



Street-Level Bureaucracy and Territory:
Normative Regimes and Inequalities in São
Paulo's Cracolândia

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Street-level bureaucracy and territory: normative regimes and inequalities in São Paulo's Cracolândia

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Abstract

This article examines the influence of street-level bureaucrats in "Cracolândia" ("Crackland"), a socially diverse area in central São Paulo where many crack users congregate in public spaces. This region has long been a target of public interventions in security, social assistance, health, and housing, while also being shaped by the activities of various non-state actors, including community associations, NGOs, and organized crime. By focusing on this territory, we present four ethnographic case studies of women who vary significantly in their social characteristics, living conditions, and connections to the area. These case studies illustrate the diverse ways these women identify and address their problems, utilizing available resources and relationships to develop strategies and interact with a mix of state and non-state actors. Our analysis highlights the distinct treatment bureaucracies afford different individuals, emphasizing the role of these professionals in perpetuating inequalities.

Introduction

The literature on street-level bureaucracy often overlooks the potential of considering territory as a unit of analysis. While it is recognized that the discretion of street-level bureaucrats are influenced by the values of their social contexts (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003), these values are typically viewed as factors that influence individual decision-making. Hupe and Hill (2007) emphasize the importance of examining the surroundings and the various micro-networks of accountability in which frontline professionals are embedded. However, the literature does not thoroughly investigate the power dynamics and social groups that frontline professionals encounter in their duties. By shifting the focus from individual discretion to the broader context, our objective is to uncover how the actions of frontline professionals impact complex relationships in marginalized territories.

Favareto and Lotta (2022) argue that territory is a recent concern in public policy studies, often viewed passively as spaces where public policies are implemented or where external economic and social processes materialize, resulting in territorially blind policies and approaches. To move beyond this territorial blindness, the authors suggest interpreting

territories through concepts and devices that promote interpretative schemes and organize the structures of territorial domination analytically. By understanding territory as a unit of analysis on street-level bureaucracy research, especially in contexts of inequality, it is possible to identify the material and symbolic relationships that contribute to defining markers, prejudices, and other forms of inequality reproduction, as well as the role of street-level bureaucracy in these dynamics.

One of the most conflict-ridden areas in Brazil is a place called Cracolândia. The term "Cracolândia" ("Crackland") has been a prominent topic in São Paulo's popular discourse for almost three decades (Rui, 2016). It refers to a part of the city center where a large number of crack cocaine users gather in public spaces to consume drugs, engage in intense forms of social interaction and economic activities, and receive various public and charitable services. This terminology has stigmatized an entire zone of the city, disregarding the diverse populations and activities within it and implying the need for particular types of intervention. Understanding the intricate power dynamics in Cracolândia provides a tangible example of how different governance actors, such as the police, organized crime, state programs, NGOs, and community associations, interact within a specific territory.

In this article, we focus on the actions of street-level bureaucracy in Cracolândia. We aim to contextualize these actions within the power relations and resources present in the region. Our territorial perspective allows us to uncover how street-level bureaucracy operates and contributes to the reproduction of inequalities in the area. We work with the concept of coexisting normative regimes to understand the different normative assumptions that underpin individual experiences and practices (Feltran, 2020). This concept also helps us analyze broader arrangements in the territory, involving diverse actors pursuing distinct objectives and interacting with one another.

Building on our previous analyses of governance assemblages in Crackland, we identified how four women with different social positions access different governance networks within the same territory to solve their problems. In this article, we aim to systematically understand the different roles street-level bureaucracies play in these complex arrangements. We want to highlight how the same bureaucracy can be present in the lives of some groups and absent in others, as well as provide different treatments to groups coexisting in the same territory, especially regarding public security. Our adoption of a territorial perspective helps us uncover how street-level bureaucracy operates and contributes to the reproduction of inequalities in Cracolândia.

In the following section, we divide the theoretical reflections into two parts. The first part discusses the relationship between scholarship in street-level bureaucracy and the idea of territory. The second part develops the concept of coexisting normative regimes as a framework to analyze the impact of street-level bureaucrats' actions on the power dynamics of the territory. Next, we present the cases of four women living in the region,

highlighting the differences in their interactions with different street-level bureaucracies. Finally, we discuss our findings and conclude with final considerations.

Street-level Bureaucracy and Territory

Street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) play a crucial role in delivering public services and allocating resources due to their discretion (Van Oorschot, 2006). The literature on street-level bureaucracy explores how frontline professionals use their discretion to act within the constraints they face (Hupe, 2013). Various factors influence this discretion, including political and administrative decisions, available organizational resources, individual expertise, and broader cultural elements (May and Winter, 2007).

Research highlights the involvement of multiple actors in public service delivery within complex environments and multilevel governance (Hupe & Hill, 2007). Policy institutions are just one part of the implementation process, along with administrative structures, individual actions, and environmental factors (Hupe & Hill, 2007). Both organizations and individuals, whether state or non-state, can formally or informally influence decision-making processes (Thomann et al., 2018).

The literature on street-level bureaucracy has focused on the interaction between SLBs and citizens, highlighting factors that influence discretion (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003), the effects of this discretion on notions of deservingness and access to benefits and services (Tummers, 2017), and the social and symbolic impacts of this relationship (Dubois, 1999). However, the context in which these interactions occur and their implications for marginalized groups and community dynamics have not been extensively studied.

Territory is not well-integrated into the public policy literature, including studies on street-level bureaucracy. Favareto and Lotta (2022) argue that territory is still seen passively, merely as spaces where public policies are implemented or where broader exogenous economic and social processes impact state action.

Although the concept of territory is multifaceted—encompassing administrative boundaries, cultural aspects, or economic logic—all conceptual approaches emphasize power relations over material and symbolic resources among members of a specific space (Lotta et al., 2022). Understanding power relations in a given territory helps grasp the interdependencies between structure and agency in local social orders.

Framing frontline professionals' work in this context allows for an analysis of public policies in the territory, considering decision-making processes and power relations that shape state actions and the role of agents in the community. This means situating SLBs' actions within existing territorial governance and promoting interpretative schemes that

analytically organize territorial domination structures (Favareto and Lotta, 2022), as discussed in the next section.

