Review – Disappearances and Police Killings in Contemporary Brazil

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Disappearances and Police Killings in Contemporary Brazil: The Politics of Life and Death
By Sabrina Villenave
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Some people disappear voluntarily, and we call them missing persons. Others are disappeared; that is, they are killed and buried in unknown places and circumstances. The term 'being disappeared' is an attempt to translate *Desaparecidos,* which was used for the first time in Argentina to name the 'political disappearances' during the dictatorship (1976-1983) and then spread to other countries, including Brazil. The book *Disappearances and police killings in Contemporary Brazil*, provides an insightful and surprising critique of the concept of 'political disappearance,' which is essential for the Truth Commissions that dig deep into the history of Brazilian dictatorship, but does not serve, and is even counterproductive, to analyze contemporary violence.

The book aligns with the aim of the Interventions Series to publish work that stretches the limits of the discipline of international relations, such as the division between inside and outside, the difference between public and national security, or its Eurocentric and racial bias. Villenave's book works on these three issues, the role of a militarized police (inside/outside, public/national security), who acts as the sovereign, who decides on the exception in a postcolonial and racialized State.

The category of 'political disappeared' in Brazil strictly applies to people, mainly from an educated, white, and leftist elite, who were supposedly involved with guerrilla movements who opposed the military regime (1964-1985). The term is present in the Law of the Disappeared (Law 9.140 from 1995), which created the Special Commission for the Dead and Political Disappeared. Other actors, such as the victim´s relatives, the newspapers, and the National Truth Commission, also refer to ´political disappeared´ in their discourses.

This means those who disappeared during the dictatorship but were not directly involved in the political battle, such as indigenous people and rural workers, do not count as political disappeared or *Desaparecidos*. Because the term disappeared is attached to a specific group and limited to the period of the military regime (1964-1985), disappeared people who do not correspond to that definition will not have the same visibility in the media or institutional settings. In terms of comparison, the disappeared during the dictatorship amounts to 243 people from different parts of the country over 21 years, while the number of disappeared between 2000 and 2012 only in the city of Rio de Janeiro is 600. Another problem, as Villenave states, is that the traditional understanding of politics as 'engaged in organized activities' silences the fact that other kinds of disappearances based on a racial structure are also political.

Therefore, the question remains: Since the concept of political disappearance depends on those criteria of time and space, what framework underpins contemporary forced disappearances in Brazil? Through the analysis of the history of police violence and its origin in the colonial and racialized structure of the state, Villenave argues that the *rationale* of security and the war on drugs (with its similarity to the war on terror) shapes – and de-politicizes – our understanding of the "disappeared bodies" in the democratic period. It also legitimizes killings and disappearances of bodies, primarily blacks, in the "abject space" of *favelas* (shantytowns). This logic is not strange to racial

capitalism (Robinson, 2000) and microeconomics (Montag, 2005), which aims to eliminate the excess of the black labour force. In this sense, the framework of the war on drugs works to silence the fact that Brazil is not a racial democracy. Instead, the country erases the racial component in the explanation of police killings and disappearances. Notably, despite the critiques of the concept of racial democracy by Lelia Gonzalez (2021) and Abdias do Nascimento (1980) among others, it still underlies much of the political and social debate in contemporary Brazil.

The book positions itself in the discussion of governmentality and biopolitics (Foucault 2008, 2019) and sovereignty, camp, and exception (Agamben 2005, 2009) in international relations. Nevertheless, Villenave claims that these theories are not sufficient to understand state violence in postcolonial and racialized societies such as the Brazilian one. Agamben's state of exception – and previous theorizing by Schmitt – affirms that the sovereign is the one who decides about the exception. Scholars apply the Agambenian thesis to different contexts, but each requires some qualifications. Contrary to the omnipresence of the state of exception in democratic states, an essential point for Agamben, the Brazilian police apparatus functions differentially depending on skin color, confirming Judith Butler's argument that there is an unequal distribution of vulnerability.

The author offers an innovative contribution when elaborating on the camp concept discussed by Agamben and Mbembe. Agamben affirms that the camp is an exceptional space outside the law. Although agreeing with the broad definition of Agamben, Mbembe insists that race plays a role in that space´s definition. Some populations are more prone to be included in the space of exclusion than others. Villenave agrees with Mbembe, but states that the *favela* has its specificity: the relation between inside and outside is more fluid than that observed in the concept of the camp. *Favelas* do not confine its inhabitants. However, it is the 'sovereign police' who will decide who can move according to criteria embedded in a colonial and racial structure. In this sense, the police are constantly redefining and re-drawing the boundaries of the city and citizenship status. Putting it differently, the state of exception is not a place but a practice or movement of creating exceptions ad hoc.

The example Villenave brings to the fore might be new to students of international relations who are not familiar with Brazilian society. As the author makes clear, the police can control the moment of the exception by using a strategy called *auto de resistência,* created during the military regime to protect the police officer who killed someone allegedly as an act of defense. In the democratic period, the police continue using the same strategy, but now in the context of the 'war on drugs.' In Brazilian legislation, there is no difference between drug consumers and drug dealers, which leaves room for the police to define who the trafficker is. Therefore, the police will define the exception by saying that some killings result from an *auto de resistência* against traffic dealers.

Mbembe is a vital author for Villenave's argument about disappearance because the sovereign will decide who will live or die and *how* people will die. Although killings and disappearances follow the same logic of the war on drugs, killings have more visibility in the media than disappearances because the last is much more challenging to investigate and confirm. By its inherent characteristic, disappearance produces a void of information and no traces of how it could have happened. Unlike the *auto de resistência (and the presence of the body)* , disappearance rests on a juridical limbo where the boundary between *zoe* and *bios*, exterior and interior, presence and absence, is blurred.

Notwithstanding its relevance for contemporary debate on IR, the book does not deal with some aspects regarding the dead body that are essential to understanding the racial bias of police practice in Brazil. As the philosopher Adriana Cavarero asked, what does the condition of the dead body tell us about the specificity of contemporary violence? In her seminal book *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, Cavarero looks at the dismembered and mutilated body which is unrecognizable as human. We could say that there are three forms of contemporary killing: the *auto de resistência* that produces an identifiable dead body (present and identifiable); the disappearance of the body (thus not identifiable due to its absence); and, following Cavarero, the mutilation of the body (present, but not identifiable as human).

Disappearance and Killings in Brazil acquires added relevance at a time when the far-right in Brazil insists on the discourse of racial democracy and criticizes affirmative actions in Brazil. It also brings an essential discussion about the concept of political disappearance in a country that, 60 years after the beginning of its last dictatorship (1964), is

still struggling to understand its past and de-militarize its police. On 2 April 2024, the President of the Amnesty Commission investigating crimes of 1964-1985 made an apology to indigenous peoples killed during the dictatorship. Despite the local nature, the study of the disappearance in Brazil can be applied to other 'abject spaces' where the 'war on drugs' is a facade for getting rid of disposable people.

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