

The Use of Terrorist Tools by Criminal Organizations: The Case of the Brazilian Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC)

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Abstract

The use of guerrilla and terrorist tactics by criminal gangs is not new or rare. However, there is very little research regarding the use of terrorist tools and strategies, such as the construction of narratives and ideology, the use of propaganda, violent communication and psychological warfare, the use of the Internet or even the inclusion of religious references in the rituals of criminal gangs. In this sense, the Brazilian prison gang PCC (First Command of the Capital or Primeiro Comando da Capital, in Portuguese), deemed by many the largest and most dangerous criminal organisation on the continent, presents a unique case that deserves closer investigation. With its evolving sophistication, transnationalization and presence in not only all South American countries but also other continents, there has been considerable debate regarding the best way to classify and define this group. Most approaches have proven to be inadequate to analyse a group which manifests so many stages and facets, depending upon the region of activity and the perspective of the observer. Nevertheless, looking at PCC's history and evolution during its nearly three decades of existence, one may conclude that the concept of "third-generation gangs" offers particularly useful parameters for analysing the terrorist tools employed by the group, i.e., its: 1) politicisation; 2) sophistication; and 3) internationalisation. The use of these parameters of analysis to study the PCC not only helps shed light on organized crime in the region but also dispels some common clichés regarding the operations of Brazilian criminal groups – which are often viewed, especially when studied by foreigners, in a rather monolithic manner. Based on the notion of the crime-terror nexus, the objectives of this article are two-fold: First, to present the wide range of strategies – normally associated with terrorists – used by the PCC and second, using the parameters of the "third-generation gang" concept, to demonstrate that the Brazilian group has become something bigger and more complex than a conventional criminal organisation.

Keywords: Terrorist tactics, organised crime, 3rd generation gangs, PCC, Brazil

Introduction

Over the last three decades, much has been written about the so-called convergence between criminal and terrorist organizations. However, authors are still struggling to define concepts, which often makes the debate "tedious and inconclusive".[1] Arriving at a definition becomes even trickier when we try to analyse organizations that are hybrid [2] and located around the centre of Makarenko's crime-terror continuum.[3] In this perspective, some terrorist entities become more and more involved in criminal activities to the point that their political motivations and ideology become secondary and they increasingly resemble a criminal organisation. Or, conversely, criminal organisations, such as cartels or the PCC (First Command of the Capital/Primeiro Comando da Capital in Portuguese), can transform and reach an ideological or politicization level, which moves them beyond the centre of Makarenko's spectrum, as they begin to exhibit characteristics predominantly associated with terrorist groups. In this regard, there seems to be an important and complex question of gradation that, obviously related to the very controversial definitions of terrorism and organised crime, still needs to be further dissected. In other words, at what point can criminal organisations that use ideological discourse or terrorist tactics be labelled 'terrorists'?

Although the use of terrorist tactics by criminal groups is not uncommon,[4] this article seeks to demonstrate that the Brazilian criminal organisation PCC stands out for having a wider terrorist toolbox. It also employs an ideological narrative to challenge what it calls the "oppressive state"[5] and takes advantage of the Internet and technological innovations for propaganda, violent communication and psychological warfare [6] in order to

intimidate the government while also creating brand symbols, mottos and rituals. In addition to characteristics normally associated with terrorist groups, the PCC also stands out for its longevity and peculiarities. With nearly 30 years of existence, the group has gone through various phases and cannot be viewed as monolithic. It has different characteristics in each of the 26 Brazilian federal states in which it is present, and it likewise acquires and exhibits new nuances and characteristics as it moves into neighboring countries, such as Bolivia or Paraguay.[7]

On the other hand, perhaps its main complexity derives from its nature as a prison gang, whose top leaders are imprisoned and face severe restrictions in their communications.[8] Despite its ability to circumvent such difficulties, through bribes and taking advantage of the deficiencies of an already-overcrowded and precarious penitentiary system, this dynamic often negatively influences the top-down flow of commands, besides hindering an accurate interpretation and analysis by law enforcement officers regarding what happens outside, on the streets of Brazil. Due to its current more horizontal structure, many of PCC's violent actions outside the prison take place at the initiative of lower-level members who are out on the streets. It seems that these cells or "departments" of the group's external structure are not always able to obtain clear endorsement from the confined leadership for their plans and attacks. Thus, this complex dynamic between the organization's internal and external dimensions (i.e., between inmates and members who are out of prison) makes it difficult to determine PCC's motivations and objectives; for instance, when the group, or a cell acting on behalf of the group, attempts to explode a car bomb at the São Paulo forum.[9]

The PCC is therefore very hard to define. As noted by Feltrán,[10] the perception of the group changes depending on the perspective from which one observes it. Whereas ethnographic research carried out in prisons and in communities ideologically dominated by the group leads to the identification of a brotherhood, investigations carried out by police and prosecutors has led them to see a business structure or a criminal network. Metaphors such as "crime masonry", [11] "crime syndicate"[12] or a kind of criminal co-op and "model of criminal cooperation"[13] are often used to describe the PCC. In a similar vein, none of the concepts and "labels" – such as transnational criminal organisation, terrorist group, insurgency, criminal insurgency or third-generation gang – seem sufficient to define and capture the PCC in all its complexity. Nonetheless, Sullivan's analytical criteria in constructing his concept of "third-generation gangs"[14] – i.e., politicisation, sophistication and internationalisation – provide useful parameters for analysing PCC's evolution and set it apart from other Brazilian groups. These criteria also help in drawing parallels between PCC's strategies and those often employed by terrorists, by identifying the terrorist "tools" used, consciously and voluntarily *or* unconsciously and involuntarily,[15] by the Brazilian organization.

Sullivan's concept goes through the evolution of urban street gangs to show that many contemporary organizations have reached new levels of complexity, becoming quasi-terrorist. Thus, in the first generation, local and unsophisticated gangs were devoid of effective leadership and focused on dominating their territory for the practice of committing petty crimes. With the second generation came drug trafficking groups that, with an entrepreneurial vision of market control, proved more cohesive and exhibited more centralized forms of leadership. These could occasionally present some level of politicization of objectives, operate in another country and conduct more sophisticated operations with the eventual use of terrorist tactics. The third generation includes organizations that not only seek profit but are involved with more politicized objectives, with systematic transnational activity and sophisticated operations. The third generation therefore stands out for its high levels of (i) politicization, (ii) sophistication and (iii) internationalization. However, it is worth noting that although the idea of gang generations has been frequently used by defence analysts and practitioners, the concept is still underused for crime-terror nexus studies around the world.[16] In order to analyse a strategically important group such as the PCC, this article shall use Sullivan's three-part analytical framework outlined here whilst also proposing adaptations to it. Thus, in addition to further nuancing the idea of sophistication, on which Sullivan's work does not elaborate much, this article proposes the inclusion of the ideological issue within the politicisation aspect. These additions allow for both a deeper and more accurate analysis of the PCC's objectives and narratives.

It is worth noting that the literature on the group is still incipient, with few books and articles published. There is an emphasis on ethnographic research in prisons and on peripheral regions under influence of the group, as well as historical-descriptive approaches to its emergence and growth. With this in mind, this article contributes to these debates by analyzing the PCC's evolution through the lens of the crime-terror nexus and the notion of third-generation gangs, calling attention to aspects still not fully debated in all their complexity. This exploratory approach also seeks to leverage perspectives obtained through the author's professional experience and off-the-record conversations with officials from Brazil's intelligence agency, Federal and Civil police from different regions, prosecutors and penitentiary intelligence, as well as some of the authors referenced here. These conversations have contributed greatly to the drawing of parallels between the actions of PCC and terrorist groups.

How the Definition of Terrorism Impacts the Analysis of Hybrid Groups Such as the PCC

Although there has been much research about the use of criminal activities to finance terrorist organizations, the use of typical terrorist tactics and tools by criminals remains under-researched.[17] There exist a few authors dedicated to analysing the nature of violence practiced by organizations from Latin American countries such as Mexico and Colombia, who debate the appropriateness and usefulness of labelling the extreme violence practiced by some groups as terrorism.[18] However, even though the Brazilian criminal organisation PCC has become more transnational and achieved prominence amongst South American criminal groups,[19] very little study has been dedicated to analyzing its use of strategies that are commonly associated with terrorist organizations.

It is important to note that, in general, there is no consensus on the use of terrorist tactics by criminals in other parts of the world. In the Mexican case, for example, there is a great deal of controversy in the literature and amongst practitioners. While some authors claim that the violence of cartels can be characterised as terrorism,[20] others debate the usefulness of labelling them as terrorist organizations despite admitting to the complexity of the topic.[21] Most reject the label of terrorism for cartel violence, however, due to the absence of a political or ideological motivation in some of these organizations – even when they recognise the presence of a certain degree of politicization in the immediate objectives of attacks which employ terrorist tactics.[22] In this sense, Mexican groups – or even the PCC, as we shall discuss – do utilize “terrorist tactics” to intimidate the government into either taking action or reversing political decisions. This is nevertheless done with a final and more important objective of safeguarding profits earned from their criminal activities, or preventing the isolation of prison leaders which would disrupt the organization's chain of command and control. To use Schmid's words,[23] acts of terrorism must be “predominantly of political nature”, and there is a crucial gradation issue in this debate.

