

CITY OF FEAR

Operating by cell phone, a highly organized prison gang launched an attack that shut down Brazil's largest city last May, with the authorities powerless to stop it.

By WILLIAM LANGEWIESCHE

For seven days last May the city of Sao Paulo, Brazil, teetered on the edge of a feral zone where governments barely reach and countries lose their meaning. That zone is a wilderness inhabited already by large populations worldwide, but officially denied and rarely described. It is not a throwback to the Dark Ages, but an evolution toward something new—a companion to globalization, and an element in a fundamental reordering that may gradually render national boundaries obsolete. It is most obvious in the narco-lands of Colombia and Mexico, in the fractured swaths of Africa, in parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan, in much of Iraq. But it also exists beneath the surface in places where governments are believed to govern and countries still seem to be strong.

Certainly Brazil qualifies. And Sao Paulo is not some flimsy town. Though it suffers from violent crime and shoddy streets, it is the largest metropolis in South America, home to 20 million people, a global business and banking center, and the capital of Brazil's wealthiest and most powerful state. From its center of luxurious condominiums and office towers, it spreads across 3,000 square miles, sprouting tall apartment buildings for as far as the eye can see. It has a problem with shantytowns and slums, the favelas which ring the city with illegal constructions and millions upon millions of the ultra-poor. But most of the favelas lie on the periphery, so far beyond view that for the upper and middle classes they can almost be ignored. And look on the bright side: back toward the center, Sao Paulo has a great university, beautiful garden restaurants, and Japanese food that puts New York's to shame.

But then, suddenly, on the afternoon of Friday, May 12, 2006, Sao Paulo came under a violent and coordinated attack. The attackers moved on foot, and by

car and motorbike. They were not rioters, revolutionaries, or the graduates of terrorist camps. They were anonymous young men and women, dressed in ordinary clothes, unidentifiable in advance, and indistinguishable afterward. Wielding pistols, automatic rifles, and firebombs, they emerged from within the city, struck fast, and vanished on the spot. Their acts were criminal, but the attackers did not loot, rob, or steal. They burned buses, banks, and public buildings, and went hard after the forces of order—gunning down the police in their neighborhood posts, in their homes, and on the streets. The police shot back and killed some people, but the others did not stop. They were like ghosts. On an animated plot of Sao Paulo their presence would have seemed like pinpoint flashes of light sparkling at random far and wide. The sparkling was slow, but word spread quickly, and traffic snarled as citizens tried to rush home. After they settled behind locked doors, they did not dare to venture out. Restaurants and shops were closed. The boulevards lay lit and abandoned. On television came news that the attacks were the work of a prison gang, half forgotten but widely known, called Primeiro Comando da Capital, or P.C.C., the First Command of the Capital. Across the state 73 prisons rose in synchronous rebellion. This caused less concern than one might expect, in part because prison riots are common in Brazil, and are routinely if sometimes brutally contained. But the attacks against the city were something else, and the government had no idea how to respond.

State authorities claimed that the situation was under control, but television showed that it was not. In fact, the authorities were barricaded inside their headquarters watching the same broadcast scenes. Some of the replays were set to music. The attacks continued in

irregular waves, without discernible patterns. Through Friday night and across the weekend the police reeled backward, abandoning their posts, only to be ambushed in the open. The police in Sao Paulo are despised for corruption and brutality, but they do loosely stand for law and order, and it was shocking to see them in retreat. Over the first two days more than 40 police officers and prison guards were killed, and also one of the firemen responding to the flames. For every agent killed, several others were wounded. Passersby died, caught in the crossfire. The national government offered to send in the army, but for political reasons the state refused. It was Sunday now, and Mother's Day. I later heard the recording of a cell-phone call in which a woman who had just torched a bus complained that a service station had sold her adulterated gasoline that did not burn hot enough. Who can you trust? The city huddled through the third night. On Monday morning, after a period of calm, people summoned the courage to return to work, in the hope that the trouble was over. But at midday the attacks resumed, and people again fled for their homes, creating one of the greatest traffic jams in Sao Paulo's great traffic-jam history.

Then, as abruptly as they had started, on Monday night the attacks suddenly stopped. It was widely assumed that the state had caved in and made concessions. And in fact the state had tried. Halfway through the weekend, having realized that they lacked the ability to restore order, the authorities bitterly concluded that they would have to negotiate-but with whom and about what? The P.C.C. is an immense and secretive network of semi-autonomous cells, and is shapeless by design. It includes 90 percent of Sao Paulo's 140,000 inmates, and at least as many people in the slums. The authorities knew that its leaders were angry about a certain transfer of prisoners that had just taken place, but this was not something the government could survive undoing, and in any case the P.C.C. had made no such demand. Indeed, it was making no demands at all. The gang's top man was being held in solitary confinement at a maximum-security prison 350 miles west of the city. He was a career criminal named Marcos Camacho, or Marcola, who was said to be intelligent and a careful student of Sun Tzu's classic text, *The Art of War*. Now 39, he had spent half of his life in prison and was serving a long sentence for armed robbery and kidnapping. On Sunday, May 14, with the attacks ongoing, a police airplane flew four envoys from Sao Paulo to see him and negotiate a peace. Typically, Marcola denied any knowledge of the attacks and refused to get involved. He would not even use a proffered cell phone to quash a rumor of his demise, though he finally did allow another prisoner to make the call. After several hours the envoys flew home.