Cracolândia and its Normative Regimes

The term "Cracolândia" has been a popular topic in discussions about São Paulo for almost three decades (Rui, 2016). It refers to an area where a large number of crack cocaine users gather to consume drugs, socialize, engage in micro-economic activities, and access various public and charitable services. The term, originally coined by the São Paulo press, stigmatizes the area, overlooking its diverse populations and activities, and suggesting the need for specific interventions. One emic term used by crack users and local actors is "fluxo" (meaning "flow"), which describes the concentration of users.

Extensive research has been conducted on Cracolândia, focusing on the social lives and spatial practices of crack users, as well as the development of public policies. Researchers have used terms like "itinerant territoriality" (Frúgoli and Cavalcanti, 2012) and "urban nomadism" (Fromm and Blokland, 2023) to describe the variability in size, composition, and location of the fluxo. This highlights how crack users fluidly occupy urban space and navigate between state agencies and non-state organizations to access services. São Paulo's security forces have employed different spatial strategies over time, ranging from aggressive dispersal operations to surveillance-based approaches (Telles, 2017; Garmany and Richmond, 2020).

Public security interventions often come with promises to "end Cracolândia" and restore public order. State-led urban reforms aim for long-term regeneration (Garmany and Richmond, 2020; Frúgoli and Sklair, 2009; Miranda et al., 2019). While these interventions have not displaced crack users or significantly increased property values, the construction of subsidized housing units (Public-Private Partnerships, or PPPs) has led to changes and generated tension between new residents and crack users. As a result, daily life in the area involves navigating complex relationships, with individuals from different social backgrounds interacting in various ways.

Feltran (2020) presents a model that highlights the coexistence and competition between state and non-state forms of authority. He describes a deep divide between "coexisting normative regimes" in São Paulo's urban peripheries, which are based on different understandings of values such as security and justice. These regimes are connected to the state and its criminal justice system, as well as São Paulo's criminal organization, the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC). While some individuals rely on the state's norms, others look to the PCC for guidance, as they exercise their own form of justice, enforcing their own norms.

The PCC, which emerged from São Paulo's prison system in the 1990s, operates in the city's low-income areas and Cracolândia. It enforces its own justice system through

"debates," where members discuss misconduct accusations based on the organization's values, particularly "proceder" (correct conduct), and mete out punishments, including death. The PCC's influence extends not only to those directly involved in criminal activities but also to individuals residing in areas with a strong PCC presence.

Feltran's concept of coexisting normative regimes suggests a deeper rupture but also recognizes coexistence rather than outright conflict. These normative regimes operate concurrently, with individuals adjusting their behavior according to each regime (Beraldo et al., 2022). This coexistence implies that different governing actors can collectively govern spaces, despite pursuing distinct or opposing objectives. Coexistence and partial integration occur when actors are unable to eliminate competitors or incorporate them into a coherent governance structure (Richmond, 2019).

As we delve into this topic, we will examine the circumstances of forced coexistence and partial integration that characterize the contemporary conditions in Cracolândia, São Paulo. Our aim is to understand how street-level bureaucracy functions in this diverse territory with multiple normative regimes, shedding light on the different roles played by bureaucracies for individuals of varying social positions in Cracolândia.

Cracolândia, normative regimes and street-level bureaucracy

We now turn to our empirical analysis, focused on four individuals with very different social and demographic characteristics, living conditions, and relationships to Cracolândia and to the *fluxo*. These cases arose from two separate research projects which the authors undertook individually, but which overlapped both thematically and practically. Each of us was the primary interviewer for two of the case studies, though we also each had the opportunity to meet and interview other individuals in common. Magri's research is an ethnography specifically focused on policy approaches towards Cracolândia conducted multi-sited both on political sets and the streets of the territory. It included more than 100 interviews conducted with people from marginalised groups, including crack users and other residents. He also draws on 6 years' prior experience of working in the area as a political advisor. Richmond's research was focused on urban governance in São Paulo and included in-depth interviews with 41 individuals who acted in a range of governance organisations in the city centre, including the district authority, various public services, participatory councils, residents' groups, NGOs, and social movements, as well as participant observation in meetings and events of these organisations.

Our decision to focus on individuals is both practical and methodological. The individuals selected are not 'ideal types' who embody a particular profile of resident in Cracolândia. However, they do starkly demonstrate the range of situations found in the area and the diversity of strategies developed for resolving challenges. They also reveal the normative

assumptions of different residents, not only in terms of what is considered effective governance in the area, but also of what are the plausible avenues are for attaining it.

In this way, the individual cases provide windows onto broader arrangements that might be difficult to capture with a top-down focus on institutions, organisations or SLBs themselves. In this sense, we regard these cases as revealing how actors interact with different institutions and how different individuals in the area act to solve problems.

Patrícia: Avoiding and Mediating the State

Patrícia is a white woman in her sixties, originally from a small town in the interior of São Paulo state. She moved to the centre of São Paulo city as a young woman to study and work and has remained ever since. Over the years, she has been able to build a stable career as an insurance broker, first working for a series of companies and now self-employed. She lives alone in an apartment in Campos Elíseos, which she managed to buy in the late 1990s. It is in a middle-class building that lies to the north of Alameda Nothman avenue, which would usually be considered the edge of Cracolândia. It sits just a few blocks from the Praça Princesa Isabel, where the *fluxo* was concentrated for a time until an aggressive police operation in mid-2022 drove users out of the square. When fieldwork was conducted in the first half of 2023, there were few users occupying the surrounding streets and Patrícia believed the situation had improved: “It hasn't changed 100% yet, but it has improved a lot. I think that after they left, it improved by about 60%. Because we couldn't even walk here on the street, we couldn't walk, it was totally unsafe.”

