

Motherhood against genocide: The Mothers of May Movement in the face of *the democracy of the massacres*



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2006 Crimes, an episode in which the murders of more than 600 people in the state of São Paulo committed by state agents became known. From their union and struggle, the Mothers of May became one of the main movements to confront the genocide of the poor, black and peripheral carried out in Brazil. In this article, I analyze the way these mothers have narrated and denounced state violence, evaluating some of the many theoretical income that the native category of *democracy of the massacres* can offer us to understand the death policies underway in the country.

ABSTRACT

The Mothers of May Movement is a network of mothers and relatives of the victims of the May

Keywords: Mothers of May, Democracy of the massacres, Anthropology of politics, Genocide.

1 INTRODUCTION^{1,2}

The day was born on the morning of May 15, 2006. Débora Maria da Silva lived a mixture of happiness, for having spent the previous day, a Sunday of Mother's Day and her birthday, along with her children and grandchildren, and apprehension, for her son to have left his house late at night to rest and return to work. Worried about the news and rumors that circulated, she tuned the radio to the local programming of Santos, seeking information about the confusing days that were happening in the state of São Paulo.

Turning on the radio, the reporter announced: "There was a killing spree in our region, with 16 people killed," and went on to read the names of the victims of each city of the Baixada Santista, starting with Santos. Listening to see if he knew anyone, he heard his son's name as third on the list.

Freaked out. It felt like the world had collapsed on top of me. I couldn't believe it, but soon confirmation came. I suffered very, very much. Imagine a mother receiving the news of her child's death over the radio! I spent a few days without eating, without sleeping, trying to explain why? (MOTHERS OF MAY, 2011a, p. 25).

¹ This article is derived from my master's thesis in Social Anthropology defended at PPGAS/USP, entitled *From mourning to struggle: the Mothers of May Movement in the Santos Lowlands*, which was funded by FAPESP.

² This work is linked to FAPESP Thematic Project No. 2020/07886-8, "Arts and semantics of creation and memory", coordinated by Fernanda Arêas Peixoto.



Not knowing why they killed her son, Deborah went through an intense depressive process: "for 40 days I vegetated, I ended up being hospitalized, more or less for 10 days. That's when I felt him say to me, 'Mom, get up! Be strong!'" (MOTHERS OF MAY, 2011a, p. 25). She saw her son Roger in the hospital bed, taking her by the arm and telling her to go fight. "I really got up. The next day I was discharged. I went home and, after a week or so, I went looking for the other mothers who had lost their children as well" (MÃES DE MAIO, 2011a, p. 25).

Upon meeting these other mothers, all living in peripheral regions in the Baixada Santista of São Paulo, they got together and went out in search of information about what had happened. "It was from these four women who fought for justice for the murder of their children that the Mothers of May Movement emerged" (CAAF-UNIFESP, 2018, p. 87). The birth of the Mothers of May Movement is a milestone in Brazil's recent history, spawned from the largest series of massacres committed by the Brazilian state since the military dictatorship, which became known as the May Crimes of 2006.

The objective of this text is to identify, through the analysis of some of the main political documents authored by the Mothers of May Movement, in dialogue with a pertinent literature, the conceptions of this movement about themes that are relevant to it, such as the Crimes of May 2006 and the *democracy of the massacres*.

To this end, I will focus more specifically on the following documents of this movement: *Crimes of May and the Democracy of the Massacres – Part 1: map of violence in Brazil*, 2011; *May Crimes and the Democracy of Slaughter – Part 2: The Crimes of May 2006*, 2011; *What were the May Crimes?*, 2011; *New manifesto for the federalization of investigations into the "Crimes of May 2006" of 2012*; *Demilitarization of the police in Brazil, 2012*; and the Final Letter of the First International Meeting of Mothers of Victims of State Violence, 2016.³

2 THE CRIMES OF MAY

Awareness of the scale of the homicides committed in May 2006 was only partially and progressively obtained. In fact, to this day it is not known exactly how many people were killed and disappeared in this period. Still, it is known that there were hundreds of cases. And this is thanks not to mandatory clarifications that should be provided by the State, but to the research work of the Mothers of May and different researchers.

The Mothers of May insist on warning that, more than 15 years after the May Crimes, the State has never given an official explanation for the murders committed, and only enunciated, together with the media, a discourse that these deaths were committed by "Attacks of the PCC" (the First Command

³ These texts, among others, make up the books of the Mothers of May that are referenced here (MOTHERS OF MAY, 2011a, 2011b, 2018, 2019).



of the Capital, the largest criminal faction in the state of São Paulo). With this, they counted on these cases being forgotten after having their deaths "naturalized" as "criminals".

The first inflection point that the Mothers of May questioned and offered another way of looking at it is the very narrative of what these events were about, made explicit in the difference in nomenclature adopted:

One of the first and most important struggles of all movements involved in the search for truth and justice in the episode was, precisely, to call the killing of May 2006, practiced mainly by the state, by a more appropriate name than that chosen by the big corporate press and the police, in order to divert attention from their responsibilities. Hence this political and historiographical dispute, which remains ongoing on a daily basis, as to how to name events: "CCP attacks," as they insist on calling it; or "Crimes of May", as we prefer (MOTHERS OF MAY, 2011b, s/p).

