Fear and surveillance on the beaches
of Rio de Janeiro: the Operação Verão
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This article presents qualitative research on *Operação Verão*, a police operation in the beach of Rio de Janeiro against collective thefts attributed to suburban youth: the *arrastão*. It analyses perceptions of beach goers and law enforcement agents and shows how citizens' fears morphed into perpetual panic that demands ever stronger security measures. *Operação Verão* exerts a selective control over suburban youth, reinforcing their stigmatization.

Keywords: policing; fear; panic; surveillance; stigmatisation.

Paura e sorveglianza sulle spiagge di Rio de Janeiro: l'Operação Verão
Questo articolo presenta una ricerca qualitativa sull'Operação Verão, un'operazione di polizia nella spiaggia di Rio de Janeiro contro i furti collettivi attribuiti ai giovani delle periferie: l'arrastão. Analizza le percezioni dei frequentatori delle spiagge e degli agenti delle forze dell'ordine e mostra come le paure dei cittadini si siano trasformate in un panico perpetuo che richiede misure di sicurezza sempre più forti. L'Operação Verão esercita un controllo selettivo sui giovani delle periferie, rafforzando la loro stigmatizzazione.

Parole chiave: polizia; paura; panico; sorveglianza; stigmatizzazione.

Introduction

Urban security issues significantly affect daily life, public debate and public policies in many cities around the world. Brazil is no exception and Rio de Janeiro is an interesting case of study.

The metropolis is known both by its beauty and by high levels of inequality and segregation. This segregation is not only present between different areas, but also within each neighbourhood, so that *favelas* (poor informal settlements) and *asfalto* (literally, asphalt, formal areas) coexist in close proximity. This is in

clear contrast to other Brazilian cities, where *favelas* are far from rich areas. Thus, the city displays a "macro segregation" between the centre and the geographic periphery and a "micro segregation" between *favela* and *asfalto* (Cano, Ribeiro, 2014). Additionally, *favelas* located in the geographical periphery (the North Zone and the West Zone) are part of both a social and a geographical periphery, which may increase stigmatisation.

In fact, Rio dwellers are treated very differently depending on where they live. Those who live in *favelas* – the *favelados* – are not accorded the same civil rights and are often associated with crime and danger (Holston, Caldeira, 1998; Kant de Lima, 1995; Wacquant, 2008a). Also, suburbs and *favelas* are considered violent places at the margins of the city (Das, Poole, 2004; Valladares, 2005; Wacquant, 2008a; Zaluar, Alvito, 2006).

However, there is a place in the South Zone – the richest area – where people from different neighbourhoods and backgrounds come together: the beach, which is one of the few free entertainment spaces where locals spend their free time. Given its unrestricted access, enjoying a day by the sea is seen as a popular option. Thus, beaches in Rio de Janeiro are usually overcrowded, with an estimate of two million people just in Ipanema beach. Beaches are considered as the most *democratic* space in the city, but tensions abound.

Thefts and brawls are not uncommon, but there is a specific type of crime particularly feared by beach goers: the *arrastão*[1]. This word stands for a collective theft, committed by a group of individuals who indiscriminately steal from people as they pass. Young people from poor and distant areas are considered the main culprits. In order to prevent this and alleviate fear, a security policy called *Operação Verão* (Operation Summer – OV) was implemented in the beaches by the Military Police and the Municipal Guard. The main targets of surveillance are youth from the suburbs.

The aim of this article is to analyse the dynamics of fear and insecurity in the beach and the main policy designed to deal with them, *Operação Verão*, from the perspective of two actors: beach goers and law enforcement agents. This is relevant for the debate on perceptions of safety and fear in contemporary societies.

The paper is based on extensive fieldwork conducted from 2016 until 2019. Individual and group interviews were carried out with 20 Military Police male officers and five Municipal guards. Also, an ethnographic observation, or a «non-participant observation» (Fassin, 2013: 30), of OV was conducted by

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[1] This term and its plural form *arrastões* will be used in this article, for lack of a good translation.

accompanying agents in their routine. Additionally, 52 beach goers (23 women and 29 men) were interviewed while the OV was in operation.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to show the perception of the *Operação Verão* by those who implement it and by potential beneficiaries, intertwining both narratives.

