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Marcus Cardoso, Carolina Barreto Lemos



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Marcus Cardoso

Universidade Federal do Amapá, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Direito, Macapá, AP, Brasil

Orcid: 0000-0002-9109-4510

Carolina Barreto Lemos

Ministério dos Direitos Humanos e da Cidadania, Mecanismo Nacional de Prevenção e Combate à Tortura, Brasília, DF, Brasil

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2571-4961>

In this article, we explore the reactions and comments of three residents of a Rio de Janeiro favela in response to the publicity and repercussions of the circumstances surrounding the death of a resident of a neighbouring favela. We argue that these reactions and discourses are guided by moralities that express senses of justice and conceptions of rights that articulate attributions of differentiated status, based on identity criteria, with expectations and demands for an unequal distribution of forms of treatment. This formulation reveals an understanding of rights as a privilege of specific moral types that are articulated with experiences of moral insult and processes of discursive exclusion.

Sense of justice, moral insult, discursive exclusion, violence.

Neste artigo exploramos as reações e comentários de três moradoras de uma favela carioca diante da publicização e repercussão das circunstâncias da morte do morador de uma favela vizinha. Sustentamos que as referidas reações e falas são pautadas por moralidades que expressam sentidos de justiça e concepções de direitos que articulam atribuições diferenciadas de status a partir de critérios identitários com expectativas e demandas por distribuição desigual de formas de tratamento. Uma formulação que revela o entendimento sobre direitos como um privilégio de tipos morais e que se articulam com experiências de insulto moral e processos de exclusão discursiva.

Sentos de justiça, insulto moral, exclusão discursiva, violência.



This article explores the reactions and comments of three residents of the Pavão-Pavãozinho favela in Rio de Janeiro in response to the publicity and public outcry surrounding the circumstances of the death of a man known as Amarildo, a resident of the Rocinha favela. We argue that these reactions and statements are guided by moralities that express senses of justice and conceptions of rights that were fundamental when the three women spoke about their everyday experiences with the police and with members of groups controlling the illicit drug trade, active in the favela at the time. Our aim here, therefore, is not to discuss police brutality or to reflect specifically on the circumstances of Amarildo's torture and murder by Rio de Janeiro's Military Police.¹ Instead, we set out to explore the interpretations and reactions of Maria, Nathalia and Ana regarding this episode and what these reveal about the prevailing moralities in this context. Similarly, we do not assume that these moralities can be extended to everyone in Pavão-Pavãozinho, although they will certainly resonate with many of its residents.

Our interpretive endeavour aligns with the proposals developed by the anthropology of law in Brazil, which places a concern with the lived dimension of rights at the centre of analysis, exploring how these rights are conceived, articulated and mobilized in everyday life by social actors and groups (Kant de Lima 2023, 1995; Cardoso de Oliveira 2020a, 2020b; Fonseca 2021; Schritzmeyer 2019; Medeiros 2019; Eilbaum 2021; Simião 2015; Cardoso 2013, 2014; Lemos 2019; Lemos and Cardoso 2021; Cardoso *et al.* 2024; Pires 2020; Lacerda 2024). The core of our argument is that the perceptions of what is just and the notions about rights that emerge in this ethnographic context articulate distinct attributions of status, based on identity criteria, with expectations and demands for an unequal distribution of forms of treatment. This formulation reveals an understanding of rights, particularly the right to life, as a privilege of certain moral types living in these localities. In this arrangement, emic categories such as *trabalhador* (worker), *pessoa de bem* (decent/good person) or *bandido* (criminal), and the like, are central. Their meanings, the contexts in which they were used, and the way they emerged in our interlocutors' reactions of indignation or indifference indicate the prevalence of an arrangement that articulates differentiated status attributions based on identity criteria with expectations and demands for the unequal distribution of forms of treatment, in a formulation that conceives rights as privileges of moral types that reside in the *favelas*, a prerogative of *pessoa de bem* (decent/good person). Moreover, episodes interpreted as a disregard for this sense of justice are experienced as a *moral insult* (Cardoso de Oliveira 2018a), provoking indignant reactions. How this framework takes shape and its implications are the topic explored over the course of the article.

Pavão-Pavãozinho, where Nathalia, Ana and Maria live and where the fieldwork was situated, is a favela in the city of Rio de Janeiro, located in Copacabana. The fieldwork was conducted intermittently between 2001 and 2014 by Marcus Cardoso. For this article, however, we concentrate primarily on the ethnographic material deriving from fieldwork carried out between 2013 and 2014, material that we have not previously subject to interpretation.

1 TN: In Brazil, the Military Police, organized in a hierarchical military structure, are responsible for ostensive policing, including maintaining public order and crime prevention. After suspects are arrested, cases are handed over to the Civil Police, responsible for criminal investigation and case building for prosecution.



