itaú branch on Avenida Paulista, the main road in São Paulo's business district.<sup>4</sup>

Diamonds as large as marbles, rare emeralds, bars of pure gold, necklaces studded with dozens of rubies, collections of watches that cost more than a luxury apartment, 500-euro banknotes—this is just a small fraction of the losses from the largest robbery of safe deposit boxes ever in Brazil.... The target of the operation was the basement of an Itaú branch on Avenida Paulista ... That is where the bank has a vault with 2,500 safe deposit boxes rented to its VIP clients. Access to the area requires passing through security guards and two doors: a grid door and a steel door. The security system includes areas monitored by cameras and motion sensors.... However, at 11.50 p.m. on Saturday, August 27, twelve men wearing lab coats raided the facilities and broke into 138 safe deposit boxes belonging to 120 clients without firing a single shot. Ten hours later, on Sunday morning, they ran off with a fortune ... No alarm went off. The criminals ... said they were part of a maintenance team responsible for changing the furniture of the branch. The watchman suspected nothing since the branch was undergoing renovations and he had been told there would be works that morning ... The men went to the main area of the branch and overpowered the only armed watchman on duty, who, threatened at

<sup>3</sup> Link: <http://jornalnacional.globo.com/Telejornais/JN/0,,MUL1406824-10406,00-LADROES+USAM+TUNEL+PARA+FAZER+ROUBO+MILIONARIO.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Link: [http://www.cntv.org.br/noticia\\_\\_2885\\_\\_O-May ROUBO-DE-JEWELRY-DO-BRAZIL-.html](http://www.cntv.org.br/noticia__2885__O-May ROUBO-DE-JEWELRY-DO-BRAZIL-.html).



gunpoint ... shut down all the alarms. Then, he was forced to open a door to the branch, and ten more men came in ... with tools ... among them [was] a magnetic drill capable of boring through steel rod, an electric saber saw and a rotary hammer, used to tear down walls. With that equipment, it was easy to reach the treasures in the safe deposit boxes. The night watchman and his morning colleague, also overpowered when he arrived at work at 6:45 a.m. on Sunday, were able to sound the alarm only after the gang had disappeared. (*Confederação Nacional dos Vigilantes e Prestadores de Serviços* [National Confederation of Watchmen and Service Providers], December 7, 2018)

Only 5 of the 120 owners of safe deposit boxes broken into during the robbery lodged a complaint with the police, raising the suspicion that the others either had not reported the stolen assets to the tax authorities or used them as a means to launder money. To this day, the bank has not disclosed the stolen amount, however, the police team in charge of the case estimates it at about 250 million reais, which would make this the largest robbery ever in Brazil, surpassing the Banco Central burglary previously described.

Although most robberies of banks and safekeeping companies by PCC members are committed in a discreet manner, there have also been more high-profile operations involving shootings and confrontations. In a robbery in Greater São Paulo in 2007, 40 men allegedly blew up the gates of a safekeeping and secure logistics company. The news article entitled '*Marcola e os quarenta ladrões*' [Marcola and the Forty Thieves], a humorous reference to the man the media considers the top leader of the PCC, is part of a longer piece headlined '*Relembre 8 assaltos cinematográficos do Brasil*'<sup>5</sup> [Recall Eight Hollywood-Style Robberies in Brazil]. It reads:

In September 2007, about 40 men used dynamite to blow up the gates of the secure logistics company Protege, in São Paulo. The gang overpowered and tied up the employees at the location and stole pouches containing 15 million reais in two hours.... According to the police, Marcos William Herbas Camacho, alias Marcola, the leader of the Primeiro Comando da Capital faction, had to step in when the stolen money was split since the group was formed by two gangs from different parts of the city. (Terra online news portal, April 8, 2015)

