

Human Rights, Democracy and Citizenship in Timbaúba

By Alejandro Reyes-Arias



Photo by Nancy Scheper-Hughes.

Abdoral Gonçalves Queiroz, head of Timbaúba's extermination group, sits shackled inside this police car, forced to watch the march against the death squads.

Brazil's democratic transition in the late 1980s brought about significant advances in human rights legislation, embodied in the 1988 Federal Constitution and the 1990 Child and Adolescent Statute. However, democratization was not accompanied by a concomitant implementation of such rights and, in many cases, repressive mechanisms such as death squads and extermination groups seem to have increased their activities after the end of the military regime. UC Berkeley Professor of Anthropology Nancy Scheper-Hughes, who has studied human rights issues in the Brazilian northeast since the 1960s, analyzed the complex relationship between human rights, democracy and citizenship through a case study of death squad operations in the plantation market town of Timbaúba, in the state of Pernambuco.

The 1964 CIA-supported "Revolution" inaugurated two decades of military dictatorship that instituted both direct and indirect forms of

repression. In her book *Death Without Weeping*, Scheper-Hughes poignantly describes the poverty, marginalization, exclusion, hunger, malnutrition and epidemics that resulted in frightening rates of infant mortality and represented insidious forms of everyday violence. More direct forms of repression were the detentions, disappearances and torture of suspected political dissidents and the activities of death squads.

The repression was supported by the wealthy, who believed that Brazil's path to progress could only be assured by an authoritarian regime. The dictatorship did, in fact, bring about an economic upturn, although at a significant social cost. In the 1980s, however, as the so-called Brazilian economic miracle began to falter, the military faced increasing demands for a democratic transition. In 1985 the first civilian president was elected and in 1988 the new Federal Constitution was enacted.

The 1990s, however, saw a paradoxical resurgence of death squads. This can be viewed in part as a reaction to what was perceived as a state of lawlessness, wherein thugs and “marginals” were thought to be free to terrorize “decent people.” A real policing vacuum — the result of reduced budgets and a poorly trained, poorly equipped and corrupt police force — coincided in fact with a rise in criminality, due in great part to a new push in drug trafficking from the Colombian cartels as well as the smuggling of contraband and other forms of organized crime. When the misery of the shantytowns invaded the areas previously reserved for the middle and upper classes, the elites began to accept death squads as legitimate substitutes for control.

Despite (or perhaps in reaction to) the extraordinary legal reforms supporting human rights, death squads began targeting street children without eliciting much public indignation. Such violence against children and the general public’s indifference or even support are indicative, according to Scheper-Hughes, of an underlying racial hatred that is disguised by the prevailing myth of Brazilian racial democracy. Poor, black youth are viewed as inherently predisposed to crime and are often referred to as *bichos*, animals, not quite human.

Death squads first entered into Alto do Cruzeiro, a shantytown in Timbaúba, in 1987, when 12 young black men in trouble with the law were seized from their homes by masked men in uniform, tortured and executed. This ushered in a period of terror for the residents of Alto do Cruzeiro. Terrified into silence, the shantytown population refused to talk about the killings and abductions. The middle classes were quietly complicit and the deaths were not even mentioned in the local opposition paper, whose editor questioned: “Why should we criticize the execution of marginals?” In addition, rumors of an international black market in organs were linked to the disappearance of children and youths, which deflected attention from the true nature of the death squads.

Curiously, some shantytown dwellers sided with the police and the death squads. One of the paradoxical aspects of repressive institutions is the frequent complicity or acquiescence by the very people who are targeted by the violence. To understand this, Scheper-Hughes pointed out that the living conditions in Brazilian

shantytowns tend to reproduce the moral economy of concentration camps. She referred to Primo Levi’s essay “The Grey Zone,” where he describes “the structures and technologies of violence and terror that become embodied in the common sense of everyday life and goad or trick the destitute into complicity, turning them into agents of their own destruction.” Under extreme conditions, people’s despair leads them to identify with their oppressors as their only chance for survival.

