

New Technologies and Racism in Ostensive Policing in São Paulo

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Em **As novas tecnologias e o racismo no policiamento ostensivo em São Paulo**, discute-se os impactos das novas tecnologias no policiamento ostensivo, concentrando-se nas questões raciais. A Polícia Militar paulista foi estudada por meio de uma metodologia variada que possibilitou analisar os resultados do policiamento sobre os grupos de cor/raça e as percepções dos policiais sobre o racismo institucional. A brutalidade policial, as novas tecnologias e o racismo estão associados à manutenção de práticas racializadas de seleção de suspeitos, projetando significado em corporalidades negras e marcas de identidade. As novas tecnologias reforçaram essa seleção de perfil e falharam em contribuir para o controle da ação policial.

Palavras-chave: policiamento ostensivo, filtragem racial, tecnologia, segurança pública, controle do crime

This article discusses the impact of new technologies on ostensive policing, with a focus on racial issues. The São Paulo military police is studied using a varied methodology, that made it possible to analyze the results of policing on the groups of color/race and police officers' perceptions of institutional racism. Police brutality, new technologies and racism are associated with the maintenance of racialized practices for identifying suspects, projecting meaning onto some black corporalities and identity marks. New technologies have reinforced this kind of profiling and have failed to contribute to the control of police action.

Keywords: ostensive policing, racial profiling, technology, public security, crime control

Introduction

This article analyses the incorporation of new technologies in ostensive policing and their implications in relation to racial profiling in the practices of the São Paulo State Military Police (PMESP). Its main objective is to examine the relationship between the use of technological tools—like electronic devices, applications, and software—in the everyday work of São Paulo military police officers, the use of force, and institutional racism.

Currently the PMESP has the largest contingent in the country with 80.000 officers to perform ostensive policing, a function attributed to the military police under the Brazilian Constitution. In terms of public security policy, the military police have come to play a leading role in crime control (SINHORETTO e LIMA, 2015), conditioning the other institutions, like Civil Police, penitentiary system and courts. This protagonism is operational since the military police selects the types of crimes and criminals to occupy the work of the Civil Police, criminal justice and the prisons; and it is also political given the expanding interface between police careers and conventional politics.

Since Brazil's return to democracy, the state government has considered the role of the PMESP central to crime control. It is constantly mentioned in electoral propaganda and in the discourses of government leaders, who over the last two decades have been part of the centre-right. Governors and mayors exploit the fear of crime and promise implacable repression as an important element of their campaigns for executive and legislative posts (CALDEIRA, 2000). Although the discourse of being tough on crime is not exclusive to local electoral campaigns—it's an international phenomenon (SIMON, 2007; GARLAND, 1995)—, the central role of the military police, ostensive policing and incarceration for public security policy has been the hallmark of São Paulo's policy, to the detriment of violent crimes investigation, offenses prevention, and alternative punishments. This trend, referred to as the militarization of public security,¹ reveals the close relationship between conservative policy and the role attributed to policing in São Paulo (MACEDO, 2015; 2022). The use of information and communication technologies has been widely used in the PMESP as part of the reinforcement of a militarized control of crime. This article aims to examine its effect on policing.

Discussing the experience in the United States, Bittner (1990) observed that police institutions are indispensable to democracies so long as they are not monopolized by any of the three spheres of government. More specifically, they should be governed through a power-sharing institutional structure with police salaries paid by the Executive, but the purpose and supervision of the police forces aligned with the Judiciary, which happens in various countries. The first police reforms aimed to remove policing from direct government control, clientelism and oscillations in party orientation. Within the framework of a theory of policing in democratic society, the concept of a police mandate (MUNIZ e PROENÇA JR., 2014) seeks to reflect on the limitations to police power created by governments and civil society over time, most of them never implemented in Brazil. Rather than a socially agreed doctrine on the use of force, Brazilian police services received a *blank cheque*.

The case of the PMESP is far from the doctrine of a division of responsibilities in the control of the police and much closer to this blank cheque. Dependent on the budget and finalities allocated by the state Executive but without being submitted to any effective institutional controls, the PMESP ends up bound to political party preferences. The channels for social participation in the definition of security policies or in the external supervision and control of the policies are extremely limited (BUENO, 2014), which leads to a routine abuse of power with one of the highest rates of police killings in the world.

The constitutional function of external control of police activity is assigned to the Public Prosecutor's Office, whose institutional policy, however, has not aimed to put this control into effect. On one hand, there is the history of relations between the Public Prosecutor's Office and the Executive (BONELLI, 2002; SILVESTRE, 2018) with various occupants of the Public Security Bureau coming from the institution and, on the other, the weak control over police activity exercised by public

prosecutors. Even the Civil Police, responsible for investigating crimes against life committed by military police officers, lacks adequate conditions to pursue this aim (MACEDO, 2015; BUENO, 2014).

The complexity of the context in which the PMESP is embedded shows that, even though it is not similar to the previous police force linked to the military dictatorship (FERNANDES, 1974), it retains traces and practices that were constituted during the authoritarian period. The persistence of a military organizational model is one important element to consider. However, the abuse of power and persistence of an extremely high level of lethality are the main factors separating the military police from democratic society (PINHEIRO, 1991), which demands a legitimate and legal monopoly on physical force (NEME, 1999; KANT DE LIMA, 1995; ADORNO, 2002).