The day after the attacks suddenly stopped, word spread through Sao Paulo that the state had agreed

to provide the P.C.C. with 60 flat-screen televisions for enhanced viewing of the upcoming World Cup soccer matches. A prison official later told me that the televisions in question already belonged to the P.C.C., that they were part of a hijacked load, and that the P.C.C. had wanted-and now received-the right to bring them in as a jailhouse boast. And okay, in Brazil soccer really does matter. But no such petty purpose can explain an assault on an entire city, nor can superficial political theories, of which there are several. Clearly, something much larger was going on. What is certain is that the assault was a demonstration of strength, an act of self-affirmation, and a measured blow against the rule of law. Some of the attacks were so brazen as to be nearly suicidal. The point being made was not that they could be carried out, but that they could be sustained. The lack of serious demands added a vicious twist. It denied the government the power even to concede, and allowed the P.C.C. to script the drama from beginning to end. Moreover, because the P.C.C. leaders were already in prison, they had little to fear of punishment. They could taunt the state from within the very walls it had built to contain them. Ah, the art of war.

A lawyer I spoke to called the asymmetry outrageously unfair. She said, "They can send people to kill the police, but the police can't do the same to them, because they are under state protection!" The police in particular felt the frustration. Able to identify only the occasional culprit, and ordered by their superiors nonetheless to get tough, they struck back with masked death squads and uniformed agents against the residents of the slums. Brazilian law officially precludes capital punishment. But by the end of the week, when the actions ceased, the police had killed at least 450 people, many with execution-style shots to the head. The state disputed the numbers and came up with 100 or so dead, most of them killed while resisting arrest. In a traumatized city where many people had condoned the police actions, only the most credulous could believe such unbelievable claims. The state was making a show of its fictions. It is a fact of history that the pretense of governing endures even as government disappears.

Big Jelly and Little Cesar

Brazil. The World Cup. The P.C.C. was a soccer team at the start. It was founded in a Sao Paulo state prison in the summer of 1993 by eight players, seven of whom have since died. The prison sits in the city of Taubate, off the road to Rio de Janeiro. At the time it was a punishment unit, where troublemakers went for stints of solitary confinement before being returned to larger prisons elsewhere in the state. Conditions there were atrocious. The prisoners lived locked alone into 160 dark and putrid cells, surviving on filthy slops, defecating into holes they could not flush, and subject to beatings by the guards.

They were released into the yards only every few days, and in groups of merely five. Some committed suicide. Most, however, were tough, and managed not only to remain vital but also to communicate fully from cell to cell. In 1993, when they lobbied the warden for a soccer tournament, he decided to let them form teams. It is unclear how exactly they proceeded, given that they remained locked in their cells and could not assemble to practice. Through the jailhouse telegraph they gave their teams names in anticipation of battle. Several included the word "Command" for the swagger, but the P.C.C. outdid all the others by calling itself "First," and staking claim to the "Capital." In light of subsequent events, the name may sound like a warning. The warden himself was eventually murdered by the monster he had created. But the Primeiro Comando da Capital was born wanting just to play soccer.

The games were held in an enclosed yard, without spectators or guards. The P.C.C. won a few matches, became its cellblock champion, and prepared to play a rival team from another part of the prison. During the run-up to the game, the competition got out of hand when the boasts turned to taunts, and the taunts became threats. Each team vowed to drink the other team's blood. The captain of the P.C.C. was a killer from the lowest of Sao Paulo's slums, a physically powerful man named Geleiao (Big Jelly), who had grown up in the gutter, and was now 35. His sidekick was a natural-born fighter named Cesinha (Little Cesar), five years younger, who had a reputation for bravery and was to serve as the P.C.C.'s chief executioner over the decade to come. Cesinha had been raised in a middle-class family, but even as a child had idealized crime, and at the age of 12 had killed for the first time.

On the day of the match, August 31, 1993, the two teams moved together down a hallway toward the prison yard. The details remain obscure, but it seems that the guards were nowhere to be seen, and that the last P.C.C. player closed a barred door behind them to ensure privacy. Just before they got to the yard, Geleiao made the first move. He grabbed an opposing player, and with a single ferocious twist killed the man by snapping his neck. Cesinha and the others sprang forward, and with bare hands and shivs took another four lives. There is no evidence that they enjoyed the killing. They inhabited a violent world and had responded necessarily to insults they believed it would have been dangerous to leave unanswered. In doing so they had also condemned themselves to lives of unending vigilance and strength, since every one of the dead men had family or friends who might try to take revenge. Afterward, they swore a public vow of mutual defense. Through the telegraph they declared, "We are united forever now. Whatever happens to one happens to all. We will never betray each other. We are brothers for life." That simple vow proved impossible to follow, but it established a principle from

which all else evolved, and among the prisoners of Sao Paulo it resonated loudly.

The Mark of the P.C.C.

The prisons of Sao Paulo were falling apart under the loads they had to bear. The most notorious of them was a decrepit facility named Carandiru, which dated from 1956 and was the largest in Brazil. It stood inside the Sao Paulo city limits in an industrial neighborhood on the north side of town, surrounded by high gray walls and accessed through a single heavy gate. It contained nine cellblocks, each five stories tall, and by the early 1990s held more than 7,000 inmates, nearly twice the intended capacity. On October 2, 1992-11 months before the P.C.C.'s bloody birth in Taubate-it was the scene of a massacre by the police, who while suppressing a rebellion in its Cellblock Nine had killed 111 prisoners, and wounded 130 others. To carry this out the police had fired merely 515 rounds-a record of efficiency reflecting the fact that most of the shooting had been done at point-blank range on prisoners who had already surrendered and were cowering in their cells.