The article is organized as follows: we begin by presenting the circumstances of the Rocinha favela resident's death and the reactions of Nathalia, Maria and Ana to the repercussions of this event. Next, we provide a more detailed introduction to the three protagonists of this article and their life trajectories. From there, we explore the connections between the critiques and reactions of these women and the moralities, senses of justice and conceptions of rights they share.

Amarildo and the repercussion of his death

Starting in 2013, the Pacifying Police Units (UPPs),² a policing model designed specifically for the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and the surrounding region, became the target of heavy criticism. Until then, the media's treatment of the initiative had been largely positive. Contributing to this shift in attitudes was the public exposure of the involvement of Military Police officers in the disappearance and murder of a resident of the Rocinha favela during an operation carried out on July 13 of that year. The victim was named Amarildo, a 43-year-old black man, married and the father of six children. His wife reported his disappearance on July 16. The following day, numerous residents of Rocinha blocked the roads close to the favela in protest against Amarildo's disappearance, accusing the police of involvement in the episode. However, it was only in August that the case reached national attention, when a recording was released showing police officers taking Amarildo to the UPP headquarters in Rocinha and subsequently to an unknown location.

Facing public pressure over the footage, the police officers captured in the video were placed under preventive arrest. Compounding the situation, in September 2013, it became public knowledge that a Military Police major had coerced witnesses who had seen Amarildo being taken into the police station into giving false testimony. The fallout from the recordings, the coercion and the manipulation of the investigations put further pressure on the state government. It did not take long for subsequent investigations to reveal that the Rocinha UPP had become a centre for torture to extract information about hidden caches of weapons and drugs, and that Amarildo had died during one of these sessions.³

During this same period, one of the initiatives that gained prominence on social and legacy media was the “We're All Amarildo” campaign,⁴ which received support from a wide-range of leading figures in the national arts scene, human rights activists, and progressive politicians. At the time, the campaign organizers stated that its aim was to “demand a swift resolution to Amarildo's case,” “raise funds to help his family rebuild their life,” and create the conditions to assist “hundreds of other families living through similar situations.”⁵ In practical terms, the movement announced auctions and shows featuring actors and musicians to raise funds and increase the cause's visibility. Additionally, artists and politicians recorded video statements to be posted on YouTube, urging diligence and alacrity in the investigation conducted by the Civil Police.

It was precisely during the shows organized by the “We're All Amarildo” campaign that Maria, Nathalia and Ana, all residents of Pavão-Pavãozinho, voiced

2 The Pacifying Police Unit (UPP) is an initiative of the Rio de Janeiro State Secretariat of Public Security. One of its stated objectives is to dismantle the territorial control of organized groups involved in the trade of illicit drugs, known as factions. The Rocinha UPP was inaugurated on 20 September 2012. For more on the UPPs, see: Borges *et al.* 2012, Leite 2012, Oliveira 2014, Silva 2012, Musumeci 2017, Leite *et al.* 2018.

3 Subsequently, twelve police officers were convicted of torture, murder, concealment of a corpse and procedural fraud in what became known as the “Amarildo case.” Amarildo's remains have still not been found. In 2014, the Rio de Janeiro Court of Justice declared the presumed death of the Rocinha resident. In 2023, the Superior Court of Justice increased the sentences of the police officers convicted for Amarildo's death.

4 Throughout the article, the discourses of interlocutors will be set in quotation marks. Emic categories will appear in italics.

5 Source: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/marisa-monte/conheça-o-projeto-somos-todos-amarildo/696826620349597> (last accessed 29 June 2024).



their dissent.

This is too much for my sanity! ‘We’re all Amarildo’? You’ve got to be kidding me, right? Human Rights activists definitely don’t represent me. Go up into the favelas – not for a daytime visit. Go up in the middle of the night, preferably in the favelas that haven’t been *pacified* yet. Then you’ll get an idea of what these ‘Amarildos’ are capable of. You’ll really see how these ‘bricklayer’s assistants’ work – or rather, what they really do for a living. (Nathalia, November 2013).

There are news stories that just ruins my day. This is one of them. I’m disgusted by what all this has turned into. I hope they also put on shows to celebrate when some ‘Amarildo’ holds a gun to their heads. (Ana, November 2013).

How should we understand these comments and the visceral reactions provoked by the case’s repercussions and the “We’re All Amarildo” campaign? Immediately, the ironic and outraged tone of their statements makes it clear that the irritation and indignation of the three women were not due to Amarildo’s death, nor to the strong evidence that, even at that moment, pointed to the involvement of police officers in his torture and murder and the concealment of the corpse.

What really upset them was the kind of public repercussion the case had garnered. Part of this reaction was provoked by how the episode was covered in the newspapers. But what vexed them the most was the public mobilization of the “We’re All Amarildo” campaign. As Ana, Nathalia and Maria explained, their understanding was that Amarildo was part of the group controlling the sale of illicit drugs in the Rocinha favela – he was a *traficante* (drug trafficker). From the perspective of the three women, the presumed (but unproven) existence of this connection delegitimized any demand for justice made by Amarildo’s family, as well as the demands made by social movements linked to human rights for those involved to be punished. The widespread attention received by the case left them astonished and seemed not only disproportionate and absurd, but was also a motive for their indignation.