Over the last 30 years, the PMESP has received the highest amount of funding of any police institution in Brazil, especially to implement ostensive policing, having practically erased other policing models.² The investments have enabled the military police to increase its personnel, modernize its vehicle fleet, weapons, and personal protection equipment, and obtain technologies with diverse functionalities. While these resources may appear small compared to the Global North countries, they have provoked substantial changes in the field of public security in São Paulo. On one hand, the unequal distribution of investment highlights the disparity between the various public security institutions, specifically in detriment to the Civil Police (SILVESTRE, 2018). On the other, new forms of planning have been created to cope with rising crime and new operational procedures have been introduced (MACEDO, 2022). It is this aspect that characterizes the operational protagonism of the military police in selecting the crimes and targets to be repressed, which in turn has an impact on the overall flow of the criminal justice and prison system.

Although the Brazilian Constitution includes prevention among the military police's responsibilities, the research identified the abandonment of violence prevention strategies (both criminal and police violence) and a focus on ostensive actions, heavily weighted towards the stop-and-search of individuals and vehicles, as well as *flagrante delicto*, accompanying an international trend that took the policy of Rudolf Giuliani, former mayor of New York, as a showcase. According to the international bibliography, this approach uses racial profiling as a method and has driven a rise in the imprisonment of young black men, especially in poorer areas (ALEXANDER, 2012; BYFIELD, 2019; FORMAN JR., 2017).

Despite assuming a leading political and operational role, this policing model has not been well evaluated in terms of reducing fear and interpersonal violence. São Paulo's public security managers perceive their work does not produce the expected results in terms of reducing property and drug-related crimes. They express their frustration describing it as *enxugar gelo*, which literally means "drying ice," and acknowledge the disconnection between public policies and the inefficiency of the methods employed (SILVESTRE, 2018; SINHORETTO *et al.*, 2021).

Nonetheless, the worst feature of ostensive policing in São Paulo is associated with the deaths caused by police actions. Throughout the studied period (between 2014 and 2019), 4.086 people were killed during police operations. According to the data collected, these deaths were concentrated in the large metropolitan areas of São Paulo state, especially on the metropolitan regions. The police typically targeted black, young, and male people. These stats led us to correlate the lead role played by ostensive policing with both police killings and racial issues, underlying themes that were investigated through the study of everyday police work using information tools and communication technologies.

Methodology

The research focused on how the practices typical of ostensive policing are related to racial inequality in public security and crime control, as part of a network research project (SINHORETTO *et al.*, 2021).³ The collected data reveals the importance of new technologies in redefining the perceptions of police officers in relation to policing and the producing inequalities.

In São Paulo state, quantitative data was collected on deaths resulting from police action (from 2014 to 2019) and in *flagrante delicto* (from 2008 to 2018). This data was provided by the Analysis and Planning Coordination Office of the São Paulo State Public Security Bureau (CAP/SSP-SP), requested under freedom of information legislation. The qualitative data was obtained from field observation and interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019 with police officers concerning their practices.

The qualitative and quantitative data refer to the police report databases. The database on arrests contained 1.048.576 occurrences, which is the size limit of an Excel spreadsheet. This suggests that the researchers did not have access to the total cases but only to a non-random sample. The data on police killings provided by the SSP relate to a period after 2014, when there was a change in the categories for recording incidents involving death caused by police actions. Another consideration is that the data on police killings contains duplicate cases and others that do not fall within the scope of the research. After processing, we succeeded in obtaining information on 4.086 incidents within a time frame from 2014 to 2019.

Access to historical records of police incidents was denied due to the alleged need to maintain the anonymity of the people involved. This refusal hindered the work of consolidating the database and excluded from our analysis other relevant indicators contained in the versions of the facts and contexts. In terms of arrests, for example, it was not possible to estimate the average monetary sums involved in alleged property crimes or the amount of drugs that justified the

arrests. As for data regarding killings, the absence of the historical record made it unfeasible to analyse the justification for the maximum use of force by the public agents or determine which police units are the most lethal.

Regarding the qualitative research, we adhered to the rituals demanded by the institution: we request from the Public Security Bureau authorization for the research. After the acceptance of our request, we completed the bureaucratic process and handled the setbacks, which allowed us to conduct interviews with commissioned and non-commissioned officers selected by the institution itself. The interviews were carried out at their offices or training centres. We also spoke to police officers who were our acquaintances, and they only accepted the invitation after receiving permission from the institution. A total of 25 interviews were conducted, concerning all ranks and posts, men and women, black and white officers, with more than two years' service in positions directly linked to end-point activities. Consequently, the range of the interviews enabled access to the executors, supervisors, planners, and administrators of ostensive policing.

The interviews also allowed us to cover distinct territories within São Paulo city, classified by the officers themselves as *batalhão nobre*, “prime area battalion,” *batalhão de periferia*, “suburban battalion,” rural town battalions, commissioned and non-commissioned officers schools, and administrative directorates. It is worth emphasizing that all the interviewees had some experience with street patrols, but their diverse professional background allowed us to map another set of activities that support the implementation of ostensive policing, as well as comprehend the difference and similarities postulated by them.

Ostensive policing and race relations in São Paulo

Ostensive policing concentrates on property crimes and drug trafficking, which generally relate to small monetary sums and low-income offenders. Conversely, white-collar crimes and offences by organized crime, associated with people from higher social classes, require investigation and are not among the objectives of ostensive policing. Equally, violence against women and the LGBTQIA+ population, offences involving racism, and even murders, are not priorities in this model of policing. The outcome is that the military police spends most of its resources on patrolling stigmatized areas and on crimes relating to the improper circulation of small amounts of money, concentrating on socially underprivileged individuals who correspond to the imagined potential criminal—in the native language, the suspect type.