Patrícia is active in a few different organisations that bring particular normative assumptions and strategic orientations to governance in Cracolândia. This can be summarised as attempting to solve problems via private channels or, where this is not possible, cultivating relationships to organisations that can mediate and rationalise access to the state. Given her class position and income, Patrícia can meet most of her individual needs (housing, healthcare etc) with private solutions. Some collective challenges, such as security and maintenance of her building can also be easily funded thanks to the similar class composition of the other residents. Patrícia is the building's “*subsíndica*” (deputy head of the residents' association) and explained that the monthly condominium fee paid by residents is sufficient to cover all regular building costs, such as private security, cleaning and maintenance. She is also a member of an association of *síndicos* in the wider region, who share information about contractors and how to resolve particularly challenging problems.

However, some of the challenges faced by residents are neither individual nor contained within the building, but concern its environs, such as public security and the maintenance of public space. For each of these issues, Patrícia has identified actors that are able to leverage particular parts of the state to mitigate the challenges of living in Cracolândia.

Patrícia is one of a group of local residents active in a community association called *Associação Campos Elíseos Mais Gentil* [Kinder Campos Elíseos Association, ACEMG]. While there are numerous community groups operating across Cracolândia, ACEMG is unique for having been created and administered by Porto Seguro, one of Brazil's largest insurance companies. Porto Seguro has been headquartered in Campos Elíseos for several decades and remained there even as the centre experienced economic decline and other large companies relocated away. Indeed, it has further entrenched its presence, expanding its real estate holdings both for its business operations and for a range of activities run by its Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) initiative, Instituto Porto, created in 2005. ACEMG was created within Instituto Porto in 2015, with the purpose of involving local residents in efforts to improve local social and environmental conditions. Specifically, it leads a range of projects focused on the conservation, cleaning and maintenance of public spaces. This includes a project focused on reducing littering and fly-tipping in public spaces and coordinating efforts between the public authorities, local businesses, residents, and informal waste collectors. ACEMG also publishes a local paper where it shares local news and success stories to raise awareness and holds monthly meetings open to local residents, though it is mainly a core group of long-standing residents like Patrícia who attend.

Central to ACEMG's approach is an online system they have developed, accessible via their website and an app, which residents can use to register complaints about local street cleaning and maintenance. ACEMG then forwards these demands to the authorities. They claim not to have direct or privileged access, just a small dedicated team who register and pursue every complaint brought to them via the normal public channels. The main one is the city government's "156" portal, a triage system for reporting a wide range of non-urgent governance issues, which can be accessed via telephone, website or app. Once registered, complaints are referred to the appropriate area within the municipal bureaucracy. However, this can be a very slow process and complaints frequently get lost in the system. As Patrícia exclaimed to us: "They [ACEMG] have someone who only does that! Unlike you and me, who have to spend half an hour there waiting for assistance – because that 156 number from City Hall takes ages!" In other words, the paid time and expertise of the ACEMG staff allow them to overcome important bureaucratic hurdles in resolving local issues.

This underlying logic – of seeking channels and mediations to make public systems function more effectively – is also visible in Patrícia's approach to the issue of public security. Patrícia is the *tutor* (warden) for her street as part of the *Programa Vizinhança Solidária* [Neighbourhood Solidarity Programme, PVS]. This a "neighbourhood watch" scheme that provides participating streets with direct and continuing access to their local Military Police battalion. The PVS was formally instituted in the State of São Paulo in 2018 via a state law that allows residents to voluntarily create local groups with police support, part of a broader expansion of the programme across Brazil during the 2010s (Lopes et al., 2022). This support includes orientation on crime prevention measures, regular consultations on local security issues, and the distribution of signs for public

display. Patrícia's role as *tutor* meant she was the main point of contact with the Military Police, maintained primarily via a WhatsApp group – which included also other residents and a designated police representative – and via the Military Police's 190 emergency line. She explained how it worked:

For example, there's a group of people who are in this *tutor's* group, everything that happens there you have to call 190, but you can [also] post it on the [WhatsApp] group to alert others. So, for example, if a strange person comes by and you think they're up to no good, or they start to break something, puncture a tyre, break into a car. We alert [the group] and call 190. [...] The normal channel is 190, and we also put it on the WhatsApp group to alert people.

Patrícia was keen to stress to us that the police did not respond to calls for support directly via WhatsApp. As with the ACEMG, the PVS does not completely bypass official triage systems:

There's a police officer [in the group], so it goes to them too. Obviously, they won't act via WhatsApp, they're not allowed to. But we've notified them, we call 190 and then they respond. They take some kind of action or, depending on the situation, they might send a police car. It's happened before!

Despite this enhanced communication, Patrícia was unconvinced by the military police's capacity to address security issues in the area. She said they generally took a long time to arrive when called, although it could sometimes be quicker when the issue was more urgent. This seemed to follow an impartial logic whereby response times were based on the severity of the situation rather than by who required support. On the other hand, the extra information provided via WhatsApp could conceivably, in some cases, encourage police to prioritise the needs of PVS participants over others. More broadly, Patrícia felt there were other constraints on police capacity in the area, such as lacking a sufficient number of trained officers and vehicles, and political and legal barriers to them using necessary force when apprehending suspects. Nonetheless, in a context of limited police capacity, it is clear that the PVS programme offers some potential security benefits to participating groups.

Given her active participation in ACEMG, the local PVS, the administration of her building and local networks of *síndicos*, it seemed surprising that such a community-minded person had very little involvement with any public bodies. When asked, she said she generally regarded local participatory councils as positive, but didn't attend meetings due to other commitments. More generally, this seemed to betray a distrust in the public sphere. When asked about the groups she was involved in, she commented emphatically: "I think they help more than the *Subprefeitura* (district council) itself. We're always asking for the help of the *Subprefeitura*, but they do very little, they really don't do much!" This apparent decision to withdraw from the public sphere in the face of perceived state failure reflects the position of someone who can afford to live without the state or access it selectively; a position not available to many others in Cracolândia.