In the background was a crime rate in Sao Paulo that was among the highest in the world, and the fact that even as the city was remaking itself into a center of global business it was being transformed into an archipelago of innumerable little fortresses where a large population of the fortunate lived and worked in near-total isolation from the poor. The two transformations were related. It was not only that the poor were being abandoned by government but that the very need for government was being questioned by the elites. Armored cars, private guards, helicopters, and business jets. Walls and high-voltage fences. Cheap labor, filthy rivers, and private schools. Tax evasion. Yes, and the fullness of long-distance communication. Within the limits of comfort, global capital seemed to be seeking places where laws were almost a charade, and in Sao Paulo it was demonstrating that the connection that mattered was neither to the street nor to the state. For better or worse the pattern was driven by trends larger than Brazil. For better or worse national policies were helpless to stop it. No insight was required to understand that crime was a symptom of poverty and alienation. But these were problems that government programs could barely address, let alone solve, and so, predictably, in the 1990s, authorities in Sao Paulo started cracking down and getting tough on crime. Fading states are not without power. Arrests and convictions soared, and sentences grew longer. It was a popular policy in Sao Paulo, where people assumed that their streets would grow safer, as if crime were a finite problem, and violence was a predilection of some certain percentage of the population. Recently I met an anthropologist with a different view, who told me that after a talk she gave in

Sao Paulo she encountered a businessman who was very mad. He said, "Don't talk to me about projects in the slums. What we need now is an even harder line." The previous week in his new armored car he had been robbed and shot in the arm when he had pushed the wrong button and rolled down a window instead of sounding an alarm. Oh, and she knew of another driver who had kept his windows closed in a similar circumstance, but while yanking out a pistol just to be safe had shot himself in the leg. Was this the fate of Sao Paulo? All that is certain about the get-tough campaign is that in the 1990s the state's prisons could not handle the surge, and that Carandiru, for one, was overwhelmed.

Carandiru had at most 100 guards for its inmate population of 7,000, a ratio approximately one-tenth that of San Quentin. Though the guards circulated throughout the prison, for the most part the prisoners were left alone to sort things out for themselves. To some degree they did. A medical doctor named Drauzio Varella, who for 13 years volunteered his services every Monday there, told me that Carandiru offered proof that people are not rats. Varella is a man of extraordinary talents, a renowned oncologist and writer, who published a memoir of Carandiru and in recent years has produced a series of popular television documentaries on subjects of health. We walked together through an impoverished area near the city's center, stopping every few minutes for strangers who approached to say hello or complain of their ailments. In the intervals we talked. Varella said, "Rats who are overcrowded become violent. There have been experiments in the United States to show it. But Carandiru showed that people in those same conditions will organize, and establish rules for their survival. The rules in Carandiru evolved as the prison grew more crowded. They were not written down, but were passed on as understandings. For instance, you had to wash. Every day. And during meal delivery you could not stay in the hallways. For hygiene. Inside the cells, when people were eating, you could not use the toilet. You could not spit. You could not cough. You could not pick your teeth."

And these were mere manners. More serious restrictions applied to the regular weekend visits by family and friends, when concerns greater than health were at play. Since 1984 the right to such visits has included the right to have sex. Space for these "intimate visits" is not officially provided, but is arranged nonetheless by the inmates. Varella was struck by the system in Carandiru. He said, "Some of the cellblocks had more than a thousand prisoners. Five, six guys per cell. Can you imagine women coming to such a place to have sex with their men? But it was the most respectful thing. The couples went up the stairs. While they climbed on one side, on the other side men came down to receive their own visitors. When a woman passed as she climbed, these prisoners averted their gazes-aggressively.

Usually they looked at the walls. And then there was the scene upstairs. Men without visitors were not allowed to descend, but had to leave their cells and stand in the halls. As the couples walked along the halls, all these men looked at the ground. You could track the progress of the couples by watching the heads go down. And so the couple entered a cell. If there were two or three guys getting intimate visits, they made a timetable between them. Each couple was allowed one hour alone. And after one hour, they had to go out. I was so impressed that it was possible in Carandiru for these men to organize in such a way. But, you know, anarchy does not endure in human affairs. And there is no empty space for power in prison."

I said, "There is no empty space for power in the world."

He laughed. "Yes, in the world."

The first rule was the need to pay debts. The deal-making was pervasive. Prisoners decided between them who would sleep where. The best cells were considered owned, and were bought and sold and rented. The main business, however, was in drugs. The principal drug was cocaine, which people injected into their veins, or smoked in the form of crack. The price was twice that of the street. Varella said, "The law was very strict. If you didn't pay, you died. Because if I sold you crack and you didn't pay me back, if I did nothing, nobody else would pay me, either. And I had to pay my supplier, because he had to pay his own supplier. So I had to kill you. This usually happened on Mondays, because the sellers gave the weekends for families to bring money."

In each cellblock the acknowledged boss, according to Varella, was the chief of the inmate janitors, known as the Cleaner. Varella said, "If you wanted to kill me, you had to talk to him first. You had to go to the Cleaner and say, 'I have to kill Drauzio Varella.'"

"Okay, why?"

"Because back in the neighborhood he raped my sister-in-law."

"Do you have any evidence?"

"I have a police report of the rape."

"So bring it to me."

Varella went on with his story. He said, "The Cleaners were the judges of the cellblocks. Very smart guys. Silent. They knew how to listen. Very calmly. They would talk economically. They were interesting types. Usually they were not physically strong. Sometimes they were very small guys. But strength had no role at Carandiru, because people had to sleep. And if you gather 20 guys, even Mike Tyson wouldn't stand a chance. So you would bring your evidence to the Cleaner, and he would read it and say, 'Okay, you can kill Varella. But I'll tell you which day.' Not just any day, because it might conflict with other plans, like a drug deal, another killing, or an attempted escape. The Cleaner would say, 'Okay, you can do it on Friday

morning.' And then you really had to follow through. If you went back to the Cleaner and said, 'I thought a little bit more, and I decided after all that I don't need to do this,' then you were not a serious guy. You would have to leave the cellblock, ask the guards to transfer you, because the Cleaner would never again allow you to share the space with him."