Incriminating procedures are constituted at diverse levels and involve an array of selective mechanisms (BECKER, 2008). The portion of crimes effectively controlled on the streets are those

attributed to the group identified as delinquent. By keeping constant surveillance on this potentially incriminated population, the police ends up encountering the acts described in the criminal types. Moreover, when they fail to find evidence that incriminates the suspects, they can still frame the responses to their stop-and-search procedures as crimes of resisting arrest and contempt of the law. Thus, incrimination is the product of social constructions resulting from procedures of choice and selection whose outcome produces the discrimination of social types. This leads them to be further monitored and punished—in contrast to social groups who, *a priori*, are not taken to be dangerous—, described by Misse (2006) as incriminatory processes resulting in criminal subjection.

International studies (BITTNER, 1990; MONJARDET, 2010; REINER, 2010; GOLDSTEIN, 1977) have shown that inequalities in treatment have always been part of policing, even in societies perceived as democratic. Proposed reforms have not been sufficient to turn the police into an institution fully guided by equal treatment and humanitarian standards. This is the case of the United States where diverse generations of the black movement have denounced police abuses in relation to the black population.

As a counterpoint to the growing demand for more punishment and policing to tackle the rising of crime and social inequality, during a period of decline in social welfare, a series of sociological studies began to focus on professional work in the attempt to demystify the belief that the police can resolve all public security problems. These studies sought to provide evidence for the construction of public policies that reform police institutions in line with the premises of democratic society. Attempting to define the bases of policing within a democratic framework, sociologists focused on the study of policing in run-down areas. The relationship between policing and the popular classes, the homeless population and drug users tended to dominate these discussions.

The topic became so sensitive that the professional police forces developed protocols for stop-and-search operations over the years in attempt to respond to criticisms. Stopping people is one of the most problematic issues in the relationship between police and society, meaning that these protocols are both an outcome of the professionalization of the police and the result of social pressures for the forces to become less violent and less discriminatory (BITTNER, 1990; COSTA, 2004). The social requirement of stop-and-search protocols is a necessary counterpart to the discretionary nature of police action: since police officers possess considerable power to approach suspects, this power must be counterbalanced by action protocols. In democratic societies, the protocols are the result of political processes of constructing the police mandate, while in Brazil the topic is shrouded in vagueness, ensuring an absence of any objective limits to police action (MUNIZ e PROENÇA JR., 2014; COSTA, 2004).

Comparing Brazil to the United States, we identify many similarities and differences. Reports of police abuse are constant, including lethal violence against black people. The data gathered in São

Paulo State show that black people are 2.8 times more likely to be victims of police violence than non-black people; black people are also 2.4 times more likely to be arrested at than non-black people. Focusing solely on the Greater São Paulo region, the number of black people killed because of police actions is 3 to 7 times higher than for the non-black population, depending on the year and district concerned. Because of these factors, the São Paulo Military Police is considered one of the most violent police forces in the world. Death as a result of police action is more frequent among some units, such as ROTA (Tobias Aguiar Ostensive Patrols) and the Tactical Force.

Over recent decades, the PMESP has sought to invest in and improve its ostensive policing model, strongly inspired by solutions imported from the Global North (PERON e ALVAREZ, 2019), which is considered technical and professional. Events like the Favela Naval⁴ had a huge repercussion, leading to the demand of reforms that ranged from the model used for police officer selection to the development of protocols for implementing and controlling police activity (SCHLITTLER, 2020). The actions of social movements put pressure on the state governor and mayors while the public trust in the PMESP fell.

Technological advances were incorporated into day-to-day work, allowing greater control over police activity. An example is the monitoring of police vehicles via global positioning system (GPS), which limits the circulation of officers within a particular area. According to officers themselves, planning became smarter. They can use modern crime data processing and georeferencing systems, which allow personnel to be sent to areas where more incidents occur. Furthermore, the incorporation of tablet computers in vehicles, along with the use of smartphones, allows faster interactions and information sharing. More recently, police body cams have been implemented.

However, it could be observed that the investment in technology privileged the model of repressive and proactive policing in detriment to community and preventive policing. The adopted innovations proved insignificant in terms of reducing institutional racism—actually, they appear to have reinforced pre-existing abusive practices. Technology has not served to revise general processes but to systemize what was already being done by the military police; in other words, it has automated what was done before.

The interviews with military police officers revealed that racism is an uncomfortable issue for the PMESP. Both commissioned and non-commissioned officers showed unease when discussing it. According to them, the police isn't generally racist. However, they acknowledge structural racism as a feature of Brazilian society, a legacy of slavery and the socioeconomic inequalities that stereotypes the black population as poor, with low levels of schooling and reduced access to economic and cultural goods.

Most police consider racism to be a driving factor in black people turning to illicit livelihood due to the historical inequality to which they have been subjected. The theory of a criminogenic

society is more accepted by the police officers we interviewed than the racist theories linked to the degeneration or inferior biological inheritance. None of our interlocutors cited the racist epistemology of the nineteenth century in the presence of the researchers⁵. Instead, they referenced the myth of racial democracy to argue that, given adequate conditions and incentives, the black population would rise socially in line with their personal efforts. The military police was referred to as an exemplary institution that recruited and promoted black professionals, enabling them to rise in their career through study and merit.

For this reason, apart from a few black police officers who expounded on their awareness of institutional racism, most of the interviewees claimed that the police force is a space conducive to professional progress for black people, in both material and symbolic terms, especially if compared to private labour market. Similar conclusions were found by Sansone (2002).

The view of the military police as a racially democratic institution fails to acknowledge a central activity of ostensive policing: the stopping and searching of individuals. All the operational plans, analyses of indicators, mapping of hotspots (i.e., mapping of areas with high concentrations of criminal occurrences) and dispatch of patrol vehicles only becomes effective when the vehicle pulls up and the police officers get out and decide who are the suspects. There is no detailed regulation for stop-and-search procedures, only a mention in the Criminal Procedure Code that it should occur as an exceptional activity in cases of “reasonable suspicion”. Hence, the entire legality of police stop-and-search is based on the notion of suspect, which is vague.