For the three women, indifference was the appropriate reaction to the death of individuals linked to crime. Watching Amarildo being treated as a victim left them particularly irate, therefore, which, in turn, prompted their provocative remarks, such as the suggestion that those who defended Amarildo should visit the city’s favelas to discover what the “Amarildos of the world” really did for a living and what they were capable of perpetrating. There was a clear implication that the man killed was involved in the local *tráfico* (drug trafficking), and that its members were responsible for atrocities in the everyday life of Rio de Janeiro’s favelas.

It is important to highlight two facts regarding these women’s perception of Amarildo’s supposed involvement in the group that organized the sale of drugs in Rocinha: first, the police investigations did not confirm any participation by



Amarildo in the group’s activities; second, none of the three women had known him personally. Nathalia and Ana used to visit Rocinha to see relatives – aunts, cousins and their father, who had moved there in 2001 and established a new nuclear family.⁶ However, neither of them had known Amarildo or heard about him before the episode of his death and the media attention it received.

Precisely for this reason, it is essential to stress that we should not assume, based on the statements of Maria, Nathalia and Ana, that the Rocinha resident in question was indeed involved in “drug trafficking.” However, this caveat does not mean that we should disregard the reactions and interpretations of these women. For the purposes of this article, determining whether Amarildo was actually involved in illegal activities or not is irrelevant. Drawing on anthropological terminology, the opinions of the three women, even if founded on unconfirmed assumptions, reveal worldviews that are “good to think” about the senses of justice and rights shared by these women. After all, practices and events are evaluated through the framework of specific values that guide the comprehension of moral problems (Fassin 2018), which provides the basis for the analysis undertaken in this article.

Let us return to the reactions of these women. For all three, the possibility that police officers had killed Amarildo during or after torturing him was a question of secondary importance. What mattered was determining whether Amarildo was a *trabalhador* (worker), a *pessoa de bem* (decent/good person) or a *bandido* (criminal) – categories central to the women’s reflections and narratives about their experiences with police officers or members of the *tráfico* (drug trafficking gangs). Over the years, they had used these categories to express their opinions about *traficantes* (drug traffickers), about their deaths in confrontations with rival groups, and about other deaths resulting from clashes with the police or from executions.

In 2013, when police participation in Amarildo’s disappearance had already become public knowledge, the women once again invoked these categories to discredit the demands for an inquiry into the incident and the punishment of those involved. At the time, they were asked to clarify what they meant. Ana said:

A decent person [*pessoa de bem*] is someone who doesn’t kill, doesn’t steal and isn’t involved in drug trafficking. Take Amarildo – everyone in Rocinha said he wasn’t the kind of criminal [*bandido*] who carried a gun, but he was someone involved in drug trafficking, involved in selling drugs. But he did keep guns for them in his house, he stored them... A decent person, in my view, is someone completely separate from that world of drug trafficking. (October 2013)

Nathalia said:

For me, it’s someone who is not involved with drug trafficking, no direct involvement with drug trafficking (...) It’s about working, about not getting involved, not being directly connected. I think that’s what it is – a decent

6 The Pavão-Pavãozinho favela is relatively close to the Rocinha favela, both of them located in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro city.



person, in the favela, what I’m talking about, it doesn’t mean they’re a ‘good guy’ [*bonzinho*]. I don’t believe in the ‘good guy’ or in the ‘poor victim’ [*coitado*] either. (October 2013).

From the perspective of the three women, Amarildo was not a “decent” or “hardworking” person. And it was precisely this understanding that allowed them to downplay the crimes committed by the police, making the circumstances of Amarildo’s death, for them, irrelevant. A conversation we had with Ana a month before the impassioned reactions discussed here is illustrative. On that occasion, while remarking that the conduct of the police officers had not been ideal, she downplayed the consequences of their actions.

It’s true that what happened to Amarildo shouldn’t have happened – the police can’t just turn up and kill someone. But it’s also true that Amarildo wasn’t just a bricklayer, like everyone is saying, that he was some poor victim [*coitado*], a worker [*trabalhador*]. That’s simply not true. (Ana, October 2013)

It is important to emphasize that these indifferent reactions were not limited to the killing of Amarildo. From the perspective of the three women, the crimes committed against “drug traffickers” were either not serious or were less serious than those committed against “decent people.” Reflecting a certain native sociology shared in the Pavão-Pavãozinho favela among some of our interlocutors, the perception prevailed that individuals involved in criminal activities were responsible for their choices and assumed the inherent risks. Precisely for this reason, there was nothing to lament when they were killed.

Nathalia believed that Amarildo got what he deserved, and she “wouldn’t lose a single night’s sleep” over people like him. In the same vein, Maria said that “as long as they’re killing each other, it’s fine,” alluding to the deaths of “traffickers.” Moreover, these women reflected on the threats, intimidation, humiliation and violence perpetrated by “faction members,” subjecting other favela residents to their control, which, in their view, was yet another reason not to sympathize with their personal tragedies.