Varella's affection for Carandiru was unabashed and clear: he had been seduced by the humanity residing there. He was also an embellisher, an artist with a poetic South American mind, who had experienced Carandiru subjectively and now remembered it through the constructs of his writing. This was obvious, and he pretended nothing else. His descriptions of the prison were matters of the heart as well as the mind. But he was not, as some people claim dismissively, an apologist for the men who were being held there, or for the society they had built. After all, he was a doctor too and squarely confronted the horrors. Man-on-man rapes. Thoughtless wars over turf. Unprovoked murders. Sadistic cruelties of the worst kind. Suicide. Many of the inmates lived in desperation or denial. Crack was an epidemic, and intravenous cocaine nearly as bad. Seventeen percent of the prisoners had H.I.V. or full-blown aids. Sixty percent of them had hepatitis C. Varella tested a group of 80 transvestites for H.I.V. and found that 78 percent were positive; among those who had been in prison six years or more, the rate was 100 percent. And they were doing this to themselves. Anarchy does not endure in human affairs, but Carandiru had rules that were clearly inadequate.

Varella saw the worst of it because one of his duties was to inspect the dead. He said, "That is a very disgusting experience, to see these guys stabbed and covered in blood. Full of holes from different-sized knives. And it was very common. Sometimes I'd have two or three or five bodies at a time. And then one day it got even worse. I think this was around 1995. A man was killed, and when I turned his body over, his head flopped to the side. He was nearly decapitated. It was clear that this had been done after his death. When people are killed, they fight and scream and try to escape. They all do. No one could have made such a full clean cut on someone struggling like that. And so I said, 'What savagery is it to do this to anyone?'

"A guard said, 'This is the P.C.C.'s mark.'

"And I said, 'What is the P.C.C.?'"

"The guard said, 'It's a small group of guys who are very cruel and are trying to impose themselves by violence.'"

Cell-Phone Swarm

Geleiao and Cesinha had arrived from Taubate. Under their leadership at Carandiru the P.C.C. expanded into the narcotics trade. Though it was ruthless, it was also

judicious and cool. It murdered spectacularly, but only in calculation of need. What it had that the competing factions lacked was discipline. The discipline was based on a moral code that enhanced the existing prison rules and included an insistence on better living conditions and prisoners' rights. The P.C.C. was a criminal gang but also a political force-albeit an absurdly self-righteous one. Prisoners were attracted to the group because it brought order to their lives and gave them purpose, protection, and power. There were obligations. P.C.C. followers lived by its laws under penalty of death. Those who formally joined became "Brothers" for life. They were initiated with a baptism involving water, and had to sign a 16-point manifesto that still serves as the P.C.C.'s constitution. The 16th point was a declaration of the group's intent. It stated, "No one can stop our struggle, because the seed of the Command has spread throughout the prison system of the state, and we are also succeeding in establishing ourselves on the outside. We will revolutionize the country from inside the prisons, and our strong arm will be the Terror of the powerful." For the initiates, there was no possibility afterward of backing out. They had to pay monthly dues and share their windfall profits. They were given a voice in weekly meetings, but once a decision was made, they had to carry out orders.

The seed was spread as the prison administrators transferred the members around. Those transfers were routine and in no sense a recognition of the P.C.C.'s strength. Indeed, the administrators insisted on seeing the new brotherhood as just another jailhouse gang, and would have scoffed at any suggestion that it required special care. When questioned by the press, government officials denied the group's existence. The secretary of prisons refused to acknowledge it even internally, behind closed doors. After a fight with a rival gang in Carandiru toward the end of 1995, Geleiao and Cesinha were shipped to prisons in other states-respectively, Parana and Mato Grosso-with no warning to the authorities there. They were gone for a few years and took the opportunity to plant the group beyond Sao Paulo. After the two men incited some prison rebellions in those states, local officials irritably shipped them home. During their absence, and with their approval, control of the group in Carandiru had shifted to two senior members of the group, named Sombra and Blindado. They in turn were befriended by Marcola, who heads the P.C.C. today. Marcola was a childhood friend of Cesinha's. He had been in Taubate at the gang's formation, though as a player on another team, and had observed the P.C.C. from the outside for a while before joining. He was more business-minded than the others and was seen to be the smartest of the bunch; he soon assumed the position of the leadership's adviser. The subsequent twists are too intricate to follow. The P.C.C. was not as coherent as it pretended to be. It suffered from

internal power struggles, and for a while took to extorting money from other prisoners—a serious violation of its own creed that might have doomed the group, had Geleiao not intervened. But the P.C.C. was remarkably self-corrective. It put Blindado and Sombra to death, and having made that point continued to grow.

Though the gang was funded by criminal ventures, including the narcotics trade, its motivation was never primarily greed. Even today the leaders show little sign of personal wealth, and though some must profit from their positions, they do not seem to use the group's resources as their own. Marcola supports a girlfriend in middle-class style but himself lives a life that is famously austere. Still, there were perks from early on. Amid the general squalor of the prisons, full members were provided with immaculate quarters in special P.C.C. sections, where the cells were freshly painted white, hung with art and illustrations, and well stocked with food and drink, magazines, books, and eventually TVs. The advantages of the group's discipline were felt elsewhere as well. Excluding the killings carried out by the P.C.C. itself, murders started declining if for no other reason than that rivals were being crushed. Rape was effectively outlawed. And pressure was being applied against the use of injected drugs and crack cocaine—both seen by the P.C.C. as corrosive to its power. H.I.V. rates began to drop. This happened even as the state continued to overcrowd the prisons, increasing the population by 800 inmates a month, and measurably aiding the P.C.C. in its rise to power.