Conceição: Between Participation and Protest

Conceição shares much in common with Patrícia. She is a 64-year-old white woman, who also moved to São Paulo when she was young, though in her case from southern Brazil. Conceição is also very active in local community organising and echoes many of Patrícia's complaints about security, the degradation of public space, and the failure of the authorities to address these issues. However, she differs starkly from Patrícia in both her personal circumstances and in the strategies she adopts in seeking to address these issues. Like Patrícia, she is firmly embedded within the "normative regime" of the state with regard to questions of security and justice, while also believing it fails fundamentally to meet her needs and demands. However, unlike Patrícia, she is also highly aware of the presence of the normative regime of organised crime and finds herself unable to withdraw from the public sphere. We can broadly summarise Conceição's approach to assembling governance, then, as a kind of contentious politics directed towards the state, which she pursues both through institutionalised participatory spaces and more direct forms of contestation.

Conceição gained a degree in her 50s, after her two children were already grown up. She used to be a Portuguese and Spanish teacher and she now works part-time as an after-school tutor. She had previously rented for many years in a lower middle-class neighbourhood in the city's West Zone, but had moved into one of the new "Public-Private Partnerships" (PPPs) in 2019, which provided her first opportunity to buy a property. The PPPs are housing developments established and subsidised by the São Paulo State government and built by private construction firms. The scheme took advantage of urban planning legislation designed to promote housing for low-income groups in order to demolish and redevelop areas of deteriorated low-density housing stock (Miranda et al, 2019). However, eligibility criteria for effectively excludes the existing marginalised population of Cracolândia due to the requirements of earning at least one minimum wage and being formally employed in the city centre (*ibid.*: 31). Nonetheless, the PPPs are far from homogeneous, and include residents on low incomes. Conceição complained about the poor quality of the finishing in the apartments and felt the company contracted to administer the building was unresponsive to its residents' association. In all these regards – social composition, building quality, the autonomy of the residents' association – her situation is very different to Patrícia's.

However, what most exercised Conceição was not life with the block, but outside of it. As she put it: "You see inside the apartment, it's nice, it's cute, it's tidy. But from the gate outwards, we no longer have that security, that cleanliness, that dignity." Conceição claimed that problems in the area worsened when the *fluxo* migrated from its previous location near Patrícia's building. This, she says, is when her "dream" of homeownership had turned into a "nightmare". At one of our meetings, Conceição spoke to us over coffee with her neighbour, Olga, 30-year-old white woman who lived in an apartment with her

father and worked as an administrator. They highlighted several ways in which the proximity of the *fluxo* negatively affected them. This included noise pollution, due to loud music and shouting, particularly at night, and the smell of crack. Another complaint was that large amounts of litter, discarded by users, accumulated on the street. This was because street cleaning and waste collection companies contracted by the district authority neglected to carry out their services in the presence of the *fluxo*.

The most dramatic concerns, though, related to security. While neither Conceição nor Olga had been robbed, they said that other neighbours had been and they felt they could not walk safely on the streets around their building. Conceição explained that where she lived, it was the Municipal Civil Guard (GCM) rather than the Military Police that was responsible for policing the streets. Although the local GCM unit is stationed at the end of their street and their street patrols are very visible, Conceição felt they did little to improve security:

They don't act! For example, they would stay here on the corner, come, stay for a few hours, change over. [...] But they can't leave their spot, an earthquake could hit there, they can't [move]! You could be beaten, robbed, and afterwards they'd come there and call the fire brigade to help you. [...] I mean, in that case, why do the police exist?

Conceição was also intensely aware of the presence of organised crime in the immediate vicinity. From her eighth-floor window, she pointed us towards what she claimed were drug trafficking points, brothels and “invasions” (occupied buildings) run by criminals. She said she was not afraid to pass on information and photographs of these activities to the authorities, even though it might put her in danger. While she was not embedded in the PCC's normative regime of justice, it felt close to her and she had to reckon with it in a way that Patrícia did not.

Two examples illustrate this. First, Conceição told us that during a street protest by residents a female crack user had thrown a bottle at the crowd which hit her in the leg, causing a minor cut. Apparently, word of this had made it back to *irmãos* operating in the area. A few days later, another user relayed apologies to Conceição from the woman who had thrown the bottle, also informing her that she had been beaten as punishment for injuring a local resident.

Another example was a threat that had been made collectively against the residents of the PPP by traffickers from an “invasion” in a parking lot opposite their building. The PPP had a security camera on its outer wall pointing towards the parking lot. The traffickers believed it was monitoring them and had sent threats to the residents via a resident of the PPP, demanding the camera be taken down and threatening to invade or even set fire to the building if it was not. The residents had passed back a message saying that they had not installed the camera, which was in theory monitored by the GCM (though they suspected that it didn't even work), and had no control over it. This had apparently

satisfied the traffickers, though they were careful to conceal their activities. Conceição explained:

They want us to take the camera down. [...] They put a tarpaulin cover over the favela, because from here you could see everything, so they put the tarp up. You can't see inside anymore, the trafficking there. You can see the back, but not the front, where they deliver, intercept, distribute.

Despite this proximity – not only to the everyday impacts of the *fluxo*, but also to organised crime – Conceição claimed not to be intimidated. Rather, she was making demands on the state via a repertoire of tactics. Since moving into the PPP, she had stood and been elected as a Councillor in the Participatory Municipal Council (CPM) of the central district. She attended monthly meetings of the Council, vocally raising issues she and other residents faced and pressing the authorities to ensure they answered. Conceição also attended the monthly meetings of the local Security Council (CONSEG). CONSEGs are participatory forums covering policing districts, which hold monthly meetings where members of the public can bring their demands to representatives of the local security forces and other relevant authorities. We attended meetings where she stood up and spoke angrily about conditions on her street. She and other regular attendees were dissatisfied with the current president and she considered standing for election, but eventually decided to support another candidate.

Meanwhile, Conceição was also involved in more direct forms of action. Local residents dissatisfied with existing institutional processes had created a group called “*Crack Não, Solução!*” (No Crack, Solutions!), which began to intermittently organise street protests and rallies. One had succeeded in shutting down the *Minhocão*, a major elevated freeway in the centre of São Paulo. We met Conceição at one protest outside City Hall, where around 30 residents banged pots and held up banners calling for the assistance of the authorities and for an end of Cracolândia. She and another leader of the group were eventually invited in for a meeting with the Mayor.