The criminals [*bandidos*] have always killed people inside the favela. Those involved with them. And that’s what the police did. The police did exactly the same thing the criminals do. What bothers me about this situation with Amarildo is that now everyone has something to say. People, like, suddenly started [saying]: ‘Oh, because the police killed Amarildo, and poor Amarildo, and Amarildo this and Amarildo that, and Amarildo’s wife this.’ (Nathalia, October 2013).

It’s different from: ‘Oh, I discovered that the drug traffickers broke into your home and killed you.’ But come on, why? A criminal killing another criminal



is really... in the favela, there's a lot of: 'Oh, a criminal killed a criminal. That's normal.' That's acceptable. It's acceptable because he was already expecting it – he probably did something outside their rulebook. You know how there's a little rulebook for drug trafficking? So, he probably did something outside their rulebook, he stepped out of line... pissed outside of the pot, and so he was killed. (Ana, October 2013).

In turn, initiatives like “We're All Amarildo” fuelled indignant reactions.

It's very easy to blame everything that's wrong on others, much easier. What I also see people in the favela doing a lot is this: 'Oh, but I'm a poor victim.' The favela residents... they often place themselves in the position of a victim, like: 'I'm a poor victim [*coitada*], I live in the favela, I'm a victim.' Society has been saying this for so long: 'Oh, that person is a poor victim [*coitada*], they're a victim of society, they're a victim because the government doesn't provide for them.' But if that were the case, the entire favela would be full of criminals [*bandido*]. And it's not. So that's not it, in reality, people... they choose the easiest path. So it's easy for you to say: 'Oh, it's the government's fault, it's the police's fault.' No! What about your own responsibility? Where's your responsibility? (Ana, October 2013).

Indeed, if we wanted to witness an impassioned reaction from the women, all we had to do was suggest that poverty and lack of opportunities pushed young people from the favelas into “drug trafficking.”

If everyone who's poor and a worker and didn't have the chance to study is a victim of society – if that gives them the right to enter the ‘world of crime’ to obtain things the fast and easy way, and if that gives them the comfort of being called a victim of ‘society’ – then I'm left asking myself: I was also born poor, the daughter of parents who didn't even finish primary school, but they never stole to support or educate me. So what am I? A complete idiot for having studied, for waking up every day at six in the morning to work, for spending nearly two hours in traffic every day without robbing anyone? I really am an idiot, no question! (Ana, November 2013).

Ana's irony in calling herself a “complete idiot” made clear her discomfort not only with the public impact surrounding the circumstances of Amarildo's death but also with claims that “traffickers” were “victims of society.” In such cases, she would refer to her parents, who had little formal education, held jobs considered menial and poorly paid, yet they had not turned to crime. Citing the example of her parents allowed her to challenge arguments that downplayed the responsibility of “traffickers” and their choices. She also referred to her own life history. Her efforts to study, pursue a university degree while supporting herself through work demonstrated, in her view, that poverty was no excuse for turning to “crime.”



The three women

In this section, we take a closer look at Maria, Ana and Nathalia – their personal trajectories and the dialogue with them over the course of field research. At the time, all three women lived in the Pavão-Pavãozinho favela. Maria is the mother of the other two women. The first meeting with them took place in 2001, during the initial fieldwork in the favela, when Maria was just over 40 years old. We first met her inside a chapel of the Catholic Church in the favela and, later that same week, we was invited to visit her home. Thereafter, we began to visit her regularly. Despite her natural scepticism and understandable initial reluctance to discuss sensitive topics, over time, we grew close.

Maria was born in the Brazilian state of Ceará. Coming from a poor family, she moved to Rio de Janeiro at a young age in search of better living conditions. On her arrival in the city, she met João, her future husband, also from Ceará. After marrying, the two lived for a short time in a neighbourhood some distance from Copacabana. Following this initial period, they decided to move to Pavão-Pavãozinho, close to João’s place of work, where they rented a ramshackle dwelling in the favela. Later, they bought a plot of land in the favela and built their own home. Constructed initially out of wood, the house had just one bathroom and a single room where they slept and cooked. Over the years, the house was rebuilt in brick with two bedrooms, a living room, a bathroom and a kitchen. Subsequently, they added another floor to the structure, where they built two more bedrooms. João initially worked in construction before settling into a job as a doorman. Maria was employed in domestic work for middle-class families in Copacabana, a service she left when she became pregnant with Ana. Years later, their second daughter, Nathalia, was born. When I met Maria, she was no longer living with João. They had separated a few months earlier and João had moved to Rocinha – the same favela where Amarildo was tortured and later killed. Maria and her daughters remained in Pavão-Pavãozinho.