Even though robberies involving the PCC occur mainly in the state of São Paulo, in which the criminal organization was founded and most of its members strike, the gang's radius of operation comprises all Brazilian regions, as well as neighboring countries. In the wee hours of the morning of April 24, 2017, PCC members allegedly robbed a safekeeping and secure logistics company in *Ciudad del Este*, Paraguay, bordering the city of Foz do Iguaçu, Brazil. Men carrying heavy weaponry overpowered the company's guards and ran off with an amount equivalent to \$40 million, in the largest robbery ever in Paraguay. The news article reads as follows.<sup>6</sup>

Brazil's and Paraguay's police departments believe the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) is involved in the million-dollar robbery of the secure logistics company Prosegur, in Ciudad del Este, Paraguay, in the wee hours of Monday. At least 30 men armed with war weaponry—such as machine guns, rifles and explosives—stole \$40 million (120 million reais.) One police officer and three robbers died, and four people were injured. The robbery has been described as the largest ever in Paraguay ... Paraguay's Minister of the Interior Lorenzo Lescano says, 'Everything indicates it was to the PCC.' He adds the cars used in the robbery had license plates from Brazil and the criminals spoke Portuguese. (*Veja Magazine*, May 5, 2017)

The robbery in *Ciudad del Este* occurred a few weeks after PCC members murdered Jorge Rafaat, a notorious arms trafficker and supplier to Brazilian criminal organizations, among which were the CV and the FDN [*Família do Norte*, or Northern Family], a group distributing drugs in the north and northeast regions. Rafaat's death, despite having prompted the CV and the FDN to declare war on the PCC, strengthened the PCC's position on the borders of Brazil with Paraguay and Argentina. In interviews, the chiefs of police in charge of the case said that the robbery in *Ciudad del Este* was also a show of force. The robbers' boldness and truculence were thought to be explained by the leading position the PCC had secured in the local illegal drug and arms markets.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.terra.com.br/noticias/infograficos/assaltos-cinematograficos/assaltos08.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://veja.abril.com.br/mundo/pcc-primeiro-comando-da-capital-ou-primeiro-comando-da-capital-esta-por-tras-de-roubo-no-paraguay-apontam-investigacoes>.

In March 2018, another carefully planned attack was attributed to PCC members by the police. It was the robbery of a Lufthansa plane in the International Airport of Viracopos, in Campinas, São Paulo State. A news article about it reads as follows.<sup>7</sup>

Another Hollywood-style robbery has gone down in the history of major robberies in Campinas, São Paulo State. On Sunday night, 4, five men armed with rifles and using a cloned car to bypass security raided the runway at the Viracopos International Airport, overpowered the employees and stole \$5 million—equivalent to 16.5 million reais—being shipped on a German airline Lufthansa aircraft ... The aircraft was scheduled to fly from Viracopos to Dakar, Senegal. The final destination would be Frankfurt, Germany.... According to the PF [Polícia Federal], the robbers entered the airport security area after breaking through the fence. In a Toyota Hilux pickup truck disguised as a security company car—with the same colors and features—, they skirted the runway and came across a security car. The two occupants were taken hostage. On their way to the Cargo Terminal, where the German company's cargo aircraft was, they went past other security guards without being disturbed. The operation lasted six minutes: the employees were overpowered and the pouch with the dollars was placed in the truck. On their way out ... the criminals changed cars and burned the pickup truck ... to hinder the chase. All the robbers escaped. (*O Estado de S. Paulo* newspaper, March 05, 2018)

Although the PCC has been targeting mainly institutions from the Brazilian national financial system lately, those establishments have improved their security apparatuses since the 1990s as mentioned previously. In addition, they now avoid keeping large sums in a single place. Those measures are making it increasingly difficult to rob banks. The attack on the Viracopos International Airport reveals a search for targets as profitable as safekeeping companies.

Bank robberies in Brazil in general involve some sophistication, but those organized by PCC members excel in this regard. They require careful planning, and there have even been operations in which nine-figure amounts were stolen, such as the Banco Central burglary in Fortaleza and probably the robbery of the safe deposit boxes at Banco Itaú. Complex infrastructure is another feature of those operations because powerful vehicles and weapons, modern communication devices, and other equipment are used. It is also striking that the robbers' clothing and equipment are similar to those of police officers and other professionals with easy access to banks and safekeeping companies. Bank employees have often been involved in those robberies; they provide information for gangs in exchange for a share of the proceeds obtained in each operation, sometimes paid in advance. Familiar with the routine of their targets, PCC members attack just as larger amounts of cash are being handled.