1. Fear, *arrastões* and *Operação Verão* in Rio de Janeiro

Fear appears to be a trait of contemporary societies (Bauman, Lyon, 2014) and a reflection of the positions that different social groups occupy within the social structure and within urban spaces (Cornelli, 2012). Panic is a more extreme manifestation of fear. According to Cohen (2002), the manifestation of moral panic occurs when society defines a certain category as "folk devils", often a target that condenses social concerns. In Brazil, this category relates to a specific profile which is often criminalized: young, poor, black[2] males from the suburbs or *favelas*. They are the principal target of security policies (Misse, 2007; Saborio 2014; Squillace, 2020a; Squillace, 2020b).

As Burchfield, Sample and Lytle (2014: 97) argue, the concept of moral panic (Cohen, 2002) describes a phenomenon in which moral entrepreneurs, media and accredited experts label certain episodes or groups of people as threats to public safety and social order. Moral panic tends to be ephemeral, since both media attention and public apprehension expire, and also overstated – sometimes irrational – compared to the real danger. In order to appease this threat, new laws and measures are adopted, mostly as a symbolic response (Garland, 2001; 2008).

However, some authors (O'Hear, 2008; Burchfield *et al.*, 2014; Cornelli *et al.*, 2020) point out that moral panic may not always be fleeting and may linger on. O'Hear argues that in such cases there is a «continued spirit of public alarm […] [that] seems to be in a state of perpetual panic» (2008: 69).

This is the case of the a*rrastão*. Every inhabitant of Rio has heard about it. In fact, the term had already been used by newspapers to describe incidents on the beach since the 80's (Cunha, 2002). In 1991, a local newspaper published an article whose he headline read «*ratos de praia* ('beach rats') commit *arrastão*», pointing out that «in groups of up to a hundred, beach rats have been doing *arrastão* on the sand, on the sidewalk and at bus stops near the beach, stealing

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[2] Official race categories used by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics refer to skin colour: *branco* (white), *preto* (black), *pardo* (brown), *amarelo* (yellow, referring to Asian origin) and *indígena* (indigenous) (Ribeiro Corossacz, 2006; Telles, 2004).

purses, watches and other belongings from beach goers» (O Globo, 1991, our translation).

But it was in October 1992 that Ipanema witnessed what was considered the first big *arrastão* which marked the history of the city (Borges, 2011; Leite, 2000; Cunha, 2002; Ventura, 1994). The media reported that a group of suburban youngsters, mostly black, caused a big disturbance on the beach, attacking and robbing beach goers and provoking a stampede of frightened people who left their belongings behind. Groups of teenagers were alleged to have taken advantage of the chaos, scooping up the belongings left in the beach, literally "sweeping down" the seashore. This type of theft was called *arrastão*, literally dragnet, a word derived from fishing in which nets are dragged at the sea bottom, catching all kinds of fish indiscriminately. The term came to define not just the kind of crime but also the phenomenon of scared crowds running away for safety (Cunha, 2002; Freeman, 2002; 2008). Furthermore, the sheer fear that it might happen often caused people to run away and provoked the very event they were trying to escape. A small fight between youngsters or a small theft could spread panic and trigger an *arrastão* on the beach.

This episode was shown profusely on tv, leaving and indelible mark on Rio's collective memory (Halbwachs, 1950) and consolidating the label for good (Huguenin, 2019).

In fact, there is no criminal code or police category equivalent to an *arrastão*. Yet, after the 1992 incident, the term came to designate a «generalized beach robbery or theft practiced by groups of black teenagers from the *favelas* of the North Zone who arrived […] in overcrowded buses» (Sansone, Nobre, 2000: 6, our translation).

This created fear and discomfort among beach goers and consolidated the perception of young people from the suburbs as the folk devil in the beach (Cohen, 2002).

Indeed, the *arrastão* appears to cause perpetual panic in Rio de Janeiro. Back in the early 90's, the idea of a temporary moral panic could have been accepted, but this panic seems to have become constant despite the fact that *arrastões* have been very rare since 1992 and no other big *arrastão* ensued. Media and political attention regarding the *arrastão* seem persistent. Furthermore, measures taken to prevent it continue to «regulate moral boundaries, and reinforce perceptions of an ever-vigilant criminal justice system» (Burchfield *et al.*, 2014: 110).

In order to reduce fear and the risk of incidents on the beach, policing of the beach came to be known as *Operação Verão*, expected during the summer. However, it is executed from September to May weekends, whenever people go to the beach.

The OV aims to preserve security in the beach area, including the prevention of the so-called *arrastões*. Hence, young people from the suburbs are submitted to an intensive control in the beach area and on their way there: Military Police conduct stop-and-search operations in bus lines connecting the North Zone to the South Zone. The OV concentrates considerable material and human resources: approximately 850-900 police officers and 530 guards each day.