Ana is Maria’s eldest daughter. In 2001, then just over 20 years old, she was living with her mother, had completed high school and was working as a shop assistant in Copacabana. Because of her job, she was typically in the favela only at night or on the weekends. At that time, she was not studying but said she wanted to go to college (*faculdade*) so as to be able to find a job that would improve her material conditions. Years later, Ana attended a private university in the evenings while she worked during the day. It was around then that she met the young man who would later become her husband. Once married, the couple decided to live in Pavão-Pavãozinho, in a house close to Maria’s. Their goal was to save money so they could eventually move to an apartment in the *asfalto*.⁷ Over the years, the desire to leave the favela appeared as one of the central themes in conversations with her. This aspiration was explained by Ana’s critical view of the presence and influence of the *tráfico* (drug trafficking) in the community. She saw formal education, work and individual effort as the immediate, available and above all legitimate means of upward social mobility. Any choice outside this path would meet

7 The term “*asfalto*” is applied to urban residential areas outside the favelas in Brazil.



with her disapproval and criticism.

Nathalia is Maria's other daughter. Her opinions and life trajectory were similar to those of her older sister. In 2001, at 16 years old, she was living with her mother and sister, attended high school, and did not work. Years later, she moved into a residence that her mother had built above the family's original house. By 2013, she was working at the same company and attending the same private university as her sister. Nathalia's relationship with the space where she lived and with her neighbours was also similar to Ana's. She too expressed a desire to leave the favela – provided she could remain close to the Copacabana area – and was critical of the *tráfico* (drug trafficking).

These three women shared similar views on many topics. They feared and resented the *traficantes* (drug dealers) operating in the favela and held drug users – whether from the *asfalto* or from other favelas – responsible for the consequences of the drug trafficking activity. An additional and crucial aspect of their narratives was the value attributed to personal endeavour and work as what they considered to be the morally legitimate for earning a decent living.

These opinions bore a direct relationship to their remarks about the public reporting of the circumstances surrounding Amarildo's death. Moreover, all three women had the same response to cases involving people close to them who had been or were involved in drug trafficking. Ana once commented, for example, that she had spent years trying to persuade a childhood friend to leave the *tráfico*, but was unsuccessful. Because of this, she said, despite caring for the young man, when she learned about his death, she was unable to feel pity. She mourned for his family, but not for him. Nathalia's account of the death of a former boyfriend is also illustrative. On one occasion, she shared that, about two years before we first met, she had dated a young man from the *asfalto* and he began frequenting the favela because of their relationship. After they broke up, he joined the *tráfico* and ended up dead in a dispute over the control of drug-dealing points (*bocas-de-fumo*) in the region. The affectionate manner in which Nathalia spoke about the young man did not shake her belief that he had been responsible for his own fate. She concluded her account of the episode by rhetorically asking how many people must have suffered and died by his hands.

Senses of justice and rights in Rio's favelas

How should we interpret the reactions and discourses of the three women? One possible interpretation takes us to discussions about the social production of indifference. These studies explore the processes by which collectives, repeatedly subjected to widespread human rights violations, come to naturalize deaths, torture and other forms of violence experienced daily. Scheper-Hughes (1992) calls this process the *normalization of violence*, describing the way in which the routinization of these experiences is understood by victimized groups as normal and justifiable practices. Bourgois (2003), in turn, uses the term *invisible violence* to problematize the structural and symbolic factors creating the conditions for



these experiences to be normalized among marginalized groups. In a joint work, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004) explore the relationship between the social production of indifference and the legitimization that acts of flagrant use of force acquire among groups exposed to these experiences, linking this phenomenon to the process of naturalizing structural inequalities and power relations. Their interpretation dialogues with Bourdieu's (1970) discussion of the process through which the particular interests and worldview of socially dominant groups are internalized by vulnerable groups as universals, causing the latter to naturalize the status quo within what the sociologist classified as *symbolic violence*.

Another line of interpretation maintains that reactions of indifference represent an effort on the part of residents of poor areas to gain some control over the violence to which they are exposed. Hence, the constant invocation of categories such as “decent person” (*pessoa de bem*) and “worker” (*trabalhador*) and the endeavour to differentiate themselves from “traffickers” (*traficantes*) and “criminals” (*bandidos*) can be seen as an attempt to eliminate ambiguities, avoid stigmas (Goffman 1980) and control potential risks that a mistaken identification might occasion (Caldeira 2000). A kind of *moral cleansing* (Machado da Silva 2008) aimed at convincing the police and the rest of the city's population of their status as “decent persons” and “workers.” In other words, a way to evade the dangers of pollution (Douglas 1966) that proximity to the *tráfico* entails.

Certainly, these two interpretive frameworks cannot be ignored. In our view, however, they are insufficient to explain the prevalence of the categories and their meanings, since there is another dimension involved in their usage that cannot be reduced to strategies for controlling violence. Our interpretation takes a different course. Maria, Nathalia and Ana's critiques of the “Amarildo case” express senses of justice and conceptions of rights shared by many other interlocutors over the years. These senses become particularly relevant when they narrated and reflected on their everyday experiences.