Additionally, in response to intellectual critiques of positivist criminology and to the need to adapt police practices to the constitutional requirements of equal and non-discriminatory treatment, officers are taught that “a suspect person does not exist, only a suspect attitude”—a phrase constantly repeated by the interviewed people. The concept of a suspect attitude is consistent with the criminology that informs ostensive policing, which is based on criminal analyses and the spatialization of priorities: the idea that policing is effective when it acts on situational factors, reducing the opportunities to commit crime.

However, what police officers call *tirocínio* (the knowledge of the streets)⁶ is a capacity to quickly and accurately discern and evaluate people, situations and events, tends to merge situational factors with elements of positivist criminology that attribute criminal behaviour to atavistic characteristics of the individual, recognizable by distinct bodily traits. Thus, physical features, ways of looking, bodily reactions, dress preferences and even the person’s way of walking are all indicators—according to the testimonies collected by the research team over the years—of a suspect attitude embodied by those under surveillance, especially in hotspots.

“Just by looking, we know”, police officers say. However, theory learnt in the classroom is repeated in the interviews, police officers explain this kind of suspect attitude as something

embodied by the individuals targeted by police surveillance. In other words, a suspect could be recognized by his or her corporality to the trained eye of the police. Contrary to the legal state of innocent until proven guilty, what the police officers discern in the corporality of those whom they see as suspects is a deteriorated moral state. Police stop-and-search in this case serves as proof of suspicion, which is why it is seen as the main instrument of ostensive policing.

The social communication sector of the PMESP takes pride in the more than two million stop-and-searches made per year. The police organic intellectuals systematically intervene in discussions on institutional racism to assert that mass stop-and-searches are indispensable to public security. However, the *tirocínio* targets this stop-and search strategy at black corporalities.

After being denied access to the databases on stop-and-search incidents, the researchers tried to study this situation through indicators of arrests. In 2017, for example, 4.8 blacks were arrested for every 100.000 black people in São Paulo state, while the figure for the non-black population was 2.2 per 100.000. Narrowing the focus to the municipality of São Paulo, the proportion of black people arrested was 8.7 per 100.000, compared to 3.5 for the non-black population. These figures confirm that the suspect attitude is identified in black corporalities in a much higher proportion than in white bodies.

As far as the police officers are concerned, these rates are due to the fact black people commit more crimes, since they are more vulnerable to poverty and worse living conditions. However, another factor deserves highlighting: the criminal sample mapped by police knowhow is subjected to the definition of policing priorities. If more black people are stopped and searched in each area, this feature of police discretion becomes incorporated as real-world data and criminological maps end up recording what was prioritized by public security agents. If more stop-and-searches are made in a popular district, the area will emerge as a hotspot on city maps. In those considered prime areas, meanwhile, the less frequent use of stop-and-search will translate into a statistical perception of tranquillity.

Police selectivity has been explored in studies on crime and criminals in Brazil, such as Coelho's (1978), who studied the data from Rio de Janeiro for the 1960s and 70s. The findings show that the profiling mechanism led to the biased and stereotyped statistics published by the police, guided by a cultural definition of what constitutes crime, leading officers to concentrate on the marginal population, which for Coelho meant a class-based discrimination.

As well as the effects of visibility and invisibility produced by the active police search for suspects, there are the priorities of criminal types defined by the policing program. Property offences and drug-related crimes are emphasized in the discourse of police officers as priority targets. Black people are arrested in *flagrante delicto* for these crimes, while arrests under the Maria da Penha Law and for murder indicate most white defendants. However, as these crimes are not defined as a priority, the results of police work show a much smaller proportion of incriminated white people.

Similar results have already produced reactions to stop-and-search policing. In the case of the New York Police Department, a court order issued after a public civil lawsuit banned “stop and frisk” in 2014 since its practice involved racial discrimination. The order was later overturned, but it instigated public debate. Meanwhile, in Canada, in 2018, the Ottawa police implemented a 35% global reduction in stop-and-search as part of its aim of reducing the disproportion between the racial groups stopped by the police. The effect was driven by the requirement to justify in detail the motive for individual searches. This led officers to be more judicious in their actions and, thus, avoid considering the black or Arab youth as suspicious simply because of their appearance. Even so, the Ottawa police are still investing in their anti-racial profiling program since they remain far from their target of eliminating differences in treatment.

North American police forces combined the different frameworks of knowledge. Policing models based on proximity and on improving relations with policed communities were developed (BAYLEY, 1990), while reforms were implemented based on actuarial models, ideas of productivity and a reduction in crime indicators by area (SIMON, 2007; HARCOURT, 2008).

Thereafter, the effects of mass incarceration began to be felt by the black communities of the United States. Urban riots in response to episodes of police brutality against black people accused of crime became frequent. Black politicians and intellectuals highlighted the costs of the new model of crime control on racial inequalities. As a result, institutional racism in policing has become a central issue in public debate and in the Social Sciences.

In France, Didier Fassin (2015) points to the growth in the military rhetoric employed by the French state and by police officers who act in the suburbs where the “social question is transformed into a martial question, and the policy for the suburbs becomes a war policy” (p. 71). The routine police stop-and-searches of Arab youths in the outskirts are practically the only situations in which the police and this population meet, frequently in encounters marked by abuses and violence. According to the author, stop-and-search-based policing serves to perpetuate the existing unequal social order according to which policing areas considered problematic is a form of “maintaining dominant social control in the *banlieues*” (FASSIN, 2015, p. 182).