Further aid was provided by globalization. Under pressure from international lenders, and burdened by state-owned industries it could no longer sustain, Brazil had opened itself to global capital and was pursuing a policy of economic liberalization. In 1997 it deregulated and privatized telecommunications. The result was an explosion of networks as multi-national companies rushed in to compete for the business. Until then cell-phone coverage in Sao Paulo had been spotty, but within two years the gaps had been filled, and prices had begun to come down. Particularly around the prisons, the usage was high, and the companies responded by building more capacity. According to one official I spoke to, the government was not aware of the pattern at the time, but, later, when it was and requested that the companies shut down their services within reception range of the prison walls, the companies resisted, as they resist today, in the name of the greater good provided by a truly free market. Be that as it may, the P.C.C. stood at the forefront of telecommunications. The phones it used were smuggled into the prisons, along with a flood of cards containing hijacked numbers. The system was sophisticated and was built by corrupted technicians. It relied on several dozen "centrals," which functioned as cell-phone forwarders through which conference calls could be made.

Starting around 1999, the conference calls were made twice a day. Typically they consisted of the most senior leadership connecting with the top men in each of the prisons—30 or 40 at a time—and because of the large numbers, the calls required discipline and practice. Each call began with a social round, reaffirming the P.C.C.'s integrity and goals. Good morning, Brother. How are you today? Now, tell us if you've run into problems, and what we can do to help. The first order of business pertained to the details of prison life—incredible food here, an abusive guard there, the rough treatment of visiting families everywhere. The second order of business pertained to business itself, to challenges or opportunities in the drug trade, to punishments that had to be meted out, and to budgets. On whatever subject, solutions were openly discussed (and opinions were sometimes polled) before the ranking member made a decision and moved the conversation on.

The P.C.C. was ignorant and cruel, but it was also proving itself to be extraordinarily adept. At a point when greed and overextension might have caused a more rigid organization to break apart, the P.C.C. gained the strength to take on the state. The cell phones lay at the heart of that process. They allowed the P.C.C. to transcend the pettiness of location, to rise even above prison walls, and to operate without restraint in an ethereal world of communication. The group began to reshape itself, away from its original pyramid design, and toward a structure of semi-autonomous cells which was so fluid and complex that it could not be pinned down. A young prosecutor near Taubate showed me a map of the connections that his office had made. It was based on intercepted calls and was plotted with the same investigative-analysis software used by the U.S. military in Iraq. I mentioned to the prosecutor that his map looked like those purporting to chart the insurgency in Anbar Province—a web of lines so chaotic that no useful pattern results. The prosecutor nodded glumly and said, "What in God's name is happening in Iraq?"

I held up my hands in surrender. "This P.C.C. structure, do you think it was intended?"

"No, look at it—how could this be planned? It was built of nothing but relations that multiplied."

It was built of conversation. It was financed by crime. It was too loose to be steered tightly, but it had the innate ability to swarm. It offered proof that people are not rats, because they organize in ways that change with the times. By 2001 even the government had to recognize the P.C.C.'s power. The recognition went public on the morning of February 18, when Carandiru and 28 other prisons rose in simultaneous revolt—an action of unexpected scale, now known as the "Mega-Rebellion," whose immediate cause was the transfer of 10 P.C.C. leaders to Taubate. All for 10 and 10 for all. More profoundly, the time had come for the P.C.C. to demonstrate its strength. For reference, the 9/11 attacks

on the United States lay seven months ahead. Because 2/18 was a Sunday, the prisons were filled with visiting families and friends. Prison tradition precluded trouble on visitors' days, but the P.C.C. saw the advantage to be gained, and it took 7,000 people hostage behind the barricades. To the state the message was Fuck you and checkmate. Some of the hostages felt betrayed, but most accepted the logic of the game: their presence could keep the police at bay and would prevent the massacre of their beloved men. The P.C.C. had an elegant touch. When given the chance to leave, most hostages chose to stay. The rebellious prisons were hardly calm: 16 prisoners were murdered by fellow inmates who took this opportunity to settle accounts. But the state was indeed thrown into doubt, and it reacted with uncommon caution. When the police were sent in they killed only four men, and probably in genuine self-defense. They moved so slowly that after two days it was the P.C.C. and not the state that restored order in most of the prisons.

Afterward, the authorities took credit for themselves and publicly proclaimed that they would not tolerate this gang. But within the privacy of the prisons they had to cede ground. The P.C.C. did not expect the state to disappear; it accepted that the government controlled the police, the courts, and the prison perimeters, and it required that the government provide health care, food, and blankets. But beyond such basics, it pushed to create prisons where the state could barely function. The authorities pushed back, as authorities do. Carandiru was a symbol for much that had gone wrong, and in September 2002 it was emptied and slated for demolition. It was replaced with new, smaller prisons, in the hope that smaller populations could be controlled more easily. The prison administration transferred some leaders and swept the cellblocks, confiscating weapons and cell phones. None of this mattered. The P.C.C. continued to grow. And so, after a while, with an election coming, officials simply declared that victory had been won. Your taxes at work. Mission Accomplished. Thanks to good government, the citizens of Sao Paulo could again sleep soundly.

Carandiru Rules

But many citizens already did sleep soundly-and all the more so because they had invested in private guards and fortifications, using some of the money they saved by evading taxes. Out in the city's favelas, the state's claims provoked laughter. The favelas are among the wildest slums in the world-places where the police are vigorously despised, and where it is good government, and not the P.C.C., that seems to have been dismantled. In 1998, there were no murders in the wealthy Jardins neighborhood, while in the shantytown of Jardim Angela, there were nearly 200. The P.C.C.'s growth in

the favelas was typically unplanned. It proceeded spottily as drug purchases were made to supply the prison market, members came home after serving their time, P.C.C. families sought assistance and protection, and independent criminals saw advantages that the affiliation might provide. Residents had never encountered such a group before. These Brothers who did not mess around, these sons who had become such serious men. Initially the P.C.C. treated its favela crews as subsidiaries whose function was to support its prison agenda, but later, as it reshaped itself around cell-phone communications, the distinction dissolved, and the leaders discovered that they could direct an outside empire from inside the prisons' walls. Marcola in particular had the imagination and strength to do it. He led a coup in 2002, put a bounty on the heads of Geleiao and Cesinha, and, having assumed the top position, aggressively expanded the P.C.C. not only to the 90 percent point in the inmate population but also to a position of such strength that it could dominate millions in the city's unruly slums.