According to the PCC members with whom I talked, assaulting 'victims' jeopardizes the success of a robbery because it arouses public sympathy, attracts media coverage, and triggers a stronger police response. They described a successful robbery as one in which the perpetrators obtain large amounts of money without drawing the attention of the police or the media, and without being identified or located. One of those men pointed out he had heard Marcola himself say, while planning a robbery in the 1990s, that the hostages could be threatened and frightened, but under no circumstances were they to be physically assaulted or shot by firearms.

Marcos Camacho, alias Marcola, is the most notorious PCC robber. During my interviews and informal conversations, I realized this character and his 'fame' stirred my interlocutors' imagination. Marcola was serving a sentence for robberies committed in the state of São Paulo in the Taubaté Correctional Facility when the PCC was founded in that same penitentiary. He quickly joined the new criminal organization. In 1995, Marcola was transferred to Carandiru, the largest maximum security prison complex in Brazil at the time, from which he escaped in the same year. He was reimprisoned in 2000.

Some of the robbers with whom I talked told me Marcola was already famous in the crime world of São Paulo as a skillful bank robber. However, he became a sort of living legend among robbers throughout the country while out of prison in the 1990s, already belonging the PCC, for his ability to devise operations considered intelligent. Some of his ideas that resulted in million-dollar robberies were described as 'incredible' in my interviews. Marcola allegedly planned the first armed robberies of safekeeping and secure logistics companies in Brazil. The large amounts stolen and his creativity in approaching those targets, unprecedented in robberies in Brazil, are believed to have brought him a great deal of symbolic capital in the PCC.

<sup>7</sup> <https://sao-paulo.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,quadrilha-rouba-carga-de-dolares-no-aeroporto-de-viracopos,70002214195>.

In 2001, Marcola confronted and defeated César Augusto Roriz Silva, alias Cesinha, and José Márcio Felício, alias Geleirão, the two prisoners at the head of the PCC since its creation in 1993. This gave him a prominent position in the PCC so that the police and the São Paulo Public Prosecutor's Office started referring to him as the criminal organization's new leader, a title he rejects to this day. Claiming revenge for the death of his companion, Ana Ollivato, allegedly murdered by Césinha and his wife, Aurinete Feliz da Silva, with the consent of Geleirão, Marcola managed to expel them from the PCC (Biondi 2010; Feltran 2018.) My interlocutors from the PCC say that despite the accusation against Cesinha and Geleirão, he was only able to bring them down with the support of a significant number of PCC members due to his reputation as a competent, articulate, and fair robber, established throughout the world of crime. Marcola's 'good' reputation had turned into political capital and legitimized both his rise and the changes he introduced in the PCC.

Although robberies committed in the 2000s and in the present decade have brought in larger amounts than those organized by Marcola in the 1990s, some of my interlocutors believe more experienced robbers, especially Marcola, have helped plan and execute those operations. Even though I am not convinced Marcola still masterminds the PCC robberies, I admit he still conveys, for the most part, the image of an ingenious, unsurpassable robber among his peers who have interacted with him at length or heard stories about him, regardless of where in Brazil they come from and whether or not they belong to the PCC.

### ***Socialities Pervading All Major PCC Robberies***

In Brazil, bank robbers form a sort of elite in the world of crime in and out of prisons, and they are often seen as 'resourceful and wealthy due to the sophistication of those operations and the large amounts they bring in' (Aquino 2010.) My informal conversations and interviews indicate these people plan, organize, and commit robberies as if they were performing an economic activity.