Previous research in Brazil has shown that the decision making of police agents is influenced by skin colour and other racial characteristics that lead them to suspect a person’s attitude and stop them (SCHLITTLER, 2020 BARROS, 2008; JESUS, 2014; SILVA, 2009). In the public debate there are frequent social accusations of racial profiling in police action and institutional racism in policing. The argument of these critical discourses is that the main victims of fatal violent crimes, including those practiced by the police, are young black men. For this reason, they also refer the growing call for harsher punishments, more imprisonment and greater police repression of being hygienist and discriminatory demands that seek to prohibit and control black bodies.

The studies that confirmed this institutional selectivity of policing successfully demonstrated the role of institutional racism in shaping the perceptions of public agents, influencing the selection of the groups to be under surveillance in societies considered racial states. The concept of institutional racism describes race relations as a form of social order within which subjectivities, experiences and types of interaction are built and marked by the racialization of subjects. Thus, it rejects the simplistic formulation that aims to contrast the outcome of racial inequality in police action to the black identities of police officers or even law breakers. Institutional racism operates independently of personal opinions, even if it may be realized through them. This explanatory approach demonstrates that racial profiling, materialized when the police officer chooses, in unequal and discriminatory form from a sample of people in public space, who should be stopped, how and for what motive.

Paul Butler (2018), analysing the race issue and incarceration, described the situation as a form of choking, in a book that almost constitutes a premonition, or perhaps an inspiration, for the protest movements against the police that erupted in 2020 after the death of George Floyd. His death was caused by a technique called a chokehold, which provides the name of the book and which Butler used to name the entire apparatus of promoting racial subordination by the criminal justice system in the United States.

According to Butler (2018), it is not a question of the deviancy of some police officers but of how the police and justice system effectively work in tandem to perpetuate the subordination of the Afro-American population. Paul Butler recognizes the role that black police officers, prosecutors and judges have also played over the years in reinforcing the criminal justice system and incarceration through the confrontation of homicidal violence involving black men. He analyses the historical construction of the black criminal and how the fear of thug drove the criminalization of black men. For this reason, he switched to advocating the abolition of the penal system and the police, believing that no reform is possible. Changes will only come when the civil disobedience of the black population breaks the relative quiet about racial domination.

This anti-racist turn in international criminology is taking time to be included in the sociology of the police in Brazil. But social movements have developed critiques of racial violence in the institutions of social control from the 1970s at least. Since 2007, however, the black youth movement has consistently denounced the aspects of racism in police action (RAMOS, 2014).

Technology and racism

Technological advances have undoubtedly produced significant changes to São Paulo's ostensive policing. In fact, technological innovations have been at the base of the modernization of

the police since the end of the 1990s, with landmark events in this process mapped in a survey by the Brazilian Public Security Forum⁷. Arthur Costa and Renato Lima (2014) use the term “incrementalism” to describe the investments made in materials and methods (weaponry, vehicles, and information technology) with the aim of supporting improvements in police performance.

Based on the diverse interviews with members of the PMESP, it became clear that technology had produced gradual transformations in terms of improving the personal safety of police officers, controlling policing and police actions, managing conflicts in society, confronting crime, and educating and training commissioned and non-commissioned officers. Programs like the Standard Operational Procedures (POP) and the Patrol Priority Cards (CPP) were influenced by the Smart Policing Plan (PPI)⁸, especially through the incorporation of smart tools like the Military Police Operations Centre (Copom online), Fotocrim⁹, the Criminal Information System (Infocrim) and technological devices like smartphones and tablets in the hands of officers in the streets.

The forms of managing and organizing policing, based mainly on North American models, introduced the São Paulo forces to georeferencing and crime data computation programs—like CompStat or similar systems—, new technological devices (tablets or portable film cameras) and forms of planning, action, and evaluation.

All the interlocutors indicated that technology is very important to performing police work and fundamental to operational planning. Comparing with previous decades, they believe that investments in technology were significant in the transition from an “artisanal” police force to a “scientific” police force. One of the points mentioned is related to the duties of lieutenants and captains. Previously their functions were limited to the management of police personnel. Today, their responsibilities include the managing of crime indicators and operational plans that demand increasingly technical and specialized knowledge.

This means that many officers have moved away from street patrols and now perform their duties mostly inside the military police battalion headquarters, where they can use a range of devices to assist in administrating police units remotely. The officers have vehicle georeferencing and geopositioning systems, interactive maps, data processing systems and equipment that assists in planning and organizing police activities.

The mapping of crime areas is one example of the impact of technological advances on the military police. What was done manually in the past, or using printed maps, is now achieved with software, combined with tools like Copom online. According to some interlocutors, the system provides maps of crime incidences (hotspots) that allow a quicker and more detailed analysis of the quantitative data on incidents. The Digital Register of Incidents (RDO) is an addition that permits a reduction in the call outs to situations that do not require physical police support, allowing a reallocation of personnel. The integration of the RDO system with Copom facilities the military

police's data processing work and directly influences the construction of the CPP. The administrative task of the officers is to manage this data, plan policing and meet the targets set by superiors.

However, this influence does not affect officers alone. According to our interlocuters, the school curricula increasingly include content on information technology. The military police training colleges recognise the need for skills in handling smart tools, as one officer teaching in the academy mentioned:

— One of the concerns—not so much a concern as one of our obligations—is to deliver a police officer capable of operating all the available technologies. He will leave knowing how to operate the TMD [*Mobile Data Terminal*]. (Major L)

The interlocuters sought to demonstrate the differences between policing in the remote past, involving manual work with little specialization, and today's complex and demanding profession. In the accounts of the long-standing officers, it was common to hear how arduous writing reports by hand was, how they had wasted time contacting the operations centres to consult documents and criminal backgrounds, or how complicated it was to distribute information. For the officers interviewed, the technology facilitated the management of commands, as well as the personnel, and allowed greater control of police activities and officers.