Elsewhere in Sao Paulo the domination is still poorly understood. After the attacks last May, newspapers worldwide reflected the confusion when they reported that the mysterious attackers were inmates who had been released on leave for the Mother's Day weekend. They were not. They were city residents, low-level P.C.C. operatives, some with debts to repay. Following the destruction of New York's World Trade Center, the P.C.C. started calling such people "bin Ladens." In May they were indeed terrorists for a few days, but so politically hollow that even social reformers in middle-class Sao Paulo insist that the rhetoric of the P.C.C. is a sham. The unanimity of opinion is striking. Apparently there are a few old-fashioned Marxists who proclaim that the P.C.C. is the vanguard-at last!-of the long-awaited revolution. But outside the favelas I myself have not met a single person in Sao Paulo who doesn't dismiss the P.C.C. as merely criminal.

Across the city's divide and inside the favelas, opinions are more ambivalent. People do not deny that the P.C.C. is a ruthless criminal enterprise occupied primarily with the narcotics trade. But they acknowledge its positive effects as well, not only in the prisons and for prisoners' families, but in the communities at large, where the gang, however selfishly, has provided for a crude new order one step up from the chaos that preceded its arrival. People understand the context too. Over beers in a favela I met a community leader and former armed robber who went by the name Marcos and was certainly no apologist for the P.C.C., but who tried to give me the view from the slums. He said, "We have all this information now-the TV, the Internet-so we've become more aware of what's happening in the world, and in this city. Whether it's soap opera or not, we see how the rich live. We also see how the TV lies. It shows a Brazil in which everything is perfect-the houses, the

neighborhoods, the families. The poor look happy, like the Carnival. But the reality in most of Sao Paulo is murder, violence, and drugs."

I said, "It seems like there are two realities here, Marcos. Because the rich can hide from you, and as far as I can tell, in Sao Paulo they hide pretty well."

He reminded me of the May attacks. "All their walls and armored cars won't solve the problem for them. They should start paying attention to the entire city. If they dropped the walls, they'd have to."

"But Brazil is moving in the opposite direction."

"Yeah, it is. And the candidate for governor says, If I get elected I'm going to build five new prisons and add 30,000 people. Well, if he's got the money to do that, why doesn't he put it into the schools, or into programs that help the people-into avoiding having 30,000 new prisoners?"

I answered, "Because it would be more expensive. Because it would require more time. Because the taxpayers don't pay taxes. Because they wouldn't support the programs if they did. Because the programs might help a little, but wouldn't help enough. Because it would be hard to measure results. Because the government is not trusted. Because Brazil has to pay back its international loans."

He said, "Okay, so the P.C.C. has come along."

I asked him for details. He said, "First, it looks after the prisoners' families by making sure they have enough to eat, and running a weekend bus service to the prisons for free. But it also helps ordinary people who have nothing to do with crime. If they go to the P.C.C. and mention their needs, usually they will be provided with the basic things, like food baskets, or medications, or maybe some material for patching their roofs. A lot of the older people are afraid of the P.C.C. and stay away. But the young ones will turn to anyone who can help."

I said, "I spoke to a prosecutor yesterday who denies absolutely that this happens. He says that the P.C.C. only looks after itself."

"The guy you spoke to yesterday, he's part of the government. He'll never admit that the P.C.C. is playing a role. But we live here, and we know." Others sitting with us chimed in to agree. Marcos said, "But the most important thing that the P.C.C. provides is not charity but rules. Like if you're someplace where there's about to be a fight with guns, and suddenly the P.C.C. arrives, people immediately calm down. Anyone who violates the rules they impose is going to have to answer for it."

"What are these rules?"

"Basic rules that we all agree with. For instance, not to look at another man's wife, not to rape, not to steal from the poor, not to steal from the little businesses here, not to inform on people, not to get in an argument and just take out your gun and kill someone. The rules aren't written down, but we all know what they are. What's

wrong and what's right. Even the top drug dealers don't dare be arrogant the way they were. They have to be humble, because even if they're not P.C.C., they have to answer to the P.C.C. That goes for all of us now. You can't kill someone just because he did something you don't like. You have to go to the P.C.C. and explain why he has to die, and they will talk to the guy and decide on the punishment."

I said, "Carandiru rules."

Marcos had been a prisoner there. He said, "Like that. And the murder rate has dropped way off. A few years ago we had lots of killings here, and now things are much safer. The government goes around claiming credit because of its security policies, and programs like bringing in water and closing the bars earlier at night, but the truth is that the killings have slowed because the P.C.C. has arrived. See, murder was mostly a favela crime. Look at the rest of Sao Paulo, where the P.C.C. doesn't have much interest, in the better parts of town. There they have lots of police, but kidnapping, robbery, and theft keep going up-understand?"