The contexts in which the categories “criminals,” “drug traffickers,” “decent people,” and “workers” were invoked, the way they seemed to be articulated with expressions of indignation, demonstrations of indifference, and the meanings attributed to them, all point to the prevalence of a framework that links differentiated status attributions based on identity criteria with specific expectations and demands for unequal distribution of forms of treatment. In other words, it is a formulation that conceives rights as privileges of moral types residing in the favelas – a prerogative of “decent people.”

The interpretation of indifference toward the abuses and crimes committed by police officers, as well as the negative reactions to the public repercussion of Amarildo's murder, seems more promising when we consider the moralities shared by the three women. Here, the aforementioned categories played a central role. Let us return to the statements of Nathalia and Ana. The understanding expressed by the two women in 2013 resembled what was observed during fieldwork conducted over the years. In general terms, *peessoas de bem/trabalhadores* (decent people/



workers) were those not involved in the local *tráfico* (drug trafficking) and not engaged in practices like theft or robbery. By contrast, the term *bandido* (criminal) identified individuals who had adopted such practices.

These emic categories are readily identifiable in Rio de Janeiro's favelas (Zaluar 1985, Ceccheto, Muniz and Monteiro 2020, Kant de Lima 1995, Machado da Silva 2008, Cardoso and Lemos 2022, Cardoso 2014, Cardoso 2017). Although these categories cannot be assumed in an essentialized or static manner, they carry a profound moral weight and play a significant role in the construction of local identities. In the opposition between “worker” (*trabalhador*) and “criminal” (*bandido*), those who did not turn to “crime” represent themselves as morally superior to those depicted as morally degraded persons. The benchmark here is a particular formulation of the ethics of work, where personal effort, daily sacrifice and a willingness to work appear as stress factors that reinforce the perception of the self as a virtuous person, distinct from “criminals,” seen as people who have taken the “easy path.” Thus, while in their everyday social relations “decent people/workers” found themselves in a position of vulnerability and subjugation vis-à-vis “traffickers,” in this formulation, which distinguishes them from “criminals,” attributing a differentiated status to each, the women were able to place themselves in hierarchically superior position. From this perspective, the means and motives that enabled “criminals” to impose their will – intimidation, the use of force and the pursuit of easy gains – were reinterpreted as evidence of their own weakness.

The attribution of moral value to the distinction between “decent people/workers” and “criminals” – positioning the former as morally superior to the latter – is fundamental to the sense of justice and rights in this context. It is through this distinction that demands for the unequal distribution of forms of treatment are sustained, framed locally as a right. In this formulation, being the recipient of these forms of treatment, deemed appropriate, was seen as a prerogative of “decent people.” Conversely, their denial was experienced as a form of *moral insult* (Cardoso de Oliveira 2018a). Likewise, extending forms of treatment considered to be the prerogative of “decent people” to individuals seen as “criminals,” or demanding them, was also experienced as an insult of the same kind.

Seen from this perspective, we can understand why the idea that individuals are in control of their own trajectories and responsible for their own choices is important to the three women. Denying this notion would call into question the assumption of moral superiority of “decent people/workers” and subvert the foundations of their convictions. Unsurprisingly, claims about external factors beyond individual motivations that could justify the trajectories of “criminals,” or even the territorial dimensions of the process of criminal subjection of these individuals, were seen as unwarranted. Any attempt to explain these trajectories through the structural imperatives of a socioeconomic kind was considered unsubstantiable.

This formulation of justice, which frames rights as the privilege of specific moral types, also operates in parallel with a process of dehumanization (Freire 2010). The interplay between the senses of justice highlighted in this article and the regime of dehumanization sustains a moral framework that conceives cer-



tain persons as *killable subjects* (Misse, 2018), people whose existence represents a danger to society and who must therefore be eliminated (Foucault 1987, Agamben 2010, Mbembe 2018). If the treatment deemed appropriate was understood as a prerogative of “decent people,” then it follows that only they can experience its violation. Unsurprisingly, therefore, crimes committed against them and those committed against “criminals” were received differently within the two favelas. In this configuration of local justice, “criminals,” due to their choices and their “weak character,” embody the condition of killable subjects. It is no coincidence that Maria, Ana and Nathalia all expressed indifference to the information concerning the torture and disappearance of Amarildo at the hands of police officers.

Discursive exclusion (Cardoso de Oliveira 2011, 2020c) is another dimension of this sense of justice that informs the complete disqualification of demands for investigations and punishment of the police officers involved in Amarildo’s abduction, disappearance and murder. Cardoso de Oliveira’s formulation refers to a type of disregard permeated by the experience of *moral insult* (Cardoso de Oliveira 2018a), characterized by the denial and/or incapacity of public institutions to adequately hear the demands of certain social groups in Brazil. Thus, the marginalization of certain individuals and social groups in terms of citizenship would be associated with the perception that they are unworthy of being heard. The practices that express this phenomenon are marked by the perception of *moral insult*, which results from the arbitrary imposition or suppression of a symbol deemed unacceptable by those suffering the aggression, associated with a denial of their dignity (Cardoso de Oliveira 2011).