Along these lines, tablets and smartphones became a fundamental tool for what they call the “cutting-edge military police” along with the bullet-proof vest, holster, gun and badge. It is rare to find a police vehicle or officer without one of these devices. Some police officers described the tablets and mobile phones as tools that have transformed police work.

— Wow, the best thing was the tablet in the car, how it has helped! Sometimes you would write loads of pages, [*but*] if you wrote one thing wrong you had to do the whole lot again, the tablet is a marvel! (Soldier M)

— It helps because sometimes our police colleague is in a car and we need to consult someone's ID [*identification*] number and there's no way to do so. So, they can make a 190 [*call*] to Copom, we link up to the officer in the Copom car and access all the information online on anyone we want. (Soldier L)

The institutional discourse argues that the incorporation of technologies for ostensive policing increases efficiency, modernizes policing standards, provides more security to agents, and reduces biases and actions that deviate from the standard operational procedures. However, our research shows that the adoption of technological tools is aimed solely at an economy of means, with no impact on issues like lethal use of force and police selectivity. This is because techniques that might result in less lethal actions depend directly on equipment not available to ostensive policing, especially frontline policing. Additionally, there was no evidence of the use of smart tools or techniques that reduce police arbitrariness and, therefore, racial selectivity.

In Rio de Janeiro, Daniel Edler Duarte (2021) explained how successive translations of the data in crime analyses using information technology (IT) tools, such as software and digital platforms, are a “politics of translation.” This involves not just the simplification of crime events to transform them into numerical indicators, but also the choices of whoever designs the tools and who uses them to give visibility to the complex reality or erase aspects of it. He concludes that the new security technologies cannot be taken as neutral and that we cannot trust on a kind of technical cleaning of human biases by technological processes.

Peron and Alvarez (2019) studied the gradual implementation of the Detecta system in São Paulo, developed from within a culture of control and hyper surveillance that originated in anti-terrorism military technologies and became incorporated into the management of smart city policies. The authors observed that the security data management apparatus was readily adapted to the privatized logic of economically interested sectors, spending huge financial and technological resources for the hyper surveillance of areas with relatively low crime indicators, while more violent areas of the city remain neglected in terms of investment. The Detecta system had important effects, they argue, in deepening the model of management through quantitative data on crime, although the predictive policing models had not been implemented. It is somewhat curious, however, that we did not hear any mention of Detecta in the field, while the georeferencing of incidents was reported in detail from planners to the frontline officers.

Even with the advance of devices to control police activity like those mentioned above, it is perceptible that discretionary actions, the *tirocínio*, still comprise the main element of the policing practiced in São Paulo. As demonstrated, ostensive policing has a low level of institutional control. Most of the time, non-commissioned officers decide how interventions should be carried out during their patrols. Training and the incorporation of technologies have made no difference to how the *tirocínio* is exercised, as one officer remarked:

— A kind of skill very difficult to train in the abstract, it has to be investigated and developed in the field because it's contextual. (...) In a training centre, it's very difficult to include a discipline that attempts to train an ability that is contextual. (Major L)

At institutional level, ostensive policing relies on quantitative data processing tools, the production of maps and crime hotspots defined in the program of targets¹⁰. To this end, a triple evaluation is undertaken in which the main sources are police reports, information from frontline police officers and the Security Community Councils (Consegs). The crime data collected defines the regions in which the operations will be carried out and the location of vehicles or patrols. However, a disproportion exists in relation to the contributions made by information from the Consegs, whether due to the institutional difficulty of performing community policing, especially

in areas of the urban periphery, or due to the absence of technologies that interpret this data. Indeed, one of the officers interviewed recognized the fact that he doesn't have "an official system to catalogue what is perceived by the community" (Major Q).

Studies of police institutions (SILVESTRE, 2018; FBSP, 2016) demonstrate that public security has obtained large-scale public investment over the last fifteen years, especially the resources directed to the ostensive policing program and to technological modernization of the military police. This investment contrasts with other models of policing, like preventive and community policing, and with what the interlocutors call the *sucateamento*, or scrapping, of the Civil Police—that is, the diminishing investment in the institution and its work methods. These studies show that the high expenditure on security has failed to produce significant results in terms of controlling crime, despite its strong social and political appeal.

Although there are attempts to automatize policing through the implementation of new institutional procedures, strategies, and technological tools, normally the police officers individually or collectively resist accountability mechanisms. References are made to everyday practices that evade the implemented procedures and systems, such as, for example, the disabling of trackers on vehicles in areas where the signal is bad or even using signal blockers. Another example is the case of stop-and-searches unregistered in the system: the officers simply note down the details about who they stopped but do not include this data in any report.

When it is impossible to use the official technological equipment, other—unofficial—technological tools are used to substitute it. Such practices are part of the everyday of ostensive policing, used above all for communication between officers and to produce content on policing to be posted on social media. This informal use is an indication of the existence of networks of police officers that overlap with the hierarchical organization of the police force. In earlier studies, Kant de Lima (1995) and Mingardi (1991) had already called attention to the fact that, although highly hierarchized, the power relations within police organizations constitute networks between the agents through which everyday work and the internal politics of the institutions are organised. In other words, while the official information technology tools contribute to increasing control over police activity, streamlining it, and making it more visible to controls, the use of mobile phones in informal channels works in the opposite direction, lowering the capacity for institutional control of police activity. As well as allowing control to be evaded, it keeps the information limited to the groups, rendering it invisible or opaque.

Fieldwork revealed the existence of communications and decisions that bypass the institutional control of the military police. During the research it was possible to verify that the sharing of information such as descriptions of suspects or information on crime incidents are shared via applications like WhatsApp. Because of their speed of information sharing,

smartphones and mobile internet allow police officers to access contents on incidents complementing, on the private chat groups, the information that arrives via radio from Copom, such as the number plates of stolen cars, audio recordings and videos.