He called the P.C.C. a "parallel government," but "proto-government" might be a better term, since the P.C.C.'s rule is exceedingly crude. Either way, the credit given to it for improvements seems nearly universal in the favelas. In another such neighborhood I met a young woman who for years had "walked" with the P.C.C. without becoming a full member, and whose name I cannot use, because she had turned against the group and was trying at some risk to disengage. Even she, who was otherwise skeptical, appreciated the gang's effect on civic order. She said, "There used to be a dealer here who tried to dominate the area, and would not share the business at all. When the Brothers came, they threw him out. Actually, they caught him and were going to kill him, but he escaped and ran away. But they don't use violence cheaply. Every Wednesday they get together and talk about all the events of the week, and they really try to find ways to avoid having to kill people for what they've done wrong. And things are much better now in the favela. It used to be that you didn't dare go out on the streets late at night. You couldn't enjoy yourself. You couldn't go dancing. You had to stay home and stay inside. It used to be there was a lot of gunfire. Exchanges of gunfire. That doesn't happen so much anymore."

She was sitting on her bed in her little dark hole of a windowless two-room cinder-block home. She laughed when I asked her if the police at the district station could offer any protection. Only if you have money, she said, then just maybe they will protect you. But no no, if you go to the station or contact them in any way, they will make you wait for hours, make your life hard, treat you like a criminal. They care only about extorting money from drug dealers on the streets. So, no, not the police, not me, not ever. She had a friend who

was pregnant and who phoned them after her husband beat her, and they said, Are you sure you really want to file a complaint, because if you do you'll be waiting for hours just to fill out the report, and then it'll be days before we'll get around to calling your husband in.

I said, "Why didn't she go to the P.C.C.?"

"If she had gone to the Brothers they would have been quick. But then her husband would have been in real trouble. They would either have expelled him from the neighborhood or warned him and given him another chance. But that would have been the last chance." She laughed again. "And she was in love."

Several nights later on the far side of the city I met with the leader of a P.C.C. cell, a "pilot" in the parlance of the gang, in reference to the responsibilities of command. He controlled five municipalities, where perhaps a half-million people live. The encounter was difficult to arrange. It took place in a slum where police death squads had been active in May, in a small house crammed with beds and used as a crash pad for P.C.C. soldiers. The neighbors had been warned to stay off the streets, and for several blocks P.C.C. sentries had been posted; they stood against walls and in the darkness of doorways, with no weapons in sight. My intermediary seemed nervous, but then he got stoned. We waited inside the house by a window without glass that overlooked a favela valley. The night was hot. P.C.C. soldiers milled about, drinking beer that we had brought. Some sat in chairs. They were mostly silent. One mentioned that he had just escaped from prison by buying the paperwork to order his release.

When the pilot walked in, everyone stood up. He was a tall, heavysset man in his late 20s, and completely unsmiling. Despite the heat, he wore a sweater and a heavy wool cap. He sat and we talked, but the conversation was sparse. He made claims about the P.C.C. that were transparently false. He said, "The Command has a vision of progress not only inside the prisons but outside in society. Not everyone who joins is a criminal. We also have good lawyers, and lots of upper-class people and intellectuals."

"Why would upper-class people get so involved?"

"Because they have revolutionary minds."

"So the Command is a revolutionary movement?"

"Yes."

"Okay, so jump ahead and tell me what you are fighting toward. Let's say you win your revolution and take power. What kind of Brazil do you want to build then?"

A smile flickered across his lips. He said, "We do not think about winning. We rebel against the government more to give a response now than with a vision of the future in mind."

That part at least seemed honest. But then he said, "In all the attacks against the police last May, we didn't kill a single innocent man. Everyone who was killed deserved to die for what he had done. The action was carefully planned."

"And perfectly executed."

"We respect the police who do their job correctly. We can accept it if they come to us after we have committed a crime. But the police who come and just humiliate the people, mistreat them, beat them up—those police will be stopped."

"What about the police who came in here afterward and killed so many innocent people? Since the P.C.C. provoked those killings, wasn't it your duty to fight back at that time? To defend the people?"

"The fault is with the media. Since it shows the Command in such a negative light, we have to stay quiet and hidden. And that's why it's difficult for us to protect society."

And so it went for an hour or more. From his position of authority, the pilot expected his words to be accepted at face value. He was a politician practicing spin. He was proto-presidential. Certain topics remained off limits to me. When I followed general questions about P.C.C. dues—its primitive form of taxation—by asking where the money ends up, my intermediary fluttered in his marijuana haze and apologized on my behalf. The pilot said, "It's a sensitive subject." He let the moment pass. When he frowned he was the picture of magisterial calm. He was strangely pompous, it now seemed to me. He was positively governmental.

The Feral Zones

The P.C.C. brought order to the prisons and slums, but showed itself to be lower than animalistic. It perfected a form of murder by which those whom it condemned to die were forced through threat of torture to commit suicide. In 2005, during a two-day riot that gutted a prison in a town called Venceslau, it invaded a protective-custody section, decapitated five of its enemies, mounted the heads on poles to wave before TV cameras, and, it is alleged, then placed one on the ground for a game of P.C.C. soccer. The P.C.C. was feral and twisted, but so what—it existed. The state secretary of prison administration at the time was a Japanese Brazilian named Nagashi Furukawa, who had arrived as a reformer and for five years had tried to apply the principles of good government, one of which is the need to be realistic. Furukawa despised the P.C.C., but he had formally recognized its power, and, having accepted a permanent withdrawal of guards from the cellblocks and yards in most prisons, he had tried to manage the inmate populations through the sole use of P.C.C. intermediaries. For a while the prisons had been calm, but now riots were again on the rise, and the P.C.C. was

becoming insatiable in its demands. By the end of 2005, Furukawa was at a loss. He tried to isolate Marcola and his nine top "generals" in a distant prison—a move that only demonstrated the lack of good choices. In January the police arrested 30 heavily armed P.C.C. commandos who were poised to mount a raid of liberation. After the arrests Furukawa continued to take the threat seriously. Hoping to throw the P.C.C. off balance, he transferred Marcola and his men to a maximum-security prison in Avare, close to Sao Paulo.