If these forms of direct action were strategic and planned, on one occasion Conceição and her neighbours took an even more drastic course of action in a situation of crisis. The copper wiring that provided power to their building was stolen from the street (a common crime in the centre of São Paulo). Aside from lighting and electronics, this meant residents lost access to the elevator in a 12-floor building and to piped water, as it could no longer be pumped up from the ground level. Despite constant calls to 156, ENEL (the electricity provider) and the GCM, no help was sent, and the building remained without power for four days. They were told that the presence of the *fluxo* made it impossible for the ENEL technicians to access the location where the repairs were needed. Eventually, the residents took matters into their own hands. One resident saw an ENEL car nearby and informed neighbours via WhatsApp. A group then went down and surrounded the ENEL car, and “practically kidnapped” it, saying that they wouldn't be allowed to leave until they solved the problem. Meanwhile, another group went to the GCM station to demand that they disperse the *fluxo*, so that the ENEL staff could access what needed. Through this direct

action, effectively forcing coordination between governance actors who could not coordinate themselves, the residents finally got their energy back.

The ease with which basic services broke down, and the great difficulty of getting them to function again, shows a certain underlying precarity in the PPP. Like Patrícia, Conceição has little confidence in the public sphere, but in her case, withdrawal does not seem like a plausible option. Instead, she focuses on leveraging the state to address her demands using both institutionalised and direct channels. Through the CPM and the CONSEG she has learned how to navigate public bureaucracies, while building relationships with likeminded residents and state agents. Where these channels break down, she engages in the more contentious politics of resident organising and street protest. In a moment of crisis, when her building lost power, she and her neighbours used their own bodies to demand a reaction from the authorities. Paradoxically, though, for Conceição, the state's perceived failure to govern seemed to have reinforced its normative status as a source of authority:

I'm fighting so that people don't just sit back, don't accept what's been imposed on them [...] Because the authorities don't look at us, they don't see us. We're transparent. We're invisible. So, we need to give them a slap in the face. We need to show them our side.

Tereza: Circulating to Survive

Tereza's story stands in stark contrast to the realities of Patrícia and Conceição. A 44-year-old Black woman with ten children, seven of whom still live with her in a building occupation in Cracolândia, Tereza cannot resolve her basic needs privately, nor easily access state institutions. Although she has run for the city council and is recognised as a political leader – or, as she calls herself, a "conflict mediator" – within the territory, her social position distances her from institutional spaces and exposes her to a greater variety of normative orders than the other two women. Indeed, to resolve her problems, Tereza has had to develop an ability to circulate, take advantage of opportunities, and cultivate relationships with diverse actors in and outside the state in order to survive, care for her family, and remain in the area.

Originally from the state of Rio de Janeiro, Tereza moved to São Paulo at the age of 15 with her mother. She first lived in the home of her mother's employer in the upscale neighbourhood of Higienópolis, not far from Cracolândia, where her mother worked as a domestic worker. She discovered she was pregnant only when she went into labour, and her mother's employer sent her to the hospital. The baby was delivered at a basic health centre, and her mother was fired shortly after. After trying to live in several places, they ended up in a housing movement occupation in the centre, close to Cracolândia. However, Tereza only moved permanently to the area about 15 years ago, right after the birth of another daughter, which child protection services had attempted to remove from her care

at the hospital, deeming her unfit to look after her. Since then, Tereza has sought to build her life and ensure the survival and education of her children.

Tereza had already spent time in a building occupation as a teenager. Later, when she could no longer afford to rent, Tereza joined other families as part of an organised housing movement to occupy a building on the Avenida Rio Branco, a large avenue that cuts through the territory. However, she disagreed with some of the rules of the movement, especially their rental charges, and so decided to autonomously occupy another vacant building near the Praça Princesa Isabel (the other side from Patrícia's building), where she currently lives. To successfully occupy the building, she obtained authorisation from PCC-affiliated traffickers to gather homeless families from the square and move in. According to Tereza, a small fee charged to occupiers and rents on the commercial stores on the ground floor of the building are used to cover general maintenance costs. Despite her previous discontentment with life in the housing movement, it is notable that she has brought many of the protocols she learned there to her own occupation. These include keeping careful records on all the occupiers, holding regular meetings to discuss internal matters, and, of course, an attentiveness to legal processes and knowledge of how to resist eviction.

If she has provisionally and precariously resolved her family's housing needs through a mixture of ingenuity, patronage and organisational skills, Tereza must engage with state bureaucracies to address some of her family's other essential needs, such as income generation, health services, and education. For income, she mainly relies on the *Bolsa Família* [Family Purse] welfare programme and a special benefit for children with special needs that she receives for an autistic son. Tereza has a strained relationship with health services, which led her to skip prenatal care for all ten of her children, resulting in gestational complications. Her children's needs demand a lot of energy, and she finds it especially difficult to deal with their schools. Her autistic son, currently lacks an in-class assistant at his public school, to which he is entitled, and Tereza is working on gathering the necessary documentation to ensure the school provide one. Another daughter has been experiencing severe bullying, and despite Tereza's attempts to address the issue, no action has been taken by the school. In each of these spheres, Tereza's relationships to state agencies and representatives is strained. But, in cases where she is able to overcome mistrust and bureaucratic hurdles, it is also essential.

But the state institutions that Tereza and her family have had greatest difficulties with are the police and criminal justice system. Her husband is currently in prison, and she occasionally visits him, enduring traumatic interactions with the prison authorities. One of her sons also spent time in a youth correctional facility and is often stopped and searched by police in the local streets. She also describes being regularly harassed by police. Indeed, Tereza's relationship to the police closely resembles the way Patrícia and Conceição describe the *fluxo* – as a source of threat, disorder and a constraint on her right to circulate freely. The *fluxo*, meanwhile, holds a more ambiguous meaning for her. As a former cocaine and alcohol user, she spent some time in proximity to the world of crack.