Just as any legal business, organizing large-scale robberies requires expenditures. The participants invest in cars and weapons, rent houses for short stays and for the meetings of the team that will carry out the crime, and bribe employees from the targeted establishments. Playing the leading role in those enterprises, robbers act as entrepreneurs: they use funds, develop escape plans and strategies, and assess the probabilities of success and failure. Classified as criminals by legal codes and the established social values, they see themselves as businessmen<sup>8</sup> and their criminal acts as investments requiring special care and skills. In view of their willingness to take risks, creativity, and innovation to circumvent banks' modern security systems, those robbers somewhat fit the entrepreneur profile made famous by Schumpeter (1961.)

Major robberies are joint efforts that promote social interaction and negotiations among its participants. To examine those connections, I chose to use the sociality category, rather than sociability, based on the observations of Strathern (1988, 1999), who explains the notion of sociability brings to mind community and empathy ties, whereas sociality refers to the web of relationships in which people's lives unfold, thus allowing us to see social relationships as intrinsic to human existence, with no previous normative connotations. I have been pointing out that sociality among bank robbers changed significantly during the 1990s (Strathern 1988; Strathern 1999).

Accounts from my fieldwork interlocutors and the news show that not only the CV, which had thousands of members, but also other types of gangs of robbers were already active in different parts of Brazil in the 1980s, robbing banks and armored cars. Those were fixed groups with leaders who made decisions and settled conflicts between members. Almost all those groups had fewer than ten members and became known by their names and their leaders' courage. They would commit robbery after robbery in nearby cities. Sociality in those groups shares some features with other types of criminal groups, such as the 'bands of *cangaceiros* [nomadic bandits]' active in the northeastern hinterlands in the early 20th century, the most famous of which was that of Lampião.<sup>9</sup> Those groups of robbers have become less and less common since the 1990s.

Since then, a type of group that chiefs of police call interstate gangs because they include robbers from different parts of Brazil has prevailed in the planning and execution of bank robberies. Almost all my

<sup>8</sup> I have never heard of any women playing a central role in this illegal activity. In some cases, robbers' wives or girlfriends carry out secondary tasks in criminal acts, negotiate rents for the properties in which the gang will be staying, or provide meals at the robbers' meetings, but that sort of cooperation is not common.

<sup>9</sup> Virgulino Ferreira da Silva, alias Lampião, was born in the hinterlands of Pernambuco State, in northeastern Brazil. After his father was murdered by the police due to a land dispute, Lampião formed a band of armed men and committed dozens of robberies and murders in revenge while traveling around the semi-arid backlands of the Northeast in the first decades of the 20th century. He inspired many books and films after being killed in a conflict with the police. He was one of the outlaws historian Eric Hobsbawm studied in his classical analysis of social outlaws worldwide (Hobsbawm, 2010).



interlocutors in this research belong to those interstate gangs. I have observed those groups are not formed previously. Instead, their composition is defined while each operation is planned and the infrastructure is obtained. They are ad-hoc groups that usually disband after the robbery is committed and proceeds are split. Friendship ties, when they exist, usually involve two or three members, not the entire group. Each robber is free to use his part of the money as he wishes, without giving any explanations or any portion of it to a leader or the faction. When one or more participants receive more money than the others, it is because he or they either invested more or lent weapons for the others to use during the robbery.

### Closing Remarks

In conversations with interlocutors with skills hailed by other robbers, I asked them about their ambitions to occupy a possible leading position in interstate gangs. All of them remarked that would involve great responsibility and danger (Aquino 2010a; Aquino 2010b.)

But wouldn't it be better if it was always the same people, with no newbies? That'd eliminate several problems, there would be more trust, each one would specialize in one or two different tasks.

Lúcio: That'd cause many more problems and involve more responsibility. Robbery is against the law, as you know. There's always one who falls, always one who dies. If it was always the same ones, it'd be easier to catch us. We'd all lose freedom. No-one wants to be stuck with anyone. We may even spend some time with some friends because we trust them enough to stick with them. But in general, you spend more time with someone if you owe them money or favors. In general, it's much more convenient to split the money, and each one goes his way. In our line of work, you can't let anyone know a lot about you.