From there in February, March, and April, the P.C.C. leaders increased the pressure, issuing a string of demands so evidently superficial that they could be seen only as a mockery of the state or an insult to the reforms of Furukawa. They asked for the right to bring in those famous hijacked flat-screen TVs, for changes in the color of the prison uniform from yellow to gray, for longer intimate visits, for better cigarettes. In the past Furukawa might have arranged for such inconsequentials, but he could not now appear to be giving in. Over the first four months of 2006 he faced 14 prison riots. At the end of April, the police intercepted another P.C.C. raiding party, this one intent on hitting Avare. Word arrived that the P.C.C. was going to demand an end to R.D.D., Regime Disciplinar Diferenciado, a new and more intensive system of solitary confinement. Word arrived that it was planning another Mega-Rebellion, perhaps for Mother's Day, Sunday, May 14. Word arrived that there might be some sort of attacks against the city.

Furukawa made a last-ditch effort to gain control. On Thursday, May 11, guards seized the top P.C.C. leaders in every prison in the state and sent them off-765 in all-to the newly rebuilt and temporarily empty prison in Venceslau. Furukawa recently explained the plan to me as if he still thought it could have worked. The idea was to disassemble the gang by interrupting its communications and isolating its best men in a truly clean, cell-phone-free facility, where the guards would not be corrupt, and a special unit of nearly 100 equally honest policemen would scrutinize every visitor, deter all smuggling, and somehow keep the P.C.C. lawyers from passing messages and commands. Naturally, nothing of the sort happened. The police unit never materialized—despite Furukawa's pleas to the governor to issue the necessary orders—and Venceslau today is a prison like any other.

That outcome was so predictable even last May that on the most practical level the P.C.C. hardly needed to respond. But more was at stake than just business or prisoners' rights. The chosen 765 were not merely the gang's elite but the very representatives and intermediaries whose recognition by the state had helped to sustain the P.C.C.'s authority in the prisons. Yes, they could be replaced by new P.C.C. intermediaries—and they immediately were—but the transfer of the 765 was an assault on recognition itself, and a betrayal of the

established lines of communication. Furukawa was not thinking in those terms, but to the P.C.C. he seemed to be cheating. The P.C.C. felt further insulted when it obtained an illegal recording of secret testimony in the Brazilian congress in which the transfer was discussed as if the gang could so easily be manipulated and denied. But the P.C.C. had a plan in place. On Friday, May 12, one day after the transfer occurred, Marcola is believed to have ordered the attacks.

It was not a war but a struggle which neither side could win, difficult though this was for government officials to accept. For the P.C.C., calling off the attacks made sense once it had made a show of itself. The P.C.C. really had no larger point to make. Nor really did the state. The rule of law? Marcola was returned to R.D.D. confinement in Bernardes. Most of the chosen 765 remained at Venceslau, where they soon resumed business. Once the police death squads finished killing the wrong people in the slums, Sao Paulo got back to its normal, strange existence. Furukawa was replaced by a prison stalwart whose vision of the future was a memory of the past. According to Furukawa, the new secretary accused him of corruption. To me, in turn, Furukawa accused the new secretary of the same. The new secretary set up a group to study privatizing the system, perhaps by calling in one of the multi-national prison companies that offer to step in now where governments have failed. In July and again in August, the P.C.C. mounted small versions of the May attacks, killing eight off-duty prison guards, bombing government buildings, shooting at the police, and burning buses. A reporter for Globo television was kidnapped, and was released two days later, but only after the network aired a P.C.C. video in which an armed and hooded man read a statement denouncing prison conditions and vowing vengeance. Through the fall and into the winter, prison riots continued, as did occasional bus burnings—though these may have been the work of imitators and independents. Government officials were warned of a possible shift toward the kidnapping of their families. Marcola went on a hunger strike for weeks in protest of the R.D.D. The P.C.C. issued a long manifesto, threatening the city with more attacks, and warning that a grand reckoning would arrive on a day it called "the Day of the Roses." The date was not specified, but there was no reason to doubt that escalations were being planned. After Christmas similar attacks were mounted against Rio de Janeiro, ordered from within the prisons by local gangs and coordinated by cell phone. International tourism was affected. In January 2007, Brazilian president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said this was "terrorism, and must be dealt with by the strong hand of the Brazilian state." He soon announced that he was sending in the army, navy, and air force to protect the beloved city. Also, a federal security force would be deployed along the Rio de Janeiro state borders to keep

out weapons, drugs, and criminals. The gestures were empty, but governments are condemned to govern.

In Sao Paulo, I spoke to a prosecutor engaged in tracking the P.C.C.'s finances. He said, "If we can succeed in this matter, we can stop the P.C.C."

I was skeptical. "And if you don't succeed?"

"We have to succeed."

"But if you don't, what happens then?"

"We don't have another plan. We have only one plan, and that is to eliminate this P.C.C. The state cannot stand to live with such a group. It is impossible."

"I'm asking you a primitive question, but why? Why can't the state stand to live with this group?"

"It is very damaging to society as a whole. The absolute lack of control that the state has over the prisons. People see this. They know this."

The lack of control is much larger than that. It extends to the favelas and, more important, to the office towers where global money flows. People see this, or they should. Sao Paulo is not alone. Consider all the other Third World cities, consider Moscow, consider L.A. The P.C.C. is just another inhabitant of the growing feral zones. I said, "But isn't it possible that this is a level of chaos that Sao Paulo can continue to live with? With all its fortifications and armored cars? Doing business with the world?"

He said, "We've got to fear what we do not know. They grew up under our noses without us seeing them. And we are still in the dark. We don't know what's coming in the future. It is simply unacceptable that a criminal gang can order attacks against security agents, against judges, that it can attack financial institutions, that it can bring the transport system to a halt. What is a state if it cannot keep this from happening?"