Authors have used this term to analyse violence within the prison system (Lemos 2019, Lemos and Cardoso 2022, 2023a, 2023b). Here, we suggest that *discursive exclusion* constitutes a structural dimension of the experiences of incarcerated individuals and the functioning of Brazilian prisons, reflecting a pattern of violence and rights violations against those in conflict with the law and their families, using diverse strategies to deny them a voice. These strategies include mechanisms of silencing, as well as the discrediting of denunciations of physical violations and the disregard of rights (Lemos and Cardoso 2023b), typically under the argument that imprisoned individuals lie and are unworthy of trust.

It is precisely in the discrediting of statements and denunciations that the connection to the notion of *discursive exclusion* becomes possible, as it is one of the dimensions that compose the sense of justice explored in this article. Both on the occasions when Maria, Nathalia and Ana downplayed what happened to Amarildo, and in those moments when they reacted with indignation to the widespread attention the case received, as well as to the demands for justice made by the “We’re All Amarildo” campaign and his family, we can observe the way in which certain voices are discredited by attacking the victim of the crime committed by police officers. This discrediting is sustained by the understanding that Amarildo was involved in “drug trafficking.” Being considered a “criminal” (*bandido*) and thus an individual of questionable character who made morally reprehensible choices (from the women’s perspective) meant that the demands and denuncia-



tions made in this case should be disregarded. Once again, we can see that it is the identification of the victim’s “social type” that determines whether the claim is deemed legitimate or not.

At the time, publicization of the circumstances surrounding the murder also sparked a parallel public debate about the structural socioeconomic factors involved in the recruitment of favela residents into “drug trafficking.” Discussion focused on the correlation between the existence of these groups and the lack of opportunities for the city’s impoverished populations. These were arguments that, from the perspective of the three women, diluted the personal responsibility of those involved in criminal activities. This debate intensified the level of exasperation felt by Maria, Ana and Nathalia. They refused to accept this kind of argument, vehemently opposing the idea itself and those who defended it. Calling themselves “perfect idiots” or expressing disgust captured with precision the impact on them of any statements relativizing the agency of individuals over their own choices and trajectories. Not coincidentally, Nathalia and Ana drew on the life trajectories of their parents, as well as their own, to substantiate their point of view.

The final straw for the three women were the mobilizations for the “We’re All Amarildo” campaign with music shows and the circulation of videos on social networking sites to raise funds and pressure for an inquiry. From the women’s perspective, these mobilizations were entirely unjustified. Why such concern for the fate of one individual who, in their view, was a “criminal,” when the appropriate reaction in such cases would be indifference or, at most, discreet disapproval? Devoting so much energy and mobilizing so many resources to punish those responsible for Amarildo’s murder was perceived by the trio as an inappropriate response.

We can conjecture that the widespread media attention given to Amarildo’s death and the activities of the “We’re All Amarildo” campaign provoked such a negative reaction from Maria, Nathalia and Ana because these initiatives had the potential to destabilize the foundations on which these three women identified themselves as “decent people,” as well as the grounds for their expectations of differentiated treatment. After all, if everyone deserves to have their rights respected, irrespective of their choices and allegiances, what value would there be in an individual who has chosen “hard work” over joining the “crime” world? In this sense, the “We’re All Amarildo” movement represented a threat to the foundations of local conceptions of justice and rights, as well as to the very identity of these three women.

The reach of this framework of justice is so pervasive that the same emic categories, with the same meanings, used by the Military Police communications sector, by those responsible for investigating the murder, and by Maria, Nathalia and Ana were also invoked by Amarildo’s family, his lawyer and the organizers of the “We’re All Amarildo” campaign. In their public statements, lawyers and family members insisted that Amarildo was a family man and a “worker,” with no involvement in local drug trafficking, to support their demands for justice. The same applied to representatives of the “We’re All Amarildo” movement in their



public statements and organized events, a direct contrast to the police’s communication strategy, suggesting that both sides were engaged in a dispute for public opinion, seeking to influence whether Amarildo was perceived as a “criminal” or a “worker.” After all, this perception would ultimately shape the public repercussion of the case. In our view, this is yet another indication of the centrality of this framework that conceives certain rights as privileges associated with specific moral categories – where identifying a person’s moral status precedes and determines whether or not a violation of someone’s rights is recognized.

Conclusion

In this article, we set out to demonstrate that Maria, Nathalia and Ana’s indignant reactions to the public commotion surrounding Amarildo’s death and the “We’re All Amarildo” movement express local senses of justice and conceptions of rights. We then problematized the nature of this formulation, examining how it is articulated with the critiques and negative reactions, connected to feelings of devaluation, disregard for their identities and the frustration of their expectations and demands for forms of treatment they perceive as their prerogative. In this ethnographic context, perceptions of what is just and of rights are linked to differentiated status attributions based on identity criteria and expectations of an unequal distribution of forms of treatment. Individual rights and the need for their observance thus depend on prior recognition of the social identity of the people involved and are prerogatives of certain social types living in the favelas.