It is thus necessary to briefly discuss the controversial topic of the definition of terrorism, in particular the differentiation between what is meant in this article by terrorist tactics and the phenomenon of terrorism itself. In this sense, this article claims that while criminal organizations such as the PCC do employ strategies normally associated with terrorist groups—which are not only restricted to operational features and guerrilla tactics—it also argues that the use of such strategies is not sufficient to label them as terrorists. As Phillips [24] aptly sums up, despite the controversy around the elements making up the definition of terrorism, there are three terms that figure in most definitions worldwide, according to a study by Schmid and Jongman [25]: 1) violence; 2) the intention to generate fear or terror, generally toward a wide audience; and 3) political motivations.

In the PCC's case, the presence of violence in most of its strategies is uncontroversial. The second element—the intention to generate terror or fear in a wider public than the immediate target—is also a crucial aspect of terrorism. It is necessary, therefore, that terrorist violence also have the intention of sending a message, frightening and influencing others. The mediate target of terrorist acts is usually the general public, but some definitions accept that the audience may be narrower and more specific, such as a specific religious group, the government, or even a specific section of the population. And as this article shall explain, the PCC utilizes not

only terrorist operational tactics—something we also see in other criminal groups—but also (surprisingly) tactics borrowed from a wider terrorist toolkit, including several nonoperational strategies commonly used by terrorists. In addition to attacking politicians, police officers and public transportation, i.e., methods the wider public is more familiar with although these have been used sporadically throughout its history, the PCC often uses extreme violence to send messages to adversaries, potential recruits and the government, always with the intention of instilling fear and exerting influence.

The third element—political motivation—is the most difficult to identify as a constant factor in the history of this Brazilian group, and it is equally difficult to locate consistently in criminal groups from countries such as Mexico. Motivation is essential in the characterization of terrorism, without which we would probably be dealing with ordinary crime in most cases. Thus, terrorism and political violence will always be intimately associated. We usually think of political motivation as being linked to a group's primordial objectives, so intuitively we expect ambitious projects involving the overthrow of a government and its ideology, the founding of a separate state, or the change of highly relevant governmental policies.[26] However, what we see in the case of the PCC and other criminal groups is that the use of violence has an intermediate and ultimate goal of guaranteeing the continuation of criminal activities, removing competition, intimidating criminal prosecutions and making a profit. It is in order to achieve these goals that the PCC reacts to particular public policies or state agents, temporarily implementing violent action with immediate and somewhat “politicized” objectives, such as the change of a specific aspect of prison policy. In this sense, the PCC does not generally have ambitious political aspirations. Instead of overthrowing the government or acquiring political power, its objectives are limited to forcing the state to leave it alone so as to keep on profiting from criminal activities, especially drug trafficking and armed robberies. It is precisely in the moments in which the state's response to crime impacts the organization's leadership and activities that the PCC uses political violence, or at the very least achieves its immediate objectives in a politicized manner. Therefore, while most of the drug-related violence in countries such as Brazil and Mexico is not terrorism as usually defined, there are sporadic incidents that can be categorized as making use of terrorist tactics. As Phillips [27] contends, any action that encompasses two elements of the consensus definition of terrorism, e.g. the use of violence in order to strike fear into others beyond the immediate victims, can be categorized as making use of terrorist tactics. In other words, even if an action might not be technically called terrorism because it lacks high-level political motivation, it still makes sense to categorize such violence as ‘terrorist-like’ or ‘quasi-terrorist’.

It is exactly in moments in which the group decides to confront the state directly and violently—resembling groups from the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro and the cartels in Mexico—that some argue [2] that its violence and strategies can be explained using the notion of criminal insurgency.[29] Although the idea of criminal insurgency seems to make sense when applied to the territorial logic of Rio's criminal groups, such as the Red Command, it is usually a concept of little utility for the PCC, whose dynamics rarely and in few places resemble the clichés about the violence of Rio's favelas, stereotypes that are often reinforced by blockbuster movies such as *City of God* or *Elite Squad*. Indeed, if there is one thing that holds true for organized criminal groups in Brazil it is that they do not all behave like those that operate in Rio, especially when it comes to the control of territory. Furthermore, when applied to the analysis of criminal groups, the term “insurgency” presents a certain degree of inadequacy that is also related to the element of motivation. Insurgencies generally have characteristics that criminals do not share, such as the objective of removing or replacing the national government through asymmetric armed conflict waging.[30] In Rio's favelas, although criminals often defy the state and the federal government, the conflict arises much more from territorial disputes over areas used for the drug trade than from any intrinsically political interests of the traffickers. Brazil's organized crime scenario lacks efforts to delegitimize and/or substitute the government.

The PCC seems unique for several reasons. First, because the debate on the characterization of Brazilian narco-trafficking organizations as terrorists takes on nuances that differ from those concerning, for example, the Mexican and Colombian cases. In Brazil, there is little inclination – whether from the press, academia, security agencies or politicians [31] – to label the violence practiced by domestic criminal groups as ‘terrorism’. Furthermore, debates around the use of guerrilla and terrorist tactics by the PCC already encounter a practical

barrier. The Brazilian Anti-Terrorism Act (Law 13260/2016) – drafted with little internal debate and under a lot of international pressure at the time of the Olympics 2016 – ended up excluding the political motivation of the perpetrator from its definition of terrorist acts. Such omission is due to a series of historical and political factors,[32] made worse by a moment of extreme political polarization in which the Brazilian government faced adversities in multiple spheres. The country was under a lot of pressure from the UN and the FATF (Financial Action Task Force), which called for it to abide by international guidelines that recommended the approval of national anti-terrorist laws in order to allow countries across the globe to cooperate effectively in countering the threat of terrorism. Since 2013, the country also dealt with massive political protests which, despite lacking clear leadership or a well-defined political agenda, contested expenditures on mega-events such as the Olympic Games and which were often characterised by violence and depredation.[33] To make matters worse, the President at the time—the leftist Dilma Rousseff—found herself in the final stretch of an impeachment process that led her out of office about a month after the law was passed.

The unusual absence of a political incentive in the law's list of motivations was most certainly related to natural fears and conspiracy theories emerging in such troubled and politically polarized times. Such was the scenario in which the legal definition of terrorism was hastily constructed in Brazil. In addition to fears that the law would be used in the future against political opponents or demonstrations, there was a concern within the leftist government base itself, historically against the approval of a terrorism law in the country, that it could be used to persecute social movements, especially those seeking land reform. For this reason, the government approved an article that prohibited the framing of violent acts by social movements deemed legitimate as terrorist. This decision moved away from the initial, more technical spirit of the law, which aimed to consider as terrorist any actor that practised violence as was stated in the original legal definition of terrorism. While there are amendment proposals to the current anti-terrorist law—in an attempt to both repeal this article and include the element of political motivation—it remains in force with the peculiarities mentioned here; defining terrorism as the “practice of violent acts motivated by xenophobia or discrimination or prejudice of race, colour, ethnicity and religion, when committed with the purpose of causing social or generalized terror, exposing people, property, public peace or public safety.”[34] The legal definition of terrorism in Brazil is an issue precisely because the political element is one of the most mentioned and almost “consensual” aspects amongst definitions of terrorism adopted by governments and scholars worldwide.[35] As a result, even if we understand that the PCC's violence seeks to intimidate or force the state into doing or not doing something, or, in other words, even if we accept that its violence is underpinned by political objectives, given the legal definition of terrorism in Brazil, the PCC would still not be classified as a terrorist group.

Almost Three Decades of PCC History

In order to fully grasp the use of terrorist tools by the PCC, it is important to first understand the circumstances of its emergence and its evolution to the present, along with the challenges and uncertainties it has been confronted in all these years. In early 2019, both the entire first echelon of the PCC's leadership and part of its lower-level right-hand men were finally transferred from São Paulo's prison system to the Federal Penitentiary System.[36] Once there, these prisoners finally stopped having physical contact with their lawyers and family members, who had been traditionally used for communications as well as for the group's criminal logistics. [37] According to prison intelligence officials, such a strategy seems to have, at least temporarily, interrupted the communication and command network of the organisation, causing numerous problems for the group. Thus, unlike in the case of previous prison transfers which had been manoeuvred by the PCC, the transfer of the group's leadership into the Federal Penitentiary System disrupted the effective communication of directives from the leadership to its operatives.