Her eldest daughter, who is now around 30, lives in the *fluxo*. Tereza believes that her daughter's intense exposure to violence, including from herself, partly explains her problematic drug use. According to Tereza, her daughter started dealing drugs to help support the household and escape from an abusive relationship in which she was routinely beaten. Her daughter stays with Tereza intermittently but regularly returns to the streets, though they remain in contact.

But Tereza was also able to change her life and build new relationships to governance actors partly through her relationship to the *fluxo*. She was able to access public services through the *De Braços Abertos* [Open Arms] programme. This harm reduction public policy was implemented by the city government, under a Worker's Party (PT) administration, between 2014 and 2016 to address problematic drug use in Cracolândia. Through the programme, Tereza lived in a hotel, received a monthly stipend, and had access to healthcare. She also joined a neo-Pentecostal evangelical church, where she received food baskets and clothes while assisting with church activities, such as organising donation lines. Once she gained control over her drug use, Tereza began taking a stand against police violence in the territory.

I got baptised and started seeking God. My life began to change and transform. I couldn't tolerate the injustices happening in Cracolândia. I confronted the police, shouted at them. One day, when people from the hotel we lived in were on the terrace, a fight broke out below. I captured the incident on video, and I saw two police officers beating a user. We started shouting and filming. One of the officers yelled 'monkey' from below. Everyone recorded it. I went down to challenge him, and at that moment, Lieutenant Paulo intervened. I showed him the video, and he promised to address the issue and removed the officer. That's when the name Tereza began to gain recognition.

This exposure led to a close relationship with a prominent and long-serving senator and later city councillor from the PT. Through this connection, Tereza gained access to a support network for people with disabilities, which allowed her son to receive a diagnosis and social benefits. More importantly, her association with this politician strengthened her role in activism against police violence, particularly towards drug users. Whenever incidents occurred in the area, she identified herself as the councillor's assistant to closely monitor police actions. These interventions raised her profile in the territory, leading to her running for the city council.

Although she garnered only a small number of votes, she gained respect and an enhanced reputation in the territory – even among the police forces. However, after the election, this respect did not last long and turned into police persecution, causing her to take a step back.

When I realised that the police were closely watching me, I started to withdraw. I have a daughter who goes to school, I have my children. Every time my kids were

approached, they would ask, 'Are you the councillor's child?' I became afraid that they might retaliate against my children, so I started to keep a low profile.

Tereza's political activism and conflict mediation are influenced by the political environment of the territory. While people still frequently seek her help in various situations, such as domestic disputes, she is cautious about exposing herself too much. About a year ago, she helped victims of a robbery in front of her building, and security cameras filmed her. These images were used by a sensationalist TV program to portray her as the criminal leader of the gang. This forced her temporarily into hiding and caused significant stress.

If Tereza must navigate the daily threats presented by the police, she must also take care to observe correct conduct within the world of crime, with which she also coexists. As her political presence grew, people from the PCC also began monitoring her, but they left her alone when they saw that she was defending the interests of drug users. There was an instance where she was taken, postpartum, to a PCC "debate" for stumbling upon information about a criminal scheme in the area. Someone demanded that her arms and legs be cut off, but the tribunal decided that she had found out by accident and would not use the information for personal gain. Nowadays, she states that some people involved in trafficking ask her to intervene in situations of police violence, but she claims that this is something she does independently regardless of who asks. When asked if she had ever been invited to work with the traffickers, she said that she had been several times but never wanted to get involved with crime because she believes that it is not God's plan for her life.

God didn't choose that for me. I have to completely change my context, leave God, and turn to the other side. So out here, I help them however I can, but I don't get involved because it goes against my way of life. I'm small, so it's better this way, them in their corner and me in mine.

Olivia: Coming to Accept Assistance

Olivia, our last interlocutor, is a 33-year-old transgender woman who has experienced violence since childhood and found support and means to improve her life through specialised public services and social projects in Cracolândia. Olivia's life has been marked by stories of rape, stabbings, assaults, and even being set on fire. As the oldest of her father's 14 children, Olivia didn't start school until she was nine years old because she had to work from a young age to take care of her siblings and support the household. At the age of seven, she started running away to the city centre, where she developed a network of friends and survival strategies, and began using drugs. By the time she was 14, she was living on the streets of the centre, which exposed her to various bureaucracies that dealt with homelessness, although always in a highly conflictual manner.

When Olívia turned 18, she was arrested for drug trafficking and spent a year and eight months in prison. After her release, she continued to access social assistance and health services, but her relationship with them remained difficult, marked by successive conflicts and expulsions. Olívia reported that when she accessed support services, she had to hide her feminine traits out of fear of prejudice and violence. It was only when she finally found a shelter with a specific department for transgender individuals that she was able to embrace her femininity once again. However, it was also at this service that she started smoking crack, which quickly escalated into problematic use, leading her back to the streets:

One day, I was with a roommate, we were high on powder, and it ran out. My friend smoked crack, which I had never done, and she bought crack for us. Then I said 'Let's go, come on!' She then said, 'It's like this, get a can, crush it, get a clip, poke holes, put ash, and hit it.' And we went through 42 rocks. We used it for almost two whole days. A few days later, begging at a traffic light, a woman gave me 50 reais [...] That's when I found out the gram of crack here was 10 reais. Damn, I never left Cracolândia. I lived on the streets in Cracolândia for about four, almost five years. I only left Cracolândia to beg and then came back. Addicted, addicted, addicted.

During her time living on the streets of Cracolândia, Olívia was unintentionally exposed to the influences of both the police and the PCC due to her intense drug use. She even faced threats from the PCC in a "debate" after they heard that she planned to report the coordinator of a public community centre who she believed did nothing for the users. However, the coordinator had ties with the drug trade and used his office to store drugs for traffickers to resell in the area. Eventually, Olívia managed to convince the PCC that her intention was to report him as an inefficient public employee, rather than for his involvement with the drug trade, which saved her from harm. This demonstrates how drug users living in the *fluxo* must carefully navigate the complex relationships between crime and public bureaucracies in Cracolândia. Although they operate distinct normative regimes, there are hidden interfaces and influential individuals who circulate between them.