In 1992, Scheper-Hughes, prompted by Franciscan liberation theology nun Sister Juliana, began investigating extrajudicial killings of street children and youths. Together with Berkeley anthropologist Daniel Hoffman, she followed a cohort of 22 street children whose friends had been killed by police and other street kids. Despite laws that prohibit the incarceration of minors in regular jails, several of them were being held in adult jails, presumably for their protection. Rejected by their families and despised by local merchants, several of them had already been marked for extermination.

Between 1988 and 1990, the Federal Police reported more than 5,000 children murdered in Brazil. In that period, the Medical Legal Institute of Recife received an average of 15 dead children per month. The state of Pernambuco became Brazil’s most violent state and Timbaúba was labeled crime capital of Pernambuco.

In the 1990s, Abdural Gonçalves Queiroz, a young, working-class resident of the flatlands around Timbaúba, managed to build relationships with plantation and factory owners, businesspeople, the police, political leaders and the judge and rose as an extrajudicial enforcer of control. He formed a group of vigilantes who, with the support of the local elite, provided protection, settled debts, carried out vendettas and ran drug and arms trafficking in markets throughout region. The bulk of their activities was focused on surveillance and “street cleaning,” ridding the town of “undesirables.” Although the numbers are still unknown, it is estimated that they killed between 100 and 200 people during their reign of terror, probably with the aid of the police and the support of the elite. In a five-year period, they eliminated virtually all the older street children of Timbaúba.

But Abdural seems to have overstepped his boundaries. By the late 90s he had displaced the mayor and the police and demanded weekly

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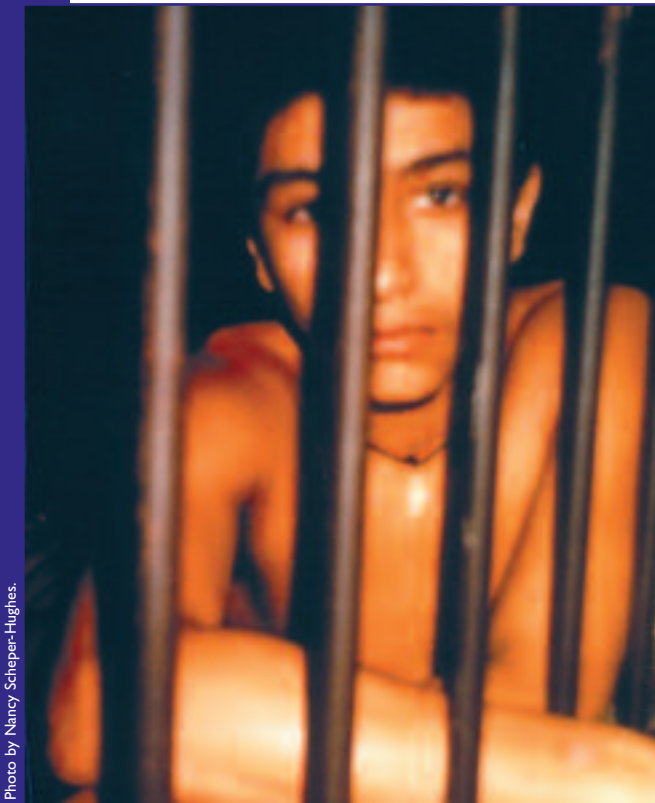


Photo by Nancy Scheper-Hughes.

The primary victims of Abdoral's reign of terror, like Pedro da Silva, 17, were poor, black and in trouble with the law, mainly for theft.

wages from the municipal government and steady contributions from private citizens. He also started giving protection to highway robbers and dealers in contraband. When he began targeting middle-class transgressors — women in extramarital affairs, homosexuals and transvestites — he lost much of his support.

In 2000, newly appointed judge Mariza Borges and district attorney Humberto da Silva Graça joined forces with a small local group of courageous human rights activists to wrest the community from vigilantes. Despite the rise of new forms of repression, the democratic transition also opened the doors to a new class of intellectuals: people who lacked professional credentials, material resources and symbolic capital, but who used the new Constitution to mobilize in the defense of street children and others targeted by the death squads.