— Personnel, mainly Rádio Patrulha, sorry, mainly the personnel on the motorbikes who don't have a tablet on their vehicles, contact us in the administration via WhatsApp to pass on characteristics of the guy who they stopped there, his document and ID, and on Copom Online itself. Once its open, we pull [*the information*] for them because they can't always make contact via the radio network, the communication of motorbikes via HT is really bad, so we converse on WhatsApp, I myself in the administration pull the history of the guy for them. (Corporal J)

This practice was recognised by some interlocutors and described by officers as a problem. The applications are cited as potential distractions, since their recreational use can affect police perceptions. Another point is related to sharing extraofficial information that could place the agents at risk, above all when this information replaces official planning. To curb this conduct, the military police run training courses in operational protocols and may punish those deviating from them. According to officers, the guidance is to prioritize radio communications, which are recorded. However, many police officers communicate via WhatsApp, which evades the institution's monitoring.

— Policing activities have to be recorded; they have to be recorded! (...) Our Copom, with the alterations made, with all the investment, is capable of recording all communications, recording these communications. So much so that for disciplinary procedures, military police inquiries, syndications, very often you ask the head of Copom for a recording of the communication of data of the vehicle involved, the day and time and so on. There is reliable feedback in the work of the police officer (...) my advice is that things relating to the operational service are not done using private devices, save in an emergency, if I need to call HQ; HQ is calling and my communication isn't getting through. In an emergency situation, yes! In routine operational matters, no! (Corporal B)

Applications like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram, among others, have been incorporated into the everyday life of citizens where the digital sphere has become a new locus for dissonance and controversy, “mediated through a constant on/offline” (MISKOLCI, 2011). There is no doubt that the digital sphere is also now integrated into public institutions, including those in the security sector like the PMESP, which today has official social media channels. On the other hand, the research found that in ostensive policing these types of tools are constantly used informally by police officers in their daily work as well as their off-duty hours.

When researching WhatsApp groups¹¹, Facebook pages and Instagram accounts of military police officers and supporters, it was observed that most of the topics are related to the day-to-day experiences of policing, sharing information on occurrences, as well as texts and audios of personal opinions that generally express a morality associated with a conservative ideal of public

security. One example are the videos recorded and shared by police officers that record forms of police use of force diverging from procedural guidelines (POP) but that receive full backing from the group members. The images depict—usually black—suspects being pursued, shot, tortured, or murdered. In these posts, it is common for captions to be added like “ID cancellation, ROTA standard” or “another CPF [*Brazilian individual taxpayer registry identification*] cancelled,” figures and memes that approve or mock the situation. The same happens on Facebook Watch or YouTube, where it is easy to come across operations conducted by the military police and groups specialized in crime incidents. On these platforms, unlike on WhatsApp, police officers seek to present incidents that follow the PMESP’s guidelines.

This form taking pleasure through images has been called videovoyeurism by Bruno Cardoso (2010). Because of its decentralized and uncontrollable nature, the profusion of images of violence related to police operations enables a greater contextualization of the scenes, at the same time as the meanings become fragmented. For the author, videovoyeurism can be described as a fetish that supersedes the demands for effectiveness in combating crime and reducing violence.

In the research conducted among the WhatsApp groups, it is notable that the kind of informal use of technological tools by police officers contributes to the dissemination of discriminatory content and reinforcement of abusive actions as part of the iconography of a “war against crime” and the logic that a “good criminal is a dead criminal.” It can also be noted that the corporality of the suspect acquires an iconographic substrate on social media, with the circulation of images that repeatedly present young black men.

In the monitored groups, police officers associate urban violence with the work of human rights organisations and left-wing policies. They complain about the formal controls that curb their actions and their capacity to respond, especially with lethal force, while stressing the need to strengthen the repressive and punitive model of ostensive policing.

Final considerations

The use of technology has proven to be a significant factor in the changes observed in policing. However, the investment in modernization of the police does not necessarily generate efficiency in the fight against crime, the campaign for a reduction in violence and the racist prejudices acted out by police officers, or a change in the global results of policing. The use of technologies was observed to reinforce these practices at the same time as it can collaborate in potentializing abusive actions by the police.

The influence of the United States' police forces in the organizational ideal of the PMESP is clear, especially among commissioned officers, who take them as models to be followed, despite noting that there is no comparison in terms of financial and technological resources, training, preparation, and personnel. However, they ignore the deleterious effects of the model for some sectors of the population: the incorporation of new police techniques and technologies produces an increase in the surveillance and racial profiling of groups of young, black residents of the periphery and the street population. The fact is that whether in São Paulo or New York, the use of new techniques has justified the claim that no racial bias exists given that the police forces work with consolidated data from a specific criminological profile of areas, types of crimes and criminals.

In São Paulo and in worldwide cities, the use of new technologies in policing has increased the surveillance of black communities. Except that, unlike the international context, anti-racist activism has yet to successfully promote deeper changes in the standard of policing, in mass incarceration and in the high number of police killings of black youths. While within the global spectrum some police forces have been obliged to establish norms of conduct and adapt operational techniques to respond to social demands for equity in treatment, the PMESP remains reluctant. The São Paulo force does not recognize racism as an organisational problem, nor its tactics and techniques as generators of racial inequality. This prevents the new technologies from being conceived as forms of supervising and adapting police work to improve the service provided to the public and mitigate the racial biases.

The PMESP's choice of statistical software demonstrates the power of interference of police officers and their criminological conceptions in the politics of translation (DUARTE, 2021) of the data used to direct policing. This choice allowed the constitution of the information monopoly, increasing the institution's power to set the agenda of public security, building an analytic platform that excludes the integration of data that does not come from its own systems.