These formulations resonate with conceptions of rights and expectations of treatment in other contemporary Brazilian contexts, as explored by Cardoso de Oliveira (2022, 2020b, 2018a), Kant de Lima (1995, 2023) and Lemos and Cardoso (2023a, 2023b, 2021). In his work in this area, Cardoso de Oliveira has drawn attention to the tensions between two conceptions of equality in Brazil: the first advocates for uniform treatment, aligning more closely with modern principles of citizenship, while the second consists of unequal treatment of unequal groups or individuals (Cardoso de Oliveira 2018b). The disparity in treatment within the public sphere reveals a dimension key to understanding citizenship in Brazil: the differential attribution of social status within public institutions and civil society, which can legitimize the denial of dignity to certain sectors of the population. In this sense, as Cardoso de Oliveira (2018b) demonstrates, the differentiated access to rights and the expectations of unequal treatment in the civic world are frequently based on the evocation of particular identities and statuses – whether to claim privileges or to deny access to rights (Cardoso de Oliveira 2022).

Still on the topic of the conceptions of justice prevalent in different contexts in Brazil, Kant de Lima refers to the “Brazilian legal paradox” in the phenomenon whereby “an egalitarian constitutional order is applied unequally” (Kant de Lima 1995, 1). In so doing, he emphasizes how rights and privileges are distributed unequally according to the status of those involved in a socially hierarchical structure. This inequality is also expressed in the different forms of social control



employed according to the social status of the individuals concerned. Especially in the case of minorities and the most disadvantaged segments of the Brazilian population – black people, indigenous peoples, traditional populations, women, residents of urban peripheries, and so on – social control is exercised coercively through moral, physical and institutional violence, including taking the lives of the people involved. For Kant de Lima and Cardoso de Oliveira (2023), one of the consequences of this mode of conflict management, related to perceptions of unequal treatment, is the reproduction of differentiation strategies “among peers so that, by distinguishing themselves from those similar to them, they can ascend to higher social strata” (Cardoso de Oliveira 2023, 11).

The discourses of Nathalia, Maria and Ana express notions of equality that are indissociable from an idea of justice and rights to which they adhere and that shape their interpretations of the events narrated in this article. What seems to us especially pernicious in this context is that this arrangement involves the naturalization of violence against individuals who are not recognized as bearing an acceptable social status or identity – those who do not share the same status of equality as “decent people” (*peças de bem*). As we have sought to demonstrate, the mobilization of categories like *peças de bem* and *bandidos* (criminals) cannot be understood merely as a strategy of purification to avoid the risks of mistaken identification by the police. If that were the case, the public commotion surrounding the case of Amarildo and the demands for justice and punishment of those involved would not, in themselves, have been enough to provoke the indignation of the three women. The disgust the women expressed can be compared to what Cardoso de Oliveira termed a *moral insult* (2018b), precisely because a notion of rights, inseparable from the recognition of an individual's status, was disregarded or threatened.



About the authors

Carolina Barreto Lemos

Carolina Barreto Lemos is an expert at the National Mechanism for the Prevention and Combat of Torture (MNPCT), deputy coordinator of the Laboratory of Ethnographic Studies and Anthropology of Law (LAET/UNIFAP) and researcher at the Institute of Comparative Studies of Institutional Conflict Management (INCT-InEAC). She holds a PhD in Law from the Postgraduate Program in Law at the University of Brasília (PPGD/UnB), a Master's degree in Philosophy from Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, and a degree in Law from the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG).

E-mail: cbarretolemos@gmail.com

Marcus Cardoso

Marcus Cardoso is a professor at the Federal University of Amapá (UNIFAP), as well as at the Postgraduate Program in Law at the Federal University of Amapá (PPGD/UNIFAP) and the Postgraduate Program in Border Studies (PPGEF/UNIFAP). He is a member of the Human Rights Committee of the National Association of Postgraduate Studies and Research in Social Sciences (ANPOCS), a researcher at the Institute of Comparative Studies in Conflict Management (INCT-InEAC/UFF) and coordinator of the Laboratory of Ethnographic Studies and Anthropology of Law at the Federal University of Amapá (LAET/UNIFAP). He holds a PhD and a master's degree in Anthropology from the Postgraduate Program in Social Anthropology at the University of Brasília (PPGAS/UnB), and a degree in Social Sciences from the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ).

E-mail: marcusacardoso@gmail.com

Authors' contributions

Marcus Cardoso performed the following activities related to the construction of the article: data production, conceptualization, data analysis, elaboration of the methodology and writing.

Carolina Barreto Lemos performed the following activities related to the construction of the article: conceptualization, data analysis and writing.

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Luis Cayón A. Durán (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6282-8282>)

“Perfect idiots”: senses of justice, moral insults and discursive exclusion from the perspective of three residents...

Marcus Cardoso e Carolina Barreto Lemos



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