2. Alarm on the beach

As emphasized by security agents and beach goers, *arrastões* are often the result of fear rather than of crime: the presence of groups of young people from the suburbs with a certain attitude can cause panic on the beach. Due to overcrowding, it is not difficult to imagine how any small conflict can turn into a stampede. Considering that this fear is part of the collective memory of local inhabitants, we might define this kind of panic as *perpetual*, because it is enduring in time and independent from the renewed occurrence of crime.

Most police officers interviewed considered that *arrastões* do not happen anymore in the same way they did in the 90's, contrary to what the media reports, but that this has not diminished fear among beach goers (MP[3] 2). This is also highlighted by Sansone and Nobre (2000) who show that most police officers deny the existence of *arrastão* in the terms presented by the media and the population.

Agents said that there are many thefts, sometimes robberies, which end up being defined as *arrastões* and, therefore, are associated with the images of the 90's. They tend to question the very definition of the term: «this expression does not exist in the penal code. What happens are serial robberies or serial thefts. […] If it happens […] they are thefts committed often by one person. You do not even have a definition of what an *arrastão* is» (MP 1).

Law enforcement agents describe a panic reaction among beach goers at the slightest incident, which can provoke chaos, «a wave taking the whole beach» (MP 2) that acts impulsively, like a mob, without knowing exactly what is happening.

Actually, many beach goers interviewed complained that there are a lot of *arrastões* on the beach, even if most of them had never witnessed any. Many of them claimed to have seen an *arrastão* from afar or confessed that they did not know exactly what happened. In the words of a beach goer:

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[3] Interviewees coded as MP are Military Police officers; MG refers to Municipal Guards, while beach goers are coded as BG.

«from a small thing people get scared and everyone runs away, even if they don't understand what is happening. But we have to run too, right?» (BG 49).

A police officer summarises it this way:

> actually, it is more about the feeling of insecurity than the crime. These are minor crimes of low offensive potential. They take advantage of being in large groups. But the sensation of insecurity is complicated because people in Rio [...] have a kind of panic. For example, there are 20 minors walking around, everyone is afraid. Then it suffices that one of them asks for information, and someone comes and says, 'he's stealing!' and nothing is happening! (MP 4).

Security officers believe these events are also overestimated, particularly when compared to crimes in other parts of the city. The research of Farias (2006) confirms the tendency to generalize and classify different incidents on the beach as *arrastões* – especially when black youth are involved.

Both beach goers and law enforcement agents note the role of the media. A beach goer said «I didn't get to witness it, but I know it happened. [...] I don't know if you've seen it [the *arrastão*] on tv!» (BG 10). And his wife added: «not on the beach, [I've never seen an *arrastão*] but inside the house we already know about it!» (BG 11).

Law enforcement officers consider that the constant use of the term *arrastão* by the media increases the feelings of insecurity and fear. An agent states that: «it impacts the sense of security in the population, this is a complicating factor!» (MP 1). Another one adds that the incidents on the beaches «draw a lot of attention. This generates a very great feeling of insecurity and is invariably well exploited by the media, which end up generating a very strong diffuse fear for the population» (MP 3).

According to Cohen (2002), the fact that the media broadcast certain information, often amplifying some elements and using alarming and misleading headlines generates certain ideas and emotions. In the case of the word *arrastão*, it frames incidents on the beach within a completely negative interpretation, arousing fear. As a result, it is not necessary to be a witness of an occurrence, because, as the interviewee said above, *inside the house we already know about it*.

Thus, the media amplify an already existing moral indignation about these *arrastões*, which impacts the choice of which areas and days people go to the beach. On the other hand, it is worth remembering that the media reproduce sensations and feelings already internalized by a part of the

population and they also tend to adapt to the expectations of their consumers, institutionalizing collective perceptions (Innerarity, 2008). In this sense, the *arrastões* should not be considered a media phenomenon: the panic they generate is real and provokes terrified crowds. In other words, the media are, at the same time, cause and effect of this panic.