The period that stretches from the group's foundation to the turn of the century may be considered a stage of ideological dissemination (see Figure 1). The group arose formally in 1993 as a consequence of persistent problems faced not only by São Paulo, but also by the rest of Brazil. In the early 1990s, the prison system was already suffering from a chronic lack of structure in what were overcrowded facilities, as well as insufficient,

ill-prepared, corrupt and violent prison officers.[38] Moreover, the state’s inability to guarantee order and the physical integrity of prisoners was rampant, especially when it came to the protection of inmates against rival groups. The regulation of relations between detainees and the organization proposed by the PCC caught the inmates’ attention because they touched upon demands that the state had failed to meet.[39] Rebellions and ensuing violent repression created the feeling among prisoners that they needed to come together; that their enemy was an “unjust and oppressive” state. On the outside, in less favoured peripheries, the inefficiency in providing the most basic services—needs often met by criminals—and the violent confrontation between police and criminals, or between rival gangs themselves, produced countless innocent victims. All of this helped facilitate the recruitment of members by organized criminal groups.[40]

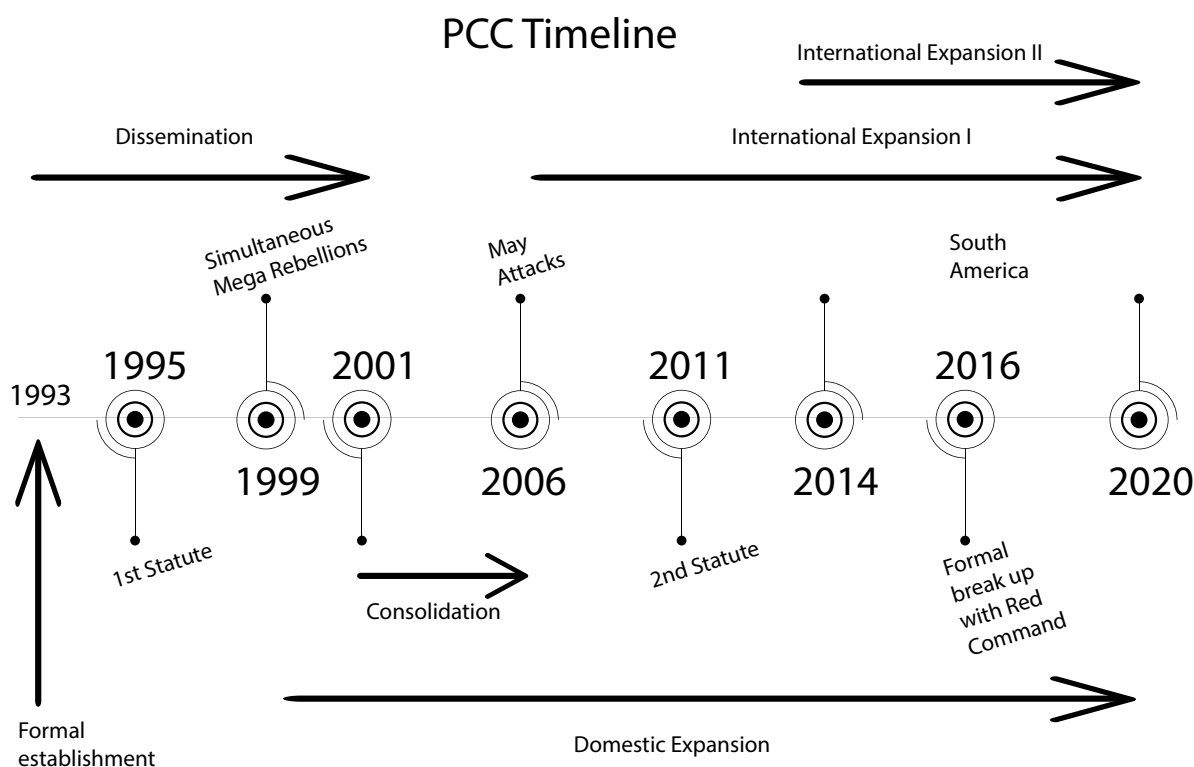


Figure 1- Timeline of PCC’s Evolution [43]

In this environment, the PCC was astute in articulating a narrative that not only reflected the inmates’ situation but also matched the dissatisfaction of that part of the population living, without great prospects, outside the “promising” world of crime. In this context, slogans such as “a brother does not kill a brother” and “crime must unite” become part of the discourse and ideology responsible for the rapid expansion of the group in the most developed state of Brazil (São Paulo), as well as some of its neighbouring states, over a period of just five years. [41] Beyond the ideological aspect, which was essential in the beginning, other factors may be pointed out to explain the organization’s rapid expansion – first in its region of origin, and then in the entire country as well as abroad. The PCC built its reputation through extreme violence, beheadings and even cannibalism aimed at intimidating both the state and its rivals – and it worked. Rival groups that did not give in to the ideology and the new rules dictated by the PCC – which would in return take care of inmates’ interests and families – were quickly “persuaded” through violence. A combination of force, intimidation and ideology thus explains how at the turn of the century a group initiated by fewer than 20 inmates already dominated the prison system in São Paulo as well as other Brazilian states.[42]

The second stage goes from the turn of the century until mid-2006 and marks the consolidation and transformation of the organisation, which, unlike what we saw in the first phase, now adopted international drug trafficking as its main source of income. At this moment, it is important to remember that Rio’s strongest

criminal group, the Red Command and its leader “Fernandinho Beira-Mar”, were the main focus of Brazilian authorities, which allowed the PCC to grow under the radar, in terms of federal law enforcement efforts. Additionally, for a few authors,[44] many of the changes seen in the PCC in this stage would have stemmed from the influence of members of leftist terrorist organizations imprisoned in Brazil. One example of this would be the Chilean, Mauricio Norambuena, a historical leader of the leftist insurgent group *Frente Patriótica Manuel Rodríguez* (Patriotic Front Manuel Rodríguez), which maintained contacts with the PCC leadership since 1999. Although this supposition is an object of controversy among government security agents,[45] the fact is that, as argued by Christino and Tognolli,[46] by coincidence or not, the organization became much more sophisticated in terms of its structure and modus operandi during this period. In those authors’ opinion, these adjustments would not have been possible without external influence, and it is worth noting the similarities between the organizational structure implemented by the PCC at this stage and that of several leftist terrorist organizations from previous decades. Around the same time, the group also began utilizing typical terrorist tools to pressure the government, such as the use of the press as a weapon of propaganda, kidnappings, the assassination of judges and attempts to blow up public buildings. This phase of power consolidation is marked by national prison rebellions and the use of terrorist and guerrilla tactics, with emphasis on attacks on public places, attempts to use car bombs, the kidnapping of a journalist from the country’s largest media conglomerate [47] and, obviously, the notorious attacks of May 2006, a real campaign of “terrorist attacks”. In this “terrorist campaign” alone, at least 300 people were killed, including policemen, criminals and innocent civilians.[48]

The group’s new leadership from the turn of the century onwards started being especially represented by the figure that, according to officials and researchers, is the group’s greatest expression of command to this day – a detainee of Bolivian descent, Marcos Willians Herbas Camacho, alias Marcola. Pragmatic and demonstrating an entrepreneurial vision of business, Marcola seemed to agree with violent and direct confrontation only in exceptional situations, or, at times, when he had no option but to manage crises initiated without his blessings. [49] At this point, the PCC already sought a national hegemony of prison control as well as the wholesale of drugs entering Brazil. With this in mind, Marcola decentralised the organisation, creating “departments” with specific functions, along the lines of a company, horizontalizing the organisation chart and giving more autonomy to managers working on the streets.[50]

The following years were characterised by three stages that, although distinct, often overlap. These can be categorised as: (i) international expansion I, (ii) domestic expansion, and (iii) international expansion II. Taking advantage of the reputation earned in the criminal world due to the concessions made by the state and by simplifying recruitment rules—which involved strict security guidelines and which was traditionally done through a “baptism”[51]—the PCC inaugurated a national and largescale expansion in approximately 1999 [49]. At the same time, around 2006,[52] it also initiated its international expansion towards marijuana and cocaine producing centres, especially Bolivia and Paraguay, seeking to eliminate intermediaries between the group and producers. This largely allowed the PCC to control the entry of drugs into Brazil. In the regulatory realm, the PCC also modified and widened its control of life within prisons, clearly taking the place of the state in the regulation of prison routine(s) and trying to take control of violence amongst criminals themselves. Acting as a business, PCC started working as a regulatory agency, mediating conflicts and disputes between criminals inside and outside of prison, and always remaining faithful to the narrative that crime needs to unite against the state and that “a brother does not kill a brother”.[53] Behind this so-called “pacification” and “awareness” is the perception that stability and predictability of relationships, coupled with less overt confrontations with the state, would maximise drug profits.[54] Once it controlled some of the most convenient border drug routes, the PCC managed to acquire prominence in the wholesale of drugs in Brazil,[55] moving on to the second stage of its international expansion (international expansion towards Europe and Africa – shown as “international expansion II” in Figure 1). Starting around 2014, according to Manso and Dias, the PCC started getting more directly involved with the shipping of cocaine abroad. It is, in fact, at about this time that Brazilian Federal Police operations began to detect the organization behind large cocaine shipments to other continents, mainly through Brazilian ports, establishing partnerships with European mafias and other organizations with international reach. There is no longer any doubt that the PCC has also taken a leading role in sending cocaine to other continents,[56] as will be seen in the next sections. The sections that follow will

detail, through Sullivan's framework of analysis, all possible parallels between the workings of the PCC and strategies normally associated with terrorists, in addition to better describing it in all its complexity.