But would it be good for *you* to have your team? The way others talk about you, you'd be the leader. The group would be yours.

Lúcio: But who told you I want to be a leader? You get no advantage. It's very dangerous ... Imagine me becoming a leader, the big boss, and imposing myself on others. If I make a mistake one day, I make a decision and others lose money or go to prison because of me, the guys will kill me.... Seriously, when I went, I always had my way, but I didn't let others see it. It has to look like everyone is making the decisions.

But your secret doesn't seem to be very well-kept. I've read newspaper articles calling you an 'intellectual mentor.'

Lúcio: I've never accepted, nor will I ever accept that title. In fact, there's some guys out there who are too vain, but dumb as soup who like to be called intellectual mentor, leader, but those guys come off badly.... In our line of work, trying to show off, to show others up is the road to death. (Interview with Lúcio in May 2008)

I have observed bank robbers are not guided only by economic motives. They also weigh other reasons and developments related to living a life under persecution in their choices and actions. One of the advantages of ad-hoc groups, which disband after robberies and have no leader, is that they make it more difficult to locate and arrest their members. Most of my interlocutors believe police investigations are more complicated if robbers escape individually than if they remain in groups. Each robber has a network of contacts, some of whom are personal connections, but most are strictly professional contacts. This allows them to invite others, and be invited, to participate in criminal operations. In addition to technical skills, money, and weapons, a good reputation among peers is a decisive factor in forming partnerships and being sought after.

Those who use excessive violence and assault, kill, or rape hostages are usually isolated and no longer invited to robberies. Spreading rumors about robberies being planned, cheating colleagues, or taking advantage when stolen money is split also brings a bad reputation. On the other hand, acting discreetly when participating in those operations and using the money obtained, showing loyalty to and empathy with partners who are just leaving prison and have no money, and other attitudes are positively regarded. In the web of relationships related to the world of robberies, moralities are key factors in guiding positions and expectations, leading certain people to be considered reliable and others to be excluded. Since the 1990s, those criminal operations have been carried out mainly by temporary gangs instead of fixed groups, created based on personal ties and contacts developed among peers. Those webs of relationships extend to other states and even countries.

According to my interviews, people gathering circumstantially and not necessarily PCC members participate in robberies involving the criminal organization. Whenever they Choose a target outside their area of activity, PCC members contact local robbers, from whom they obtain objective information and with whom they plan and organize the operation. Some of my interlocutors have their own weapons. Others revealed they use weapons the PCC provides for its members, which must be returned after the operation for which they were borrowed is completed.

This *sociality*, which involves mainly symmetrical relationships and emerged among gangs of robbers in the 1990s, bears similarities to that prevailing in the PCC since the 2000s. That is what Biondi's (2010, 2017, 2018) and Feltran's (2012, 2018a, 2018b) studies explain. Biondi (2010) highlights political changes occurring in the PCC since 2001 due to the turf war that led to the fall of Césinha and Geleirão, defeated by Marcola. She explains the PCC had a pyramidal structure under the former leaders. When Marcola took over, he eliminated leaderships and hierarchies, and he introduced egalitarian relationships among the members of the criminal organization, which started operating based on depersonalized *sintonias*. Without a leader, the PCC did not come to a halt when the São Paulo State government, considering Marcola the organization's leader, placed him in stricter prison conditions, restricting his contacts with other prisoners and the outside world. On the contrary, it expanded to all states and became Brazil's largest criminal organization in number of members. Biondi says that this expansion in the 2000s was possible precisely because the PCC does not rely on top-down orders to operate (Biondi, 2017).

Feltran (2018a, 2018b) estimates over two million people are currently involved directly or indirectly in activities of the PCC, which does billions of reais in business per year. He stresses the entrepreneurial independence of PCC members, who are involved in legal and illegal activities other than drug and arms trafficking—such as farming, the port industry, car thefts, and robberies—. In its members' routine, the PCC serves as a network of mutual support among criminals, based on values considered fair (Feltran 2018a; Feltran 2018b).