3. Demands for security

All this generates a great demand for security. Actually, as confirmed by both law enforcement agents and beach goers, the demand for security on the beaches is large and complex. According to Garland (2001), the threat of crime is internalized in the consciousness of city dwellers, so that fear persists at unprecedented levels and delinquency is evaluated as a daily risk. This involves a series of collective representations of threats that are difficult to remove. This is particularly true in Rio, where delinquency and insecurity are seen as daily risks (Cano *et al.*, 2004). Regarding the beach, for example:

We have a city that has high rates of crime and violence. In their daily life, people in Rio are already kind of prepared to be faced with criminality. I think that, in the big cities around the world, especially in Latin America, this is kind of common. So, people don't stop going to the beach, [...] because there might be an *arrastão*. They go to beaches and they might suffer from that. What most people usually do is stop circulating with […] a watch, a gold chain, cell phones, they use them in a disguised way to avoid being a victim (MP 3).

On the other hand, precisely because Rio de Janeiro is considered a dangerous city, local inhabitants seek a kind of tranquillity on the beach that they would not expect in other places of the city, which is why they might demand a sort of absolute security (Bauman, Lyon, 2014). The beach is considered an almost sacred place for the culture of the dwellers: a place where one expects to be relaxed and rather than victimised (Freeman, 2002).

Hence, the challenge of OV is to respond to this overblown demand for security and to demonstrate that the State, often accused of being unable to contain crime (Garland, 2001), is able to guarantee safety. For some agents, this great demand equates to pressure to have immediate results.

A policeman points out that the application of vast human resources in the beach and the surroundings is necessary for people to feel safer (MP 3).

As a colonel explains:

> providing public security on the beach in the South Zone is a challenge, because Ipanema is a world-famous beach, so it attracts a lot of people. The demand is heavy [...] the operation must be like this, the way it is, very robust, because the demand is big due to the number of visitors. It is a lot of people. The beach is overcrowded, the transport is overcrowded (MP 8).

Thus, there must be a «show of force» (Cohen, 2002: 98) because this is supposed to discourage crime and provide a sense of security. According to a municipal guard, «how do you fight the subjective feeling of fear? We need to give positive information: there are police, there are guards» (MG 2).

Most beach goers declared that they felt insecure on the beach, but even those who claimed to feel safe expressed some reservations. Basically, safety appears to depend on the day, the place, and the crowdedness of the beach.

Despite the measures taken by law enforcement, most people who go to the beach do not feel safe, especially at lifeguard stations number 7: this area is deemed to be the central point of disorder and *arrastões*. Indeed, beach goers declared they feel particularly insecure when they start seeing groups of people running on the beach.

Lifeguard station number 7 is considered the worst area in terms of social status and safety, precisely because it is frequented by people who come from the suburbs, both families and suburban youth (Cunha, 2002; Farias, 2006; Huguenin, 2019; Roth-Gordon, 2017). This is also where fights and incidents are thought to be more likely since people who come from far away, whatever their social status, are considered more dangerous.

Interviews seem to confirm this perception. A male interviewee said: «lifeguard station number 7, no way! Don't even mention it!» (BG 30).

A total of 31 people interviewed stated that they would like to see more policing on the beach whereas 14 saw no need for that. The demand for more police is particularly focused on the sand because most incidents happen there.

Other suggestions involve the kind of operations that were, in fact, being performed on as part of the *Operação Verão*. People may not be fully aware of the policies being implemented or they may want them intensified.

Law enforcement agents, however, tend to be sceptic about these demands: «The feeling of insecurity is very strong and the police cannot be present in all places. We don't have time for this! It is not enough to provide good security. There is no way to avoid theft, robbery, from the moment we do not have control over the arrival of people» (MP 9).

4. Limiting access to young people from suburbs

Special police operations in the bus lines between the North and the South Zone take place during OV and young people from suburbs are the most monitored target on the beach.

The challenge reported by many agents is to try to implement a preventive action before an incident occurs, preventing crime, which require measures that might compromise the rights of individuals who have, so far, committed no crime. In other words, agents shed light on a universal problem: the potential contradiction between demands for security and respect for human rights (Kant de Lima, 1995; Cornelli, 2020).

In the words of a policeman:

> we cannot deny the fact that […] several of these minors actually commit crimes. Others do not, but many do. So, this is a factor that makes our action extremely difficult because we suffer a demand from society in terms of safety: people want security and, at the same time, we have several facts that regulate and limit our actions. So how to act preventively in this case? How not to abuse authority? How to maintain security? This is the great difficulty! So, it's very simple for people to say: there must be police. But it's no use, if I can't catch dozens of groups that are leaving [the beach], when – it's a fact – several people from these groups commit crimes! I can't keep an eye on them all the time. At the same time, I can't catch them and simply remove them from the area because they are there (MP 7).