Politicization of Objectives and the Importance of Ideology

Sullivan's first parameter for analysing third generations gangs is that of politicization. Within the crime-terror nexus and its application to hybrid groups, perhaps two characteristics garner the most attention when we compare the patterns of violence used by the PCC and other criminal narco-trafficking organizations. The first is the PCC's eventual turn towards terrorist tactics, which is relatively well known to the general public due to the duration, media coverage and scale of its nationwide terror campaigns, such as the one conducted in May 2006. As already discussed above, much of the time when the group has targeted the general population, public buildings, means of transportation or public officials, it seems to have some kind of claim or immediate motivation that was political in nature. In other cases, it has simply sought to retaliate against a specific measure adopted by the state against the group or its leadership. However, as previously asserted, the ultimate goals of using such strategies have always been much more related to ensuring the safety and well-being of PCC's incarcerated leaders and the development of its criminal activities, as opposed to achieving any high-level political goal. However, it is the second characteristic that reveals the PCC's more complex nature and one which is worth adding to Sullivan's original parameter of politicization – that of narrative and ideology. The importance of the narrative and the ideology developed by the organization is often misunderstood or even underestimated by both practitioners and the media. What follows is an engagement with the group's ideological evolution in order to illustrate how studying the PCC's ideology as part of its 'politicization' can help us use the concept of third generation-gangs to further develop our understanding of the crime-terror nexus. In the PCC's case, it is precisely the evolution of its narrative that effectively subverts the profit-ideology dichotomy which supposedly distances criminal groups from terrorist ones in traditional understandings of the crime-terror spectrum (for example, Makarenko's crime-terror continuum).

The literature on the use of violence by the Mexican cartels, for instance, highlights the peculiarities of *La Familia Michoacán* cartel, responsible for numerous attacks in the region of the same name, using explosives, beheadings and the killing of civilians with the intention of frightening and intimidating rivals, the state and the population.[57] The group's main features concern its Christian orientation and its self-appointment as a defender and representative of the people of Michoacán. Members of *La Familia Michoacán* declare themselves to be legitimate representatives of the people with the mission of defending these people against the injustices, humiliations and oppression of the Mexican state. The PCC in Brazil is comparable and should likewise be seen as a unique and potentially even more complex case, which is why it hardly fits within the categories or metaphors already used to describe it. Brazil currently has about 80 prison gangs, amongst which the PCC is undoubtedly the most prominent one, having overcome its former partner and source of inspiration *Comando Vermelho* (CV or the Red Command in Portuguese). Having emerged in the 1990s, almost 20 years after the CV arose in the neighbouring state of Rio de Janeiro, the PCC developed in a sort of coalition with the CV, mirroring its slogan "Peace, Justice and Freedom". However, at the time the PCC came into being, the CV had already realised the financial potential of the drug world – leaving the PCC to carry the ideological banner of protecting the prison community and their families in what were extremely precarious prison conditions. Referred to as "the family" by inmates, the PCC's reputation as protector quickly made it the "legitimate" representative of the criminal "class".[58] The group's ideas concerning protection against abuse, the lack of structure in prisons and rules of coexistence represented what were essentially the urgent demands of every detainee in the country. In this sense, the appearance of an organization that dictated what was right and wrong, mediated conflicts and exercised a monopoly violence based upon criteria clearly outlined in a statute, responded to the core demands of the hundreds of thousands of inmates in the country.[59] Thus, through its narratives of criminals uniting against the system, the PCC stood apart from other criminal organizations because it was able to embed a sense of legitimacy and even morality into its illicit and violent activities. Functioning at the same time as a crime-regulating agency and a criminal union, the "party" or "family" – other denominations used by its members – created a brotherhood built upon the ideal of mutual assistance while also challenging and defending the

rights of its members against the “oppressive state”, supporting prisoners’ families and also legally defending prisoners. Furthermore, the idea of a regulated and pacified world of crime, capable of improving the lives of members, their families and neighbourhoods, aligned with an “us versus them” narrative, made it possible for this discourse to resonate with the economically less favoured communities of São Paulo. In this manner, the ideology regulating criminal violence became a necessary evil outside prisons as well, and the appeal of such ideas on the streets worked in favour of PCC’s recruitment and rapid growth.[60]

In a short period, the PCC managed to dominate – physically or ideologically – the vast majority of São Paulo’s prisons. The proof of the power behind PCC’s discourse was made evident by the fact that, even in prisons where “official” members were not in a majority, coexistence was still regulated by the PCC’s rules, which thus managed to “politically” dominate prisons.[61] Given the organization’s ability to control internal prison violence, the government conveniently and systematically took advantage of this “pacification” and neglected the PCC’s growth, denying the organization’s existence as long as it could.[62] By the late 1990s, the group was able to pressure the state into revoking measures that went against its leadership’s interests. Through the promotion of simultaneous rebellions in various prisons and the exercise of violence against public officials and rivals resisting its rule, the PCC was able to compel the government to grant privileges and transfer important prisoners to more desired prison locations. The classic prison dilemma, also very present in the terrorism and radicalisation debates,[63] refers to the complex decision of whether to separate or bring together more radical leaders and individuals, and it was very well “utilized” by the group. When brought together, the leadership was able to better organize and make plans. When the leadership realized the need to spread their discourse to regions not yet ideologically dominated, the PCC used violence and coercion to politically pressurize the government into transferring specific members to such places. Gradually, the PCC came to dominate the richest state in Brazil and, due to the transfer of its leaders to other state prisons, it was also able to dominate neighbouring states – including those bordering Paraguay, which facilitated the initiation of other criminal projects. The transfer of the PCC’s leaders to Rio de Janeiro’s prisons brought together the heads of the two largest criminal organisations in Brazil – the PCC and CV. Consequently, with a 20-year delay in relation to the group from Rio, the PCC eventually followed its example and began focussing its external activities on drug trafficking.[64]

It was in this transition phase towards its focus on drugs that the PCC became more sophisticated and used terrorist tactics more often, also combining structural changes with ideological adaptations. Leaving behind a pyramidal organization in favour of a decentralised structure whose “departments” each had a specific function, it started working as a secret criminal network where responsibilities were shared and compartmentalized.[65] Each member would only participate in, and have knowledge of, what was strictly necessary to perform a specific function, so as not to compromise the security of the entire organization in case someone got arrested by the police.[66] The words “unity” and “equality” started being used by criminals in addition to the original motto, “Peace, Justice and Freedom”. This reinforced the new leadership’s discourse that the PCC would unite and pacify crime, in an administration of progress and shared and divided responsibilities, a brotherhood in which no brother was more important than the other.[67] With the arrival of cell phones and apps, the PCC began to make use of these tools for its propaganda and discourse dissemination. As it expanded rapidly throughout Brazil, its entry into other regions of the country generated bloody conflicts with rival groups and the organization began to portray its violence as a necessary step to raise “awareness” amongst the entire prison community that the union around the “PCC model” was the only alternative against an oppressive state. Leaflets were produced and circulated to portray the group’s “occasional” violence as an important step in a necessary revolution.[68]

Still pertaining to the issue of politicisation, it is important to stress that if, on the one hand, the PCC makes use of diverse tactics to politically intimidate the government, on the other, the idea that the group would infiltrate or try to participate more directly in politics is the subject of controversy. Investigations have shown evident cases of sponsorship of candidates for legislative and executive positions at the municipal level, but authors like Feltrán argue that the organization has no real interest in being part of the state structure, since its objective and ideology are precisely that of going against the system. In the opinion of this author, unlike mafias or

groups such as FARC, the PCC does not long for political power and does not see advantages in the infiltration of corrupt agents in the state machinery.[69] However, one must also note that there is evidence that the group has already funded and operated behind NGOs which were supposedly created to defend the human rights of inmates, so as to politically pressure the state against applying more severe penalty regimes. PCC members have also used intimidation and violence against journalists. We even have one case where a human rights NGO was used as a front for the PCC and provided a support structure for its criminal activities.[70]

Sophistication

For Sullivan,[71] one of the factors that differentiates third-generation gangs from “ordinary” criminal groups is their level of sophistication. Although Sullivan does not present many nuances or examples of what he considers an abnormally sophisticated stage for criminal groups, analysing the PCC’s case, it is clear that this is a characteristic that functions at different levels and is exhibited in several ways. It is manifest, for example, in its tactical, military, structural and strategic sophistication, as well as in its planning of operations, the use of symbols and rituals, recruiting, propaganda, in its communication of extreme violence as a tactic of psychological warfare, not to mention its infiltration of civil society and the political lobby.