The new information technologies, however, are unable to dispel the sense of insecurity. The data points to a decrease in some indicators while others show that violence is still commonplace, justifying the punitive policies. Appropriated by the narrative of a crackdown on crime, the new technologies are used to fill gaps left by the earlier techniques of social control, for example, by amplifying the police gaze informed by the *tirocínio* or "trained eye." This remains central to the organisation of ostensive policing, scaled up when the police gazes constitute a mosaic on the map or when the images from the network of cameras are interpreted through an "malicious gaze," as Cardoso (2010) describes it.

Today, digital technology exists throughout the police work, despite being complex in descriptive terms and arbitrary when it comes to operational procedures. The Radar System is linked to Copom Online and to the 190-emergency call system allowing the São Paulo military

police to quickly access the data on any vehicle and check whether it has been stolen. Despite of it, as described by the interviewed police officers, the information extracted from these systems are shared on WhatsApp chats, on informal ways. So, images, videos, text, and voice messages, reinforce the practices of a traditional police approach, rooted in racial profiling.

In São Paulo, the paramount concern in the adoption of police technologies was not to use the available tools to limit and control police work: on the contrary, they served to broaden the scope of the PMESP's action, increase the productivity of existing practices, and systemize racial profiling. As Peron and Alvarez (2019) point out, they introduced a conception of policing based on data analysis and, in so doing, constructed a security apparatus composed not only of state interests but modulated especially by private interests, whether those of residents and local businesses or those of the large surveillance technology corporations.

For decades the São Paulo security policy has been based exclusively on punishing certain individuals without altering the social, urban, and economic conditions under which crime proliferates. The investments in technology and reinforcing the apparatus of policing are consequently part of a project characterized as neoliberal (GARLAND, 1995; HARCOURT, 2008), a form of risk management associated with the reactive/proactive model of policing marked by the resurgence in punishment and racial profiling. Meanwhile, ostensive policing and violence prevention policies have withered in São Paulo state, not even considered in the inputs into the digital systems, much less as legitimate clients of a policy for public security information management.

While prior to the adoption of computerized technologies, the empirical knowledge of the street categorized bodies, territories, and age groups as dangerous, they now permit this knowledge to be translated into data for the creation of hotspots, the main source of directive planning for ostensive police action. And while this knowledge was once local and fragmented, it is now integrated to guide the institutional strategy of public policy as its primary source of information.

“Artisanal” policing is being industrialized and disseminated on a large scale, amplifying the inequalities in public security provision. The choices made in policing strategy are political questions and produce results that subaltern racialized groups like black people. In the absence of integrated social policies that tackle the demands made on policing, ostensive policing lacks the capacity to deal with the problem of crime and violence by itself. As well as producing racial discrimination, mass incarceration and a growing number of deaths in police actions, politicians are elected due to a narrative based on irresponsible punitive discourses and, once in government, they channel enormous sums of public money from the Global South to private technology firms from the Global North.

Notes

¹ The militarization of security is a theme discussed in Brazil with specific characteristics in each context. In relation to Rio de Janeiro, the involvement of the Armed Forces in policing is part of a context covered by this term. Other cities saw similar operations to enforce law and order. This is not the case of São Paulo, however, where the military police have played the lead role in militarization. As Sinhoretto (2014, 2021) indicated in earlier studies, this is not just a question of an organisational mechanism but of a broader strategy of conflict management that affects the dynamics of other institutions.

² Denari (2016) has shown that female policing has been absorbed by ostensive policing program, abandoning tasks relating to the management of social issues that assimilated the work of women police officers to social care. Along the same lines, community policing was demobilized as an alternative doctrine (GODINHO, 2013).

³ The research project "Ostensive Policing and Racial Relations: Contemporary Forms of Crime Control" was funded by Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) (Universal Call of Projects: 2018-2021) and was conducted in São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Rio Grande do Sul and the Federal District. Over the period of the project, the researchers also received funding through Research Productivity grant (PQ-CNPq), PhD awards from CNPq and from Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (Capes Foundation).

⁴ The Favela Naval incident, which occurred in 1997, was a case of police violence with national repercussions. In the municipality of Diadema, located in the metropolitan region of São Paulo, military police officers conducted a blitz operation and were filmed assaulting and extorting money from various people, one of whom was executed by the officer Otávio Lourenço Gamba, nicknamed Rambo.

⁵ It is worth highlighting that most of the interlocutors were selected by the military police in response to the request for interviews. In the research conducted in social networks, the occurrence of openly racist speech was recorded in police officers' comments.

⁶ TN: From the Latin *tirocinium*. The English cognate "tirocinium" refers to early training, just one of its meanings in Portuguese.

⁷ The information gathered was produced by the Brazilian Public Security Forum and can be accessed on the site. Available on: <https://memoria.forumseguranca.org.br>

⁸ The Smart Policing Plan, created by the PMESP in 2007, was designed to systemize a methodological standard within the institution for the use of smart digital database systems to identify trends and areas with higher crime incidences as support for planning its policing.

⁹ Fotocrim is one of the databases used by the PMESP, containing photos, facial composites and information on criminals that has been registered.

¹⁰ São Paulo possesses a program of targets based on reducing incidences of a selection of offences per area. This selection varies over time. The targets program is cited as a source of pressure on managers since nobody wants to receive a poor assessment. The officers patrolling the streets, however, have little clear idea of how the targets function.

¹¹ It is worth stressing that the monitored WhatsApp groups are not composed of the interviewed military police officers and have no institutional connections to the PMESP. Access was allowed through informal networks that will be kept anonymous to protect our informants and collaborators.

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