Law enforcement agents consider the moment when young people leave the beach to catch the bus the most sensitive one. So, when there is a large group of young people, officers tend to escort the group towards the bus stop. When the bus arrives, if the group is too big, a kind of triage is carried out to prevent everyone from taking the same bus and the vehicle is escorted until it leaves the battalion's area. In the next area, another battalion will also escort the bus until it exits their area. Also, stop and search procedures are conducted inside the bus to check whether someone is carrying stolen material. These checks are frequently conducted both during the inbound and outbound trip.

A lieutenant explains: «if there is any member [of the group] that is suspicious, that has a different attitude from the others, he is stopped» (MP 5).

The argument offered by the Secretary of Public Security back in 2015 to justify taking adolescents without money or identification to police stations was to protect them from "social risk", which is a rhetorical inversion since

it is the youth who are considered a risk. Interestingly, some police officers remembered how, during their youth, they also travelled many kilometres to get to the beach and spent the day without drinking or eating anything, as they only had the money for the bus ticket (MP 15). Law enforcement agents tend to differentiate between the *favelados* that live next to the beach and those from the suburbs. The former would not be as problematic, since they would behave themselves and keep a good relationship with the *asfalto*. The latter would be the culprits:

Let's say, they are from places not close to the beach, because those who live closer won't get into trouble because […] they'll end up being seen and being stopped more easily. People come from far away and, sometimes, they don't come with the intention of doing an *arrastão*, but they don't have money, they're hungry, so they decide to find a way to get some things (MG 2).

Conclusions

This paper explored the perceptions of safety by law enforcement agents and beach goers. Both confirmed that *arrastão* is often the result of fear. A fight between people may set up a panic reaction so hundreds of people start running. Once somebody starts running, many others will follow and leave their belongings behind so they may end up losing them. Thus, the *arrastão* may be conceived, in part, as a self-fulfilling prophecy provoked by a panic reaction. Real crimes behind an *arrastão*, if any, tend to be few and minor, but its impact on society is phenomenal. On the other hand, the big *arrastões* of the early 90's have hardly ever repeated themselves, yet this has not prevented panic from being perpetuated. In this sense, in the beach the moral panic (Cohen, 2002) of the early 90's evolved into a perpetual panic (O'Hear, 2008; Burchfield *et al.,* 2014; Cornelli *et al.,* 2020).

Many beach goers said that their main fear is the *arrastão*, even if most of them have never seen one, and some who say they did, admit that they are not sure what really happened.

Since the *arrastão* is often blamed on suburban youth, law enforcement officers carry out selective controls over this category that is subjected to constant surveillance. These youngsters, already stigmatized because they live in "advanced marginality" (Wacquant, 2008b), are often seen as folk devils (Cohen, 2002). The profile is compatible with that which is often criminalized in Rio de Janeiro – young, black males from *favelas* and peripheries (Misse, 2007; Saborio 2014; Squillace, 2020a; Squillace, 2020b) – but there is a distinct element in the beach. Those who come from distant suburbs are seen as the main threat, since

favelados living close to the beach, are perceived as well behaved. This also explains the stop and search operations that police execute on buses arriving from the North Zone. Suburban youth embody both a social and geographical periphery, whereas the *favelados* from the South Zone represent just a social periphery.

Suburban youth need not commit crimes in order to be perceived as disrupting. Their mere presence on the beach or their display of behaviour considered uncivilized and inappropriate create fear and discomfort.

The police play a role of containment and reassurance in the beach yet are unable to quell this perpetual panic. The operation does not seem to be enough for most beach goers, which continue to demand a more ostensible police presence. Nevertheless, while their presence may well foster security, it might also confirm the sensation that the beach is a dangerous place, hence the need for the police, thus triggering a vicious circle.

On the one hand, law enforcement agents state that the fear of beach goers is exaggerated and leads to an overblown demand for security, in what has been called the paradox of insecurity (Stafford, Galle, 1984), that is, the lack of correspondence between violence or criminality and the perception of insecurity. Yet, this fear allows the police to claim more resources and more staff, to expand OV and to gain legitimacy as protectors of the community.

To conclude, the concepts of risk and fear and the process of labelling deviants constitute the background scenario in which the feeling of insecurity on the beaches of Rio de Janeiro plays out, as well as the responses to alleviate it. The *Operação Verão* may collaborate in the process of exclusion of suburban youth from the beach, exacerbating social segregation.

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