Amongst these aspects, the one that potentially has the greatest relationship with the crime-terror nexus is what can be called operational and tactical sophistication; i.e., the use of guerrilla and terrorist tactics, especially at specific moments in the group’s history. As mentioned previously, on several occasions the PCC has used simultaneous rebellions, the assassination of public officials, attacks and violent depredations, and even thrown grenades targeting public buildings full of civilians as a way to pressurize the state into either responding to requests or reversing public policies concerning the prison system.[72] It has also planned rebellions in anticipation of a particular reaction by the state, which resulted in granting it the strategic transfer of leadership figures it was seeking in the first place.[73] Due to the group’s complexities, it is important to remember that when it comes to attacks with the greatest potential to injure a large number of civilians, the actions were not always the result of a consensus within the leadership, which has generally diverged when it comes to the issue of using terrorist tactics. There is a lot of uncertainty concerning how and from where orders for such attacks were given, and it has been frequently difficult to specify the motivations and objectives behind such decisions. The PCC is characterized by a confusing flow of commands; there are frequent betrayals and internal struggles for power, and top leaders diverge over the most appropriate strategies for intimidating the government. While some have acted passionately and often out of revenge for police actions, others, who took over command around 2001, have been much more pragmatic and understand that direct confrontation with the state and the use of terrorist tactics could be bad for business.[74] In an example of the use of terrorist and guerrilla tactics under uncertain circumstances, in one of PCC’s most emblematic actions, the group kidnapped a journalist from the largest TV network on the continent to have an ideological manifesto read in the network’s highest-rating show. This was an attempt to morally justify the famous ‘terror campaign’ conducted by the group in May 2006. Clearly influenced by various guerrilla manuals such as the one by Carlos Marighella, this kidnapping is a good example of the PCC’s reproduction of guerrilla tactics used by Brazilian insurgent groups against the military dictatorship in the 1960s.[75]

Some researchers even attempt to dismiss the importance of the PCC’s use of such tactics, arguing that the use of terrorist operational strategies by the group occurred during a very specific and relatively short period of its history. Thus, for these researchers most of the PCC’s street attacks and the assassinations of judges or police officers were concentrated between 2006 and 2012. But it is important to stress that the idea that PCC has no longer been conducting attacks targeting the population and the government as it did in May 2006 through to 2012 is only partially true. Certainly, while it never repeated a campaign of attacks with the duration and magnitude of the one conducted in São Paulo 14 years ago, the group still promotes more regionalized waves of attacks in isolated states, as the ones in Minas Gerais and Ceará in 2019 and in Santa Catarina in 2013 and 2014. However, because these attacks have a smaller reach and do not entirely paralyze important cities such as São Paulo, they end up gaining less coverage from the national media and receive no media coverage

whatsoever abroad. However, for some specialists, a decreasing stress on the use of terrorist tactics (although not a complete stop in their use) can be explained by the PCC's leadership arriving at the understanding that using this type of strategy does not pay off, given that it normally provokes an exceedingly harsh state response towards the organization. Thus, although attributing the decrease in terrorist(-type) attacks to a decision by the PCC's top leadership is a reasonable theory (albeit one difficult to confirm), there are other nuances and insights that can be brought into this analysis from the perspective of practitioners. The creation of a federal penitentiary system and an independent intelligence system in 2006 – to “house” those criminal leaders that the Brazilian state systems could no longer handle – was a game changer for the Brazilian state. Whereas the state of São Paulo, the PCC's largest stronghold, did not consent to transferring their most relevant inmates to the federal system until 2012, from the very moment leaders were transferred, the lack of access to cell phones and other difficulties found in federal penitentiaries had a clear impact on the PCC's capacity and disposition to keep on planning and conducting attacks that were terrorist in nature.

Furthermore, originally fighting against the PCC was a regional effort, more concentrated in São Paulo, and with each federal state police conducting investigations with little or no coordination with the police from other states. Over the last decade, with the PCC's national and international expansion, state police corporations were forced to share their intelligence information amongst each other. Moreover, Brazil's Federal Police, which not only functions in a more integrated manner at the national level but also exchanges more information with neighboring countries, started to dedicate significant efforts to combat the organisation. As a result of these factors, several highly sophisticated PCC attacks were prevented by police action, and a few of these were also covered by the media.[76] Therefore, on the one hand terrorist tactics are definitely a part of PCC's toolkit and some evidence seems to suggest that the use of such tactics is sporadic and might be deliberately limited by the leadership to avoid a harsh state response. On the other hand, it would also be correct to say that were it not for effective police intelligence structures disrupting potential and planned attacks we would probably see many more incidents with terrorism-like characteristics used by the PCC.[77]

When it comes to communication, PCC's leadership always managed, before its isolation in the Federal Penitentiary System, to see to it that the necessary messages reached the intended recipients. It should be noted, that what is categorized as ‘sophistication’ here is not necessarily limited to technological sophistication. Fact is that the organization has always been extremely creative when it comes to communicating. Whether by notes left on pieces of paper hidden in unexpected places, or by bribing penitentiary agents, or by involving a law department whose members were willing to serve as messengers, the fact is that the PCC, more often than not, always found a way to pass orders around, especially before the creation of the Federal Penitentiary System. Having said that, the surprising effectiveness of imprisoned group members in orchestrating complex actions on the streets is directly related to the PCC's use of technological innovation. The arrival of cell phones was especially crucial for the group's strategy. Even though prisoners are not allowed to own mobile phones, a flawed prison system in combination with the presence of corrupt prison officials has enabled the group to set up an impressive communications system. As early as 2000, before the emergence of chat apps, the PCC was able to set up several “telephone exchange” systems managed by members and family outside the prison environment. They were able to improvise conference calls, receive directives from leaders, as well as update imprisoned leaders with information gathered on the streets.[78] Later, once again facilitated by weak oversight in state prisons, improvements in cell phones and apps allowed the group – much like various other terrorist organisations – to start using technological innovations like the Internet, messaging applications and social networks for purposes of propaganda, recruitment and even as a form of violent communication against competitors, the population and the state. The group's extreme violence, both inside and outside prisons, was now filmed, broadcast and shared to other regions of the country, which was surprising since, unlike terrorists, most gangs and criminal groups tend to avoid publicity and do not care much about their reputation.[79] Acting like a “Brazilian Islamic State”, the PCC filmed scenes of atrocities against rival groups, which they justified morally through the ideological discourses previously referred to. These videos became commonplace and quickly went viral amongst criminals across the entire country, both inside and outside of prisons. More than a form of intimidation, voluntary or not, the PCC demonstrated its savvy in utilising technological advances to its advantage, increasing the power of its image among criminals. As it became more

capable of forcing the state to comply with its demands using the threat of terrorist-like attacks, it progressively strengthened its recruiting power outside the state of São Paulo.[80] In parallel, it was also skilful in mobilising its brand symbols and strengthening itself in the midst of a rising culture that was distinctly ‘anti-system’ in peripheral regions. The emergence of cultural expressions glorifying a life of crime—similar to the idea of “narcoculture” in Mexico[81]—and criticising state oppression, helped the PCC to foster an environment to attract not only hardened criminals, but also young people with no prospects of upward social mobility and a history of violence and/or involvement in petty crime. In this regard, music (especially rap and hip hop), Facebook pages, graffiti, tattoos, symbols, gestures and slang became a counterculture framework that spoke to the group’s narrative and ideology, progressively expanding its ability to recruit members in Brazil. Its motto and references to the numbers “15-3-3” – an allusion to the order in which the letters P and C appear in the alphabet – came to be seen in all prisons and around the streets of São Paulo. At the same time, one could also see both inmates as well as young people from marginalized areas singing rap songs that emulated the group’s statute and anti-oppression discourse. The PCC’s narrative thus created a feedback mechanism between a prison counterculture and another that had emerged in the peripheral regions of Brazil,[82] just as the group’s internal and external dimensions fed off one another each time a criminal either got arrested or went back to the streets. From its early days, the group also used symbolism to mark the admission of new members into the organisation, a ritual that became known as a “baptism”. At the ceremony, the new member—necessarily referred by two members or “godfathers”—listened to the group’s history and the articles of its statute, by which he then swore to abide.[83] For Paes & Nunes, similar to “a religious conversion, the baptized brother in the PCC abandoned his unruly individuality to embrace a life dedicated to the community.”[84] As with some extremist groups, the baptism represented the prevalence of the collective identity over the individual and a loss of individuality, especially considering that permission to leave the organization is only granted in exceptional circumstances; without permission the member may be punished with death.[85] To give an air of morality to its struggle, the PCC still traditionally includes religious references in many of its meetings and internal guidelines. In many of its meetings, easily found on YouTube, prisoners congregate in the prison yard and, at the end of deliberations filled with references to divine justice, they loudly recite their motto and go-to passages such as “If God is for us, who can be against us?”[86]

On the other hand, once the PCC started focusing on drug trafficking, the organization also underwent a structural sophistication through a decentralization of command, as previously discussed. This also meant adapting its discourse. Faced with the need to expand nationally and internationally, the group was smart enough to relax its strict baptism rules while also limiting the payment of the monthly membership fees to individuals who were outside jail and financing the criminal activities of newly released members,[87] smoothing their re-entry into the world of crime – a true case of upside down “resocialisation”. As previously mentioned, the PCC’s structural sophistication reached the point of having “departments” with all kinds of purposes, with an emphasis on the “legal department” which is made up of lawyers permanently hired to meet the needs of affiliates and family members, in addition to serving as messengers and, eventually, playing roles in the criminal activities of the group.