The inexistence of formal leadership, the egalitarian relationships among its members, and the freedom with which they conduct their own business activities, introduced by the reform put in place by Marcola in 2001, establish unique socialities among many criminal organization active in drug markets in Brazil. However, similar relationship patterns were already in force in the social universe of bank robberies from the 1990s, as I have pointed out. Considering Marcola was a bank robber before overthrowing Césinha and Geleirão and even before the PCC was founded, he is likely to have been inspired by the socialities among bank robbers when undertaking the structural and political reform in the PCC.<sup>10</sup> It was apparently the robbers' point of view, which according to my interviews had been gaining importance in this organization due to the million-dollar robberies they had been committing, that rose in opposition to the power structure maintained by Césinha and Geleirão, replicated from factions such as the CV, focused on controlling drug trafficking in areas of urban peripheries. It is clear the major innovations in bank robberies and in bank robbers' criminal careers from the 1990s, made possible by the introduction of groups with no centralized leadership positions, were the inspiration for the changes implemented by Marcola in the PCC.

With no leaders or hierarchies, bank robberies started being organized by groups of individual entrepreneurs thanks to their contact network, and they reached new heights in terms of organization and profits. As a result, they became a major branch of illegal markets in Latin America. Those operations now required considerable investments in infrastructure and connections with other legal and illegal markets, such as that of stolen and cloned cars, arms trafficking and civil construction, among others. Inspired by moviemakers' imagination shown in heist movies, bank robbers started devising unusual ambitious plans to perpetrate those major robberies in real life. Robbers expanded their know-how and perfected their techniques, thus becoming 'skilled professionals.' Therefore, they managed to obtain larger amounts, buy assets and invest in

<sup>10</sup> The introduction of an egalitarian structure and the discontinuation of individual leadership positions in the 2000s obviously did not eliminate the tensions among PCC members from the organization's routine. The challenges in resolving conflicts among members, all now on a level playing field, changed in size. In this regard, I emphasize another commonality between the socialities prevailing in temporary groups of robbers and in the PCC: the importance of moral arrangements. As I have noted previously, partners are selected, and those engaging in conducts considered inappropriate are isolated based on moral principles in the web of relationships among bank robbers. Marques (2007) and Feltran (2012) reveal the PCC introduced 'debates' to arbitrate the disputes among its members from the 2000s onward. They serve as informal courts whose decisions are based on moral imperatives prevailing throughout the social world of crime. When a dispute involves outstanding debts, thefts, assaults, or even murders, PCC members organize debates, and the parties are confronted with each other. Once the parties and their arguments are heard, settlements are made or sentences are pronounced and carried out immediately (Feltran 2012). Therefore moral principles are important among criminals involved in major robberies and in the PCC. They shape behaviors and relationships in contexts in which social interaction is mediated by no bosses or leadership positions.

legal businesses. That is why they are able to pay lawyers and bear their families' expenses while in prison. According to some of my interlocutors, major robberies, made possible by the introduction of temporary gangs, have been proving a successful and promising path. In fact, they are worthwhile even if the robbers are caught by the police since the amounts obtained in those operations is often not recovered by their owners.

The men with whom I spoke never had the opportunity to go to college or satisfy their ambition of achieving material success and personal recognition through noncriminal means. Nevertheless, they obtain such high amounts from their robberies that they are able to fulfill all their own and their families' material needs for life if they invest them well in legal markets—a situation more difficult to achieve in legal occupations, especially for people from poor or middle-class families.

In this paper, I focused on bank robberies as an emerging segment of illegal markets in Brazil and neighboring countries. Those criminal acts became a key factor in strengthening and structuring the PCC. In addition, I argue their sociality and organizational dynamics triggered changes in the PCC's operation and relations of power. Although major robberies are not among the PCC's main activities, part of its members have been carrying them out continuously since the organization was founded. I consider the members of the PCC, with their million-dollar bank robberies, not only the protagonists but also the pioneers of this activity, which has become an important branch of illegal markets in Latin America.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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