When it comes to the security forces, Olívia had numerous intense interactions with the police while living on the streets of Cracolândia. They controlled the cleaning schedule of the local streets, dictating where the *fluxo* could gather, and frequently conducting surprise operations and inspections. Olívia also experienced numerous incidents of losing her belongings due to the city's urban cleaning operations conducted with police support, which meant she repeatedly had to start over. Even now, despite no longer being homeless, Olívia constantly feels the need to stay alert:

No one here has a good relationship with the police. We have to constantly watch our backs when we're out and about. When we're in the *fluxo*, we feel safe, but the moment we step outside, my dear... it's especially challenging because many people remember me from when I was using crack. So, it's always a game of

having to look both ways. We don't carry any possible weapons or anything like that, because even the slightest thing can be viewed as suspicious. Always carry proof of purchase for your cellphone, showing that it was bought from a store. We face persecution, unnecessary stops, and abuses of power. They divert us from where we want to go, forcing us to go another way. It's incredibly complicated, very complicated.

After years of intense crack and alcohol use, Olívia one day accepted an invitation to shower at the *Recomeço* [Begin Again] Programme, a state public health service in the region that addresses problematic drug use. The service provided some on-site healthcare and social assistance services and referred individuals to so-called “therapeutic communities” (rehabilitation clinics) for treatment. It was there that she met Miranda, a social worker, with whom she developed a close relationship. Miranda was later fired and started her own independent project in the region called *Tem Sentimento* [Have Feeling], focused on supporting transgender people.

Through Miranda, Olívia was able to participate in different social projects in the area run by civil society organisations, which were crucial in improving her living conditions. Thanks to these social projects, Olívia engaged in income-generating activities, received support to rent a room, and was able to start treatment for her drug problem. Although she faced many setbacks throughout the process and wasn't always able to fully commit to these projects, they marked the beginning of a better life for her and provided a support network that she still relies on today.

Through Miranda, Olívia also gained entry to the *Transcidadania* [Trans Citizenship] Programme. This is a public policy run by the São Paulo City Hall, which she joined during the pandemic. The main aim of *Transcidadania* is to reduce the vulnerability of the trans population by offering coordinated services, such as a monthly stipend equivalent to the minimum wage, educational support, and health monitoring. Olívia spent two years in the programme, during which she was able to restructure her life, get off the streets and find a place to rent, and resume her studies.

After her time at *Transcidadania* came to an end, Olívia found herself back in a state of homelessness. However, she soon secured a spot at a specialised shelter for transgender people in the South Zone of the city. She was warmly welcomed there and had the opportunity to take a makeup course. She also developed good relationships with the other residents. It was during this time that she began a romantic relationship with Paloma, another transvestite resident of the shelter, and they soon decided to start a life together.

They found a place to rent with the help of Olívia's *Bolsa Família* and Paloma's income from social projects. However, after selling a piece of land that Paloma owned in Brazil's Amazonian region, they decided to purchase a plot of land in São Paulo's West Zone. The plot came with a wooden shack, which they are still in the process of paying off. Owning a place and not having to pay rent had long been a dream for Olívia. However, they still have a long way to go before they consider themselves financially stable. Olívia is now

re-entering *Tem Sentimento*, where her partner already works. With their combined income of two minimum wages, they hope to pay off their debts and eventually build a brick house.

As can be seen, in her life in Cracolândia, Olívia was involuntarily subjected to the normative regimes of both the state security forces and the PCC, as well as bureaucracies related to health and social assistance. However, it was through her voluntary involvement with public services and social projects specifically designed for transgender individuals that she was able to break free from the intense vulnerability that had defined her life up until that point. Ultimately, Olívia recognises that Cracolândia is where she hit rock bottom, but it is also where she managed to rebuild her life:

This place here, whether you like it or not, I can say it's where I found the opportunity to get off the streets. At the same time it destroyed me, it was the street, it was drugs. But the space, the place outside of the drug is wonderful. First, because you're in the city centre, commercial. So here, there's money everywhere. There are many institutions and projects nowadays, very broad. So it's practically where I get my livelihood. Where I can maintain this standard of being a citizen.

Discussion: Territorializing the Actions of Street-Level Bureaucracies in Cracolândia

From the stories of our four female interlocutors, we can see that individuals living in close proximity in the territory of Cracolândia face very different problems and develop very different strategies for resolving them. The four women contrast starkly in terms of the material resources they can mobilise, the state and non-state actors they are able and willing to interact with, and the nature of these interactions. However, there are some notable patterns in the similarities and differences between the cases that we wish to highlight.

In a sense, the principal rupture between the four cases is quite clear. Patrícia and Conceição share much in common in terms of their social conditions, which allow them to resolve many of their basic needs, such as housing, income generation and healthcare, through private (or semi-public) means. They are also both clearly embedded in what Feltran (2020) calls the “normative regime of the state”. This is not to say that either invests much trust in state institutions, particularly those related to security and justice. In Patrícia’s case, her mistrust is evidenced by the private security of her building and in her use of the PVS to directly access police support (and even then, she doesn’t believe it operates effectively). In Conceição’s case, in the context of intense feelings of vulnerability and a lack of access to private security, she rails against the failures of the security forces both through participatory channels and direct action. Nonetheless, for both women, the law and state institutions still provide a normative orientation and plausible parameters for how justice and security *should* operate. The fact that it doesn’t,

leads Patrícia to partially compensate for perceived state failure via alternative channels, while Conceição seeks to bring the reality of public security more into line with her normative expectations.