Internationalization

As mentioned, many authors and practitioners engaged in fighting the PCC believe that it is currently the largest transnational criminal organisation in Latin America. With an estimated number of over 30,000 baptised members in Brazil alone, Feltrán [88] warns that the number of informal members—former inmates, supporters and collaborators who help and act in coordination with the group on the outskirts of urban centres—is much higher. Operating all over Brazil, there is evidence that it is also present (at various levels) throughout the whole continent, with an emphasis on Paraguay and Bolivia. In addition to being the main concern of most police forces in neighboring countries, informal conversations with police officers from the United States, Mexico, El Salvador, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy show that the expansion of PCC and its virulent ideology in the prisons of other countries is already a matter of growing concern. There is information about foreign prisoners being baptized in the prisons of several countries, including some in Europe,[89] and it is not

rare to find news of baptized foreigners in Brazilian prisons, such as Venezuelans recruited in Northern Brazil. Following a recent visit to Central America, Farah [90] has stated that there is evidence that the PCC has initiated partnerships with groups such as Salvadoran MS-13. Recent Brazilian Federal Police operations confirm that the PCC has trade agreements with the largest European mafias involved in international trafficking to Europe. [91] There are also indications that the criminal network that controls the flow of cocaine through the largest ports in Brazil, especially the Port of Santos, located at the epicentre of the organization's area of influence in the state of São Paulo, is connected to the PCC. This allows the drug exported by the group to reach also Africa and Asia.[92] Finally, there is also reason to believe that the PCC may have established agreements (possibly occasional) with the Lebanese organization Hezbollah, whose global network of contacts would allow the Brazilian group to export to any place on the planet.[93]

The strategic shift to investing in drugs by the PCC quickly led to the conclusion that it was necessary to eliminate intermediaries, especially in Paraguay and Bolivia, so that it could pay less for drugs purchased directly from the producers. In pursuit of establishing hegemony in the wholesale supply of drugs, the PCC's strategy involved controlling strategic points along the border with these two countries and eliminating local drug lords with the use of extreme violence. At the time, the PCC already had members involved in international drug trafficking. Therefore, the presence of members doing business in Paraguay was not new. However, from 2006 onwards,[94] under Marcola's leadership, transactions normally carried out by criminals in their own name, i.e., without representing the organization, began to be replaced by negotiations where the buyer was already ostensibly presenting himself as someone negotiating on behalf of the PCC. This is related to the complex and peculiar way the individual and collective dimensions of the group often get confused. There has always been a fine line separating the individual freedom of members to have their own businesses on the one hand and, on the other hand, the obligation to build up the "family" by using their contacts and networks to do business on behalf of PCC. Contrary to what many reports claim, the PCC never intended to monopolise the drug trade in a country the size of Brazil. Yet, its ambition to create a hegemony of the drugs wholesale would facilitate the regulation of trafficking, with the establishment of rules of (trans-)action, minimum prices and other parameters. Without the territorial logic of domination seen among Rio's groups, the PCC sought to merge a diplomatic search for the implantation of its ideology and rules with coercion and force, making it easier to progressively enter other countries.[95]

Entering Paraguay was crucial. Not only was it one of the two largest marijuana producers in the world alongside Mexico, it was also an important route for cocaine, especially that coming from Bolivian producers,[96] with whom the PCC had negotiated to buy and transport the drug. Christino and Tognolli [97] show how they were granted permission to transport cocaine primarily through Paraguay, even counting on a partnership with the Paraguayan insurgent group *Ejército Popular del Pueblo* (EPP – People's Popular Army in Spanish). In mid-2011, the so-called "Paraguay Project" became public through some of the calls made to the members and a sequence of decisions, which showed that the group would spare no effort to expand internationally. First, the PCC published a new statute in which it expressly stated that the group and its ideas had no territorial boundaries. Simultaneously, the organization began to send key members to negotiate with stakeholders in neighbouring countries, which soon brought desired results, since they were quickly able to acquire arms and drugs for about half the amount of money they had paid before. More importantly, the group embarked on an open offensive to eliminate competition from former drug traffickers at the borders. The same goes for CV—its oldest partner and influencer, which preceded (and inspired) the PCC in the decision to invest in drugs and get closer to producers—initiating a phase of confrontations between the two largest criminal organizations in Brazil.[98]

As explained above, the PCC's entry into neighboring countries occurs both via local penitentiary systems and through the purchase of drugs, which it nowadays negotiates directly with local drug producers.[99] The feedback loop between internal and external dimensions, which was discussed above, repeats itself here. As the group advances on the streets with its illicit transactions and as members get arrested and taken to Paraguayan prisons, the expansion of their ideology and narrative is amplified from within prison walls. Within the prisons, its members also acquire new contacts and channels for weapons and drugs, and this loops back to the

external dimension of the PCC which simultaneously gains strength. Thus, the PCC has quickly managed to be present in all Paraguayan jails, with hundreds of members that include baptized Paraguayans, becoming one of the largest—if not the largest [100]—criminal organization operating in Paraguay, both inside and outside its prisons. Once again within the prison system, the PCC's ideology of unity against what they consider to be injustices, abuses and oppression continues to expand, suggesting that this model can be replicated in any other country, neighboring or not, if it suffers from similar structural problems as Brazil.

Final Remarks

Many of PCC's strategies and tactics undoubtedly fulfil many of the criteria normally used to define terrorism. This confirms the assumption that the Brazilian group, often involuntarily, makes use of a wide range of tools, including those normally associated with terrorists. Given its prison roots, the Brazilian organization is extremely *sui generis* and presents a series of unusual nuances. However, none of the concepts utilized to explain it seems sufficient to fully capture it in all its complexities. Whereas practitioners and researchers have already suggested studying the PCC in the light of the third-generation gang framework,[101] this concept also does not fully capture the multiple facets of the PCC – especially, if we apply the concept of third-generation gangs as it was originally formulated. Indeed, rarely has the group presented high levels of sophistication, internationalisation and politicisation at the *same time*. Thus, the key aim of this article is to recommend ways by which the original three-part framework of analysis of the third-generation gangs concept could be modified in order to make it not only more suitable to analyse the PCC but also allow the concept to be better applied to organizations like the PCC, i.e., those that exhibit a nuanced amalgamation of criminal and terrorist characteristics. This involves including the aspect of ideology into understanding the issue of politicization as well as highlighting the PCC's increasing sophistication which reflects some interesting parallels with innovations adopted by terrorist groups, albeit these crossovers have not been discussed in detail here.

The PCC is living through a period of challenges and uncertainties. As the police seeks to attack its finances and with the communication between external and internal dimensions compromised by the isolation of its leadership in Brazil's federal penitentiaries, the group is now trying to adapt. If history proves anything it is that the recent measure adopted by the state will not eliminate the organization, which is increasingly expanding its horizontal structure towards becoming a flexible criminal network, with its external cells having greater freedom of action. Moreover, the feedback loop between its internal and external dimensions is enhanced by a policy of mass incarceration practised in practically all countries in Latin America. Policies that extend well beyond mere transfers and attempts at isolation urgently need to be considered, given that the PCC seems to have shown the world once more that what happens behind bars hardly ever stays behind bars. How to better handle the prison population – especially when it comes to processes of radicalisation that are terrorism-related, linked to organised crime or is a virulent nexus of both – is one of the most challenging issues for the international community today – and the PCC is arguably one of the best cases to illustrate the full gamut of complexities associated with this challenge.