In the spring of 2001, Scheper-Hughes received an invitation from Judge Borges to help in the criminal case against Abdural Queiroz. Although her book *Death Without Weeping* had not been translated into Portuguese — due to resistance to the controversial issues it raised —

a Spanish translation was being used as evidence by the prosecution. Scheper-Hughes was now being asked to help identify the victims and survivors of the death squads. The relatives were afraid to testify and only a fraction of the executions were known to the judge and prosecutor.

In addition to talking to friends in the shantytown, Scheper-Hughes and her husband Michael searched the records at the Cartório Civil, where 95 homicides were recorded between 1995 and 2000, 31 of which were found to be linked to Abdural's death squad.

Scheper-Hughes' participation was seized by the human rights activists as a tool to build a broader coalition against death squads, bringing together political leaders, teachers and officials. On July 19, 2001, a march against death squads was organized to mark the one year anniversary of the arrest of Abdural and his accomplices. Most residents were still too afraid to participate in the march, but the municipal secretary of education declared the day a public holiday and led the town's school children down the streets of Timbaúba. José Carlos Araújo, the outspoken radio host of People's Radio, and his wife Maria do Carmo also participated, while hundreds of fearful residents peeked at the event from their homes. The march was led by street children dressed in white, carrying crosses with signs painted with the names of their siblings who had been killed.

At some point, two heavily armed police jeeps appeared in front of the march, frightening the demonstrators. However, the police had been ordered by Judge Borges to accompany and protect the march. In one of the cars, a shackled Abdural Queiroz was forced to watch the public outcry against his activities. The march ended at the mayor's office, where the demonstrators delivered a plaque commemorating the end of terror, demanding that it be placed in the main square facing City Hall. The event received national TV and radio coverage by Rede Globo, and the public recognition of the demands for rights of an oppressed population created a sense of empowerment unknown until then.

However, in April 2004 the shopkeepers of Timbaúba issued a manifesto decrying the



Photo by Emily Earhart.

liberal legislation and the “excessive” protections against “criminal children,” appropriate, according to them, to the developed countries of the first world, but inapplicable in countries like Brazil. During a visit in the spring of 2004, Scheper-Hughes heard stories of a resurgence of death squads formed by Abdural and his accomplices, who were communicating with local bandits via cell phone. District attorney Humberto Graça had been reassigned to Recife, and Judge Borges was now viewed with suspicion as a liability to the community. Human rights activists were receiving death threats, and the elite once again actively supported hired killers behind the scenes. That spring a large cache of weapons was discovered in the warehouse of a local shopkeeper and in the garages of his friends and neighbors. The ringleader was arrested, but he was released within a matter of weeks.

Then, at 7:30 pm on April 24, 2004, José Carlos Araújo was shot in the chest, belly and mouth by two young men on motorcycles, in view of his wife and three children. The 37-year-old community radio host had been denouncing the continuing existence of death squads in Timbaúba and the involvement of local businessmen in murders in the region. The local police later captured a suspected assassin,

19-year-old Elton Jonas Gonçalves, who confessed that he had killed Araújo because the radio host had accused him on the air of being a bandit. In the last program before his assassination, Araújo seemed to foresee his end and bid farewell to his audience. “My friends, I do my duty with a clear conscience, but now it is time to return to reality, to the world of God, a world where I will never be betrayed. At the end of my program I always say that life is good, but it also has difficult times. The way out of hard times is never to bow your head. It is time to rise up and keep going.”

The story of death squads and resistance in democratic Brazil is one that clearly has no end in sight. But it is in the struggles of people like José Carlos Araújo and the intellectuals and human right activists of Timbaúba, who valiantly exercise what James Holston has termed “insurgent citizenship,” that hopes for a more just society remain alive.

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Nancy Scheper-Hughes speaks at CLAS.