Tereza and Olívia, meanwhile, experience the territory in very different ways. They live in fear of lacking a place to sleep or enough food, and must be open to engaging with a wide diversity of actors to secure these basic needs, whether public or charitable, legal or illegal. It is striking that the *fluxo* – the primary source of problems and threats as seen by Patrícia and Conceição – is viewed very differently by Olívia and Tereza. For Olívia, after a lifetime of violence, it is viewed as a place of relative safety. For Tereza, it is a world of complex sociability and a problematic but understandable place of refuge for victims of violence like her daughter. For both women, it was through their relationship to the *fluxo* that they first experienced minimally positive interactions with the state. By contrast, as poor women with histories of living in illegal occupations and on the streets, their primary experience of the police is as a source of threat and *disorder*. They are aware of the normative claims made by the state, and Tereza (not unlike Conceição in this regard) draws attention to its systematic failure to live up to these. However, for her, the state simply does not, indeed cannot, provide plausible normative parameters for how questions of security and justice are to be resolved.

Instead, both Tereza and Olívia must also come into contact with, and adjust their behaviour to, the normative regime of the PCC. Even though neither is directly involved in trafficking, they cannot escape the informal justice system established by the PCC, which is embedded in the social words in which they circulate. Tereza's occupation had to be approved by local traffickers, and in her activism against police violence she ends up helping some people involved in the drugs trade. Both Tereza and Olívia have also been forced to go before PCC “debates”, though both were thankfully cleared of wrongdoing. It is interesting to note that, in both cases, what prompted these debates was that they had discovered obscure relationships between drug trafficking and public institutions in the area. This means they must carefully navigate relationships with both the state and with organised crime, due to the opacity of possible relationships between them (Richmond, 2019). This is in stark contrast to the other two women. Patrícia is little aware of organised crime as distinct from “criminality” in general. Conceição is intensely aware of the proximity of organised crime and of some of its manifestations, but her understanding largely consists of conjecture built on these fragments. Tereza and Olívia's up-close knowledge of how these relationships operate reinforces, for them, the implausibility of the state's normative regime.

However, there are also other, less obvious, distinctions between the four cases. In terms of their broader orientation to the state, it is Conceição and Olívia who have become most embedded in institutional logics. Conceição's contentious repertoire (McAdam et al., 2004), even when using direct tactics, is fully oriented towards pressuring the state. Olívia's long history of distrust of social assistance programmes was eventually overcome by her investment in programmes specially targeted at the trans population. This process

of what we might call the “state capture” of her strategies is embedded in and reinforced by personal networks and nonstate civil society organisations, which are also focused on the trans community. Nonetheless, the result has been to turn Olívia into something of a “success story” for institutional processes and, to a significant extent, to render her legible to the state. The need for her to leave the territory might be understood as a direct result of this. For highly marginalised individuals on low incomes, the only way to remain in Cracolândia is on the streets or under conditions of illegality, implying a failure of state capture.

Interestingly, it is Patrícia and Tereza who somewhat defy this logic. Patrícia’s mistrust of the state and ability to resolve most problems privately means she can opt out of institutional processes in ways that Conceição cannot. Through private security and the informal (and somewhat opaque) forms of articulation she has established with the PVS, her strategies, in a way, also make her less “visible” to the state, though not in any way that disadvantages her. Meanwhile, Tereza’s highly negative experiences of the state, not only of the police, but of street-level bureaucrats and broader bureaucracies in the areas of social assistance, health and education, mean that, depending on the situation, she may avoid, enter into conflict with and only occasionally successfully access state services. Although she is not a crack user, in a sense, Tereza represents the incorrigibility of Cracolândia itself and its refusal to be subordinated to institutional logics. Tereza insists on remaining in the territory, strategically navigating Cracolândia’s governance assemblage, and opportunistically exploiting the scant material, social and political resources at her disposal. In a way, people like Tereza “encroach” on empty buildings, public spaces, and state programmes, repurposing them as needed and normalising their presence in the territory. However, this encroachment is unlikely to lead to eventual state recognition, and instead reproduces a territorialised conflict that shows little sign of abating.

Closing Remarks: Street-Level Bureaucracies Materializing Inequalities within the Territory

This article examined the relationship dynamics within a specific urban area involving four women living in São Paulo’s Cracolândia, an unruly and socially heterogeneous territory characterized by intense conflict but also home to a diverse array of actors and activities. By defining the territory as the unit of analysis, it was observed that the same street-level bureaucracy can be non-existent in the lives of certain individuals, such as social assistance and health services for Patrícia and Conceição, while being vital survival alternatives for others like Tereza and Olívia.

Similarly, the police, a street-level bureaucracy present in the lives of all our interlocutors, is perceived and accessed in very different ways among them. In terms of access, Patrícia has managed to secure a privileged contact channel with the police, while Conceição has occupied institutional spaces for public security discussions to enhance her sense of

safety. Conversely, Tereza and Olívia have no intention of accessing the police but merely seek to avoid becoming targets of violence. For Tereza, the only form of contesting the police is through complaints made outside institutionalized spaces, which she can only do with the political and institutional backing of a parliamentary contact.

In general, we can assert that some actors are formally and explicitly integrated into working relationships, such as the public social assistance system, with its bureaucratic protocols of evaluation and referral between diverse programs, or relationships of outsourcing, like those of the PPPs or state-contracted waste collection services. In other cases, organizational innovations have allowed some nonstate actors and social groups to effectively attach themselves to state institutions to more effectively leverage their attention and resources, such as ACEMG or PVS. Then there are broader informal networks that permeate the porous borders between state institutions and civil society, including individuals who transit between participatory councils and protest groups, or NGOs established by veterans of state social policies. Finally, the hidden interfaces identified between organized crime and different parts of the state indicate that the deep rupture between their respective normative regimes does not prevent situated relationships and exchanges spanning across it. Even this famously unruly territory requires and produces some minimal mechanisms for coordinating collective life, albeit in ways that do not really satisfy anyone.

These findings offer an innovative perspective for the literature on street-level bureaucracy, as they go beyond the focus on the interaction between SLBs and citizens and the exercise of discretion by these professionals. Thus, it is possible to understand how the actions of SLBs impact the dynamics of a territory and how their actions are essential in defining and reinforcing inequalities against certain impoverished and racialized groups. For future research, we intend to incorporate data from the SLBs themselves to understand how this territorial dynamic impacts their individual decision-making processes.

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