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Notes

- [1] Schmid, Alex P. (2018) 'Revisiting the Relationship between International Terrorism and Transnational Organised Crime 22 Years Later'. The Hague: ICCT Research paper. (August), p. 2.
- [2] For the purposes of this article, hybrid groups are those that exhibit both characteristics normally attributed to terrorist and criminal organisations.
- [3] Makarenko, Tamara (2004). 'The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism'. *Global Crime*. Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 129–145.
- [4] Phillips, Brian J. (2018). 'Terrorist Tactics by Criminal Organizations: The Mexican Case in Context'. *Perspectives on Terrorism*. Vol. 12, Issue 1.
- [5] Manso, Bruno Paes; Dias, Camila N. (2018). *A Guerra: A Ascensão do PCC e o Mundo do Crime no Brasil*, São Paulo: Todavia.; Biondi, Karina (2018). *Proibido Roubar na Quebrada. Território, Hierarquia e Lei no PCC*, São Paulo: Terceiro Nome; Christino, Marcio; Tognolli, Claudio (2017), *Laços de Sangue. A história secreta do PCC* (3ª ed.), São Paulo: Matrix; Ferreira; Marcos A. (2018), 'Brazilian criminal organizations as transnational violent non-state actors: a case study of the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC)'. *Trends in Organized Crime*. November 2018; Lessing, Benjamin; Willis, Graham D. (2018). 'Legitimacy in criminal governance: managing a drug empire from behind bars'. Comparative Politics Workshop at University of California - Los Angeles (UCLA), Department of Political Science; Denyer Willis, Graham (2015). *The Killing Consensus: police, organized crime, and the regulation of life and death in urban Brazil*. Oakland: University of California Press; Berg, Ryan (2020). 'Breaking out: Brazil's First Capital Command and the emerging prison-based threat'. American Enterprise Institute.
- [6] Psychological warfare is a military strategy that is also used by terrorist groups such as the Islamic State. It consists of striking the opponent without the use of force, through techniques that affect them emotionally, usually instilling fear and reducing their willingness to resist. Violent communication is one of the techniques of psychological warfare, in which a group uses images and audio-visual resources to intimidate opponents.
- [7] Martens, Juan (2019). 'Presencia y Actuación del Primer Comando de la Capital (PCC). Implicancias Políticas y Sociales'. *Revista Jurídica del Ministerio Público*. Edición 10. Diciembre 2019.
- [8] There are different regimes and conditions for serving sentences in Brazil. Even in the most corrupt prisons, where prisoners eventually have access to cell phones, there are times when leaders are temporarily isolated in solitary cells.
- [9] Christino; Tognolli (2017); Manso; Dias (2018).
- [10] FELTRAN, Gabriel. *Irmãos. Uma história do P.C.C.* São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2018.
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] Manso; Dias (2018).
- [13] Manso, Bruno apud Olaya, Angela; Salomon, Josefina (2020). 'PCC and Brazil Government engaged in game of chess'. *Insight Crime*.
- [14] Sullivan John P. (1997) 'Third Generation Turf, Cartels, and Street Gangs: Net Warriors'; Sullivan, John P. (2007). 'Maras Morphing: Revisiting Third-Generation Gangs'. *Global Crime*. Vol. 7, no. 3-4 (Feb).
- [15] This article does not claim that PCC utilize "terrorist tools" with the intention of mimicking terrorists. In spite of having consciously reproduced some guerrilla tactics used by insurgents (and even discussed it over the phone as emerged from intercepted calls), most terrorist strategies used by the organization and their crime-terror aspects should be better interpreted as "unintended consequences".
- [16] Sullivan, John P. (2012). 'A crucible of conflict: Third-Generation Gang Studies Revisited'. *Journal of Gang Research*, Vol. 19, No. 4.
- [17] Phillips (2018).
- [18] Phillips (2018); Campbell, Howard; Hansen, Tobin (2012). 'Extreme Violence and Terrorism in Mexico'. *Small Wars Journal* August 14; Longmire, Sylvia M; Longmire, John IV (2008). 'Redefining Terrorism: Why Mexican Drug Trafficking Is More Than Just Organized Crime', *Journal of Strategic Security* 1, no. 1), pp. 35–51; Williams, Phil (2012), 'The Terrorism Debate Over Mexican Drug Trafficking Violence', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 2, pp. 259–78; Flanigan, Shawn T. (2012) 'Terrorists Next Door? A Comparison of Mexican Drug Cartels and Middle Eastern Terrorist Organizations', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 2, pp. 279–294.
- [19] Many researchers and practitioners, from Brazil and abroad, who have been investigating the group believe that it is the largest

and most dangerous criminal organization within South America. See: Manso; Dias, (2018) or Sampó, Carolina apud Jose Cueto (2020). Como el Crimen Organizado se apoderó de las rutas más importantes del Narcotráfico en Sudamérica. *BBC News*. 3 March.

[20] Longmire (2008); Howard; Hansen (2012).

[21] Flanigan (2012); Phillips (2018).

[22] Flanigan (2012); Phil Williams (2012). 'The Terrorism Debate Over Mexican Drug Trafficking Violence'. *Terrorism and Political Violence*. Mar. 2012.

[23] Schmid, (2004).

[24] Phillips (2018).

[25] Schmid, Alex P. & Jongman, Albert. *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2005). Actually, as explained by Phillips (2018), the exact terms the referenced authors use are "violence, force," "political," and "fear, terror emphasized."

[26] Phillips (2018).

[27] Ibid.

[28] On criminal insurgency, see: Sullivan, John P. Sullivan; Robert J. Bunker (2012). *Mexico's Criminal Insurgency*. Bloomington, Universe Inc.; Grillo, Ioan. *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency*, New York: Bloomsbury Press.

[29] Robert J. Bunker; John P. Sullivan (2015). 'Criminal Insurgents in Mexico and Latin America'. Bloomington: Universe Inc.; Christian Azevedo (2018). 'Criminal Insurgency in Brazil'. *Small Wars Journal*. Jan. 2018.

[30] Phil Williams (2012).

[31] One of the few exceptions is the governor of Rio de Janeiro, Wilson Witzel, who has been publicly referring to narco-trafficking groups as 'narcoterrorists'. See Ricardo Senra (2019). *Nos EUA, Witzel se descola de Bolsonaro e diz querer ser presidente*. *BBC*. April 2019.

[32] Debates on terrorism or related activities such as terrorism financing have been controversial in Brazil for quite some time, becoming a kind of taboo. Regardless of the abundant evidence to the contrary, there is still a tendency to deny the existence of activities linked to the "terrorism" in the country. Some even argue that having an anti-terrorism law is unnecessary and harmful. In the short debate that preceded the passing of the law, there were allegations that the small Muslim community in Brazil would be stigmatised, or that the introduction of such a law would have a negative impact on tourism and Brazil's international reputation. Some contended that the law would signal an unrestricted alignment with the US and, consequently, attract transnational terrorism towards Brazil; others maintained that the law was unnecessary due to the country's historical neutrality. It is also important to highlight that several of the leftist leaders forming the government's base in Congress at the time, including then-President Dilma Rousseff, were part of the political and armed opposition to the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1989. Given that many of the current leftist leaders of the country were previously incarcerated and labelled "terrorists" and exiled from Brazil during those 25 years, it was understandable that many members of Congress would resist the creation of an anti-terrorist law. See Lasmar, Jorge M. 'When the Shoe doesn't fit. Brazilian approaches to terrorism and counterterrorism in the post-9/11 era'. In: Michael J. Boyle. *Non-Western Responses to Terrorism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019.

[33] Lasmar (2019).

[34] Brasil. Lei 13.260/2016. Lei de terrorismo. Mar. 2016.

[35] See Alex Schmid (2004). 'Terrorism - The Definitional Problem'. *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*. Vol. 36 Issue 2; Leonard Weinberg; Ami Pedahzur; Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler (2004). The Challenges of Conceptualizing Terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16:4, pp. 777-794.

[36] The Federal Penitentiary System was created in 2006 for prisoners considered most dangerous by the federal states. Contrary to what was the practice until then in the penitentiary systems of each state, in the federal system the prisoner loses physical contact with family members and lawyers, only getting to speak to them through a glass window with the conversation being recorded.

[37] See Asmann, Parker (2019). 'Brazil Clampdown on Gang-Controlled Prisons Unlikely to Succeed'. *Insight Crime*. Feb; URL: <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/latest-brazil-prison-crackdown-lacks-long-term-focus/>.

[38] Manso; Dias (2018); Feltrán (2018).

[39] Ibid; Willis (2015).

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid; Christino; Tognolli (2017).

[43] Created by the author, based on a literature review and informal conversations with Brazilian Federal Police officers who have been investigating PCC in São Paulo and at the borders with Bolivia and Paraguay. However, dates and periods should not be seen as rigid and static.

[44] Manso; Dias (2018); Christino; Tognolli (2017). In the first phase, PCC had as main funding the monthly fees paid by members and income from bank robberies.

[45] Some prison intelligence and Federal Police officers who have been dealing with PCC believe that there is some exaggeration in this supposed influence. They argue that, in terms of *modus operandi*, before Norambuena, there were already plans of using car bombs and assassinations coming from more radical founders such as César Augusto “Geleirão”. This is also discussed by authors such as Christino and Tognolli (2017). Moreover, there are many attacks with no evidence of a top-down command. In addition, several PCC members in the same prison did not like the Chilean insurgent. In this sense, Marcola more likely may have taken strategic advantage of his legend to enhance his own image as an articulate, revolutionary leader. However, there is a consensus that Norambuena exerted some influence when it came to changes in the PCC’s structure. See also note [50].

[46] Christino; Tognolli (2017).

[47] Manso; Dias (2018); Christino; Tognolli (2017).

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid. It is important to highlight that this is a controversial interpretation, supported by a few police officers, prosecutors and journalists who investigated the group. However, this interpretation is viewed as simplistic by field researchers who tend to downplay the exclusive importance of personal roles and decisions in bringing about these changes. In this author’s opinion, it is indeed reasonable to believe that, even under a different leadership, instead of attributing all changes only to the personal decisions of Marcola, the transformation can be better explained by a combination of internal and external factors. Decentralisation often occurs in a less voluntary and more natural manner, a reflection of an organisation’s expansion, combined with external factors. The fight against criminal and terrorist organisations frequently disrupts hierarchical structures, forcing a more horizontal dispersion of leadership functions and leading to the creation of local and regional networks – as, for instance, happened to Al Qaeda after 9/11. Moreover, network researchers, for example, point out that virtual or confined environments (such as prisons) naturally induce groups to create decentralised criminal networks. See, for example: Schneider, Éder; Gonçalves, Sebastián; Iglesias, José Roberto; Cunha, Bruno R (2019). *Dynamic Networks Model Mediated by Confinement*. Applied Network Science. June.

[51] Manso; Dias (2018).

[52] Authors and practitioners differ when it comes to PCC’s entry as a “legal entity” abroad. While Paes and Camila appear to understand that it started around 2007, Christino and Tognolli believe it started around 2003. However, most Brazilian federal police officers in the Narcotics Division with whom this author spoke informally tend to agree with Abreu’s version, who points to 2006 as the moment when they noticed a change. See: De Abreu, Allan (2017). *Cocaína: A Rota Caipira. O Narcotráfico no Principal Corredor de Drogas do Brasil*. Rio De Janeiro: Editora Record.

[53] Manso; Dias (2018); Feltrán (2018).

[54] Feltrán (2018).

[55] Manso; Dias (2018).

[56] Until recently, it was believed that the PCC was involved only in logistics with regards to the transport of cocaine from producing countries to ports, whereas European mafias were in charge of facilitating the entry of the drugs at European ports. However, some Brazilian Federal police officers involved in investigations over the past two years now believe that a few PCC cells already have the capacity and the necessary contacts to place cocaine on European soil on their own.

[57] Williams (2014); Flanigan (2012).

[58] Feltrán (2018); Manso; Nunes (2018).

[59] Brazil has the world’s third-largest prison population with more than 700,000 people. Feltrán (2017); Manso; Nunes (2018).

[60] Biondi (2018); Feltrán (2018). Willis (2015).

[61] Willis (2015); Feltrán (2017); Manso; Nunes (2018). However, according to Brazilian prison intelligence, this was not always observed in other regions of the country, which are culturally very different from the central and southern parts of Brazil. In the

North and in the Northeast regions, the PCC is often seen as an outsider group wanting to impose its will over locals.

[62] Ibid.

[63] How to identify leaders and other individuals with recruiting power is difficult from the outside, regardless of whether one looks at organised crime or terrorist organizations.

[64] Manso; Dias (2018); Christino; Tognolli (2017); Lessing; Willis (2018); Ferreira (2018).

[65] Ibid; Feltrán (2018).

[66] Feltrán (2018).

[67] This decentralization and the brotherhood discourse lead a few fieldwork researchers such as Feltrán (2018) to interpret that there is no well-established leadership within the PCC. In their view, PCC functions more as a “crime masonry”, a criminal network formed for mutual aid, without top-down command and control. This perspective is not shared by the majority of practitioners with whom this author has had informal conversations. It also does not seem to be shared by other researchers, since there were circumstances already revealed by investigations in which there were undoubtedly commands originating from the imprisoned leadership. In this author’s opinion, there is some confusion between an absence of command and the already mentioned peculiar top-down flow of control which characterizes the PCC.

[68] Manso; Dias (2018).

[69] Feltrán (2017).

[70] Unclassified reports show clear examples of the utilisation of NGOs and lawyers as instruments of political pressure against journalists and the government. Manso; Dias (2018); Christino; Tognolli (2017). However, this is not to say that most Brazilian NGOs defending human rights in prisons are somehow involved with PCC.

[71] Sullivan John P. ‘Third Generation Turf, Cartels, and Street Gangs: Net Warriors’. *Transnational Organized Crime*. Vol. 3, No. 3; Sullivan, John P. (2007). ‘Maras Morphing: Revisiting Third-Generation Gangs’. *Global Crime*. Feb. 1997.

[72] Manso; Dias (2018); Christino; Tognolli (2017).

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Manso; Dias (2018); Christino; Tognolli (2017).

[76] To cite an example of sophisticated planning and attacks, occasionally with some political connotation, interrupted by preventive police action and prison intelligence: In 2018, there were plans to assassinate public agents and launch car-bomb attacks in public buildings in Brasília, Brazil’s federal Capital, during a period of presidential elections — one of the buildings was the headquarters for the National Penitentiary Department (DEPEN). Among the reasons for the actions figured the isolated leaderships’ dissatisfaction with restrictions imposed on them in federal prisons, such as the recording of their conversations with family members and lawyers. The intercepted conversations included mentions of guerrilla tactics used in the past by Colombian group FARC. See: Veja (2018). Polícia Federal descobre planos de atentados do PCC em Brasília. October. URL: <https://vejasp.abril.com.br/cidades/policia-federal-descobre-planos-de-atentados-do-pcc-em-brasilia>.

[77] Another significant example had to do with a plan to liberate the organization’s leader, Marcola, estimated by PCC to cost more than 20 million dollars. He was held in a prison, along with other important members, in a city of São Paulo state, with a population of approximately 250,000 inhabitants. The cinematographic plan included the use of hired mercenaries (ex-FARC members and Nigerian militia), two helicopters disguised as police aircrafts for the leadership to escape, a specially armoured truck prepared to break down a prison wall, bypassing internal security and the use of large quantities of .50 anti-aircraft machine guns positioned to close the city’s airport and prevent police from leaving their bases and operate its own helicopters. See URL: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2018/11/plano-de-resgate-de-numero-1-do-pcc-preve-mercenarios-e-helicopteros-em-sp.shtml>

[78] See for example, Manso; Dias (2018).

[79] Bruce Hoffman (2006), *Inside Terrorism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press).

[80] Manso; Dias (2018); Christino; Tognolli (2017); Feltrán (2017).

[81] See also how Mexican cartels take advantage of countercultural aspects of criminal life and use social media and technology in its favor: Sullivan, John P. (2012). ‘Criminal Insurgency: Narcocultura, Social Banditry, and Information Operations’, *Small Wars Journal*. December.

[82] Manso; Dias (2018); Feltrán (2017).

[83] Some reports describe the drinking of *cachaça* mixed with blood drops from the freshmen.

[84] Manso; Dias (2018), p. 133 (translated from Portuguese)

[85] According to some Prison System Intelligence officers, in theory only two circumstances would allow “desertion”. One is a total commitment to a new “religious life”. The other would be to accomplish one last mission, often related to assassinations of state officials such as police officers or prosecutors.

[86] See URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8smAQYqDF7s&feature=youtu.be>.

[87] Feltrán (2018).

[88] Ibid. It is important to note that it is hard to provide precise numbers of PCC’s members and supporters. Ferreira (2018) argues that, according to wiretapping conducted by Brazilian prosecutors, the PCC has ‘baptized’ hundreds of thousands of individuals during its history in Brazil, of which around 20,000 are operatives. Most researchers and media usually estimate a number of between 20.000 and 30.000 operatives.

[89] See: Odilla, Fernanda (2018). ‘PCC ‘batiza’ estrangeiros no grupo de olho na expansão do tráfico de drogas na Europa’. BBC. Aug. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-44857777>; Pinheiro, Mirele (2020). ‘Investigação aponta que PCC faz batismo na Espanha, Itália e EUA’. Metrôpoles. Jan.; URL: <https://www.metropoles.com/distrito-federal/investigacao-aponta-que-pcc-faz-batismo-na-espanha-italia-e-eua>.

[90] Farah, Douglas apud Pinto, Paulo (2018). ‘Facção brasileira na América Central: PCC expande atividades’. Correio Braziliense. April; URL: https://www.correiobraziliense.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2018/04/21/interna_politica,675233/pcc-expande-atividades-para-a-america-central.shtml.

[91] See for instance: Neves, Yuri; Bentacur, Monica. PCC-‘Ndrangheta, the International Criminal Alliance Flooding Europe with Cocaine. Insight Crime. Aug; URL: <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/pcc-ndrangheta-criminal-alliance-flooding-europe-cocaine/>.

[92] Lasusa, Mike (2016). ‘Brazil Is Top Cocaine Transshipment Country for Europe, Africa, Asia’. Insight Crime; URL: <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/brazil-is-top-cocaine-transshipment-country-for-europe-africa-asia/>.

[93] This partnership supposedly started with specific symbiotic relations, in which the PCC would guarantee the safety of its members imprisoned in Brazil in exchange for the expansion of contacts and channels for the purchase of arms and the flow of drugs abroad. These connections are currently transforming into more stable and collaborative relationships. See Gurney, Kyra (2014). ‘Police Documents Reveal ‘Hezbollah Ties’ to Brazil’s PCC’. Insight Crime. Nov.; URL: <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/police-documents-hezbollah-ties-brazil-pcc/>.

[94] Although authors differ on the exact moment in which the “party” or “family” took over business, based on conversations with police officers who investigate narcotraffickers in Brazil, it is safe to say that these changes started to progressively occur sometime between the years 2005 and 2007, as also argued by De Abreu (2017).

[95] Manso; Dias, (2018); Feltrán (2018).

[96] Martens, Juan (2019).

[97] Christino; Tognolli (2017).

[98] Ibid; Manso; Dias, (2018).

[99] Martens, Juan (2019).

[100] Ibid.

[101] See Sullivan, John (2007); Coutinho, Leonardo (2019). ‘The Evolution of the Most Lethal Criminal Organization in Brazil’, Prism. Vol. 8, No. 1; Carrijo, Alfredo. Countering the PCC: A New Federal Government Approach. Master’s Thesis, National Defense University’s College of International Security Affairs, 2018.