The ato de nomear não é mere detalhe, mas implica uma forma de constituir memória e os próprios cognitive processes de atribuição de sentido a respect do ocorrido. In this sense "the terminology to name what happened is part of the struggles for the senses and meanings of the passing. These ways of naming also make diverse senses, and change over time" (JELIN, 2001, p. 70-71).

But, after all, what were the Crimes of May 2006? This is how the Mothers of May narrate:

Everything indicates that the wave of violence began on May 12, the eve of Mother's Day, and in the first two days 43 public officials were murdered in attacks immediately attributed to the CCP. Most of the homicides placed in the account of such an entity did not occur during shootings, but were the result of ambushes against public agents (mostly low-ranking police and prison officers) who were off duty in the streets, restaurants, bars and public spaces of São Paulo. Such civil servants, by the way, had not received any warning from the authorities who commanded them – probably due to the high electoral pressure already underway, even though the plans attributed to the CCP, it is reported, were already known to many commanders weeks or even months before the attacks. There was the image of the big politician-candidates to watch over... Just as there are those who point to concrete indications that several rival sectors of the police would have taken advantage of the CCP's alibi to settle accounts among themselves, between rival factions within the police itself. In any case, in addition to these attacks, the PCC would also have organized rebellions in more than half of the prisons of São Paulo and ordered the setting of fire in several buses, in addition to hitting some banks as well, paralyzing the circulation of transport and a significant part of the mercantile-financial in the state to draw attention to their demands (MÃES DE MAIO, 2018, p. 107).

The press, the police and the government of São Paulo considered these "PCC attacks" as a revenge of this organization due to the transfer of hundreds of its alleged leaders to a remote maximum security prison on the eve of Mother's Day (denying the right to visit their relatives), who would have rebelled in dozens of prisons and sent a *general salary*⁴ (MALLART, 2011) in the state of São Paulo.

The Mothers of May have long disputed that narrative. They said that the real reasons for this conflict were due more to internal disputes in the criminal networks of which the State is continuously

⁴ As explained by an interlocutor of Mallart, "The Salve General is a communication of the Command. When it revolutionizes some walk, for example, in 2006 it had the attacks. In 2007 came the general salute of peace, the white flag. The hail of peace was communicated to everyone (Caius)" (MALLART, 2011, p. 311).



part (MÃES DE MAIO, 2018), since several public agents play "roles of collaborators, competitors, negotiators and/or bribe collectors" (MÃES DE MAIO, 2018, p. 111). Concretely, the paradigmatic case that led to such a conflict was the kidnapping of Marcola's stepson (considered one of the leaders of the PCC), Rodrigo Olivatto de Moraes, by two civil police officers who tried to extort the organization demanding the payment of three hundred thousand reais (JOZINO, 2020).

Thus, unlike what the official police-media discourse propagated, the "PCC attacks" did not occur during all nine days of high homicide rates (between May 12 and 21), but lasted until May 14, nor did they target civilians, targeting only security agents. What would have happened from then on was a "response" from the state to the CCP's so-called initial attacks:

The "reaction" of the state, also called the "response", was supposedly to "fight back" against the wave of violence that would have been initiated by the CCP. And in fact, in the following days, the police and paramilitary agents linked to it began to brutally intensify *a practice already verified historically in their daily work in the state of São Paulo, at least since the emergence of the Death Squad in the 1960s, and the prolongation of its lead in the conduct of many members of the Tobias de Aguiar Ostensive Patrols – ROTA, among other violent police groups: the "killing of suspects" in the peripheries, with the participation of public exterminators and/or private agents (some also linked to "private security" companies)* (MÃES DE MAIO, 2018, p. 107-108).

In Brazil, the Death Squads date back to the 1950s, first in Rio de Janeiro and then in São Paulo, and were characterized as groups made up of police officers to execute "enemies", "bandits" or "communists". The scale of the murders committed by groups of Death Squads is not known, but on Internet pages it is possible to find estimates that their victims have passed the thousands of cases, considering only the period of the military dictatorship.

In the current democratic regime such groups continue to operate, and in a recent report the extent of their executions was measured: *Squads killed in 3 years twice as many as the dictatorship in 21* (REINA; PEDRETTI, 2020). In addition to such paramilitary groups, deaths are practiced exponentially in the history of some military groupings, as was demonstrated in another recent report: *Rota, 50 years of killing* (STABILE, 2020). In the May Crimes, Death Squads⁵ and belligerent units of the police forces acted together in the killing carried out.

But the collusion for the killing wasn't just organized between police forces and Death Squads—which, as it should be remembered, are often made up of the same agents. The Crimes of May 2006 were also engineered in coalition with political authorities:

There is evidence to indicate that from May 14 to May 20, there was an official decision to initiate a repressive action in response to the attacks. The Secretary of Public Security at the time, Saulo de Castro Abreu Filho, would have defended the following position: "Distribute the large-caliber weapons and we will go up." This statement by the secretary reportedly happened at an emergency meeting during the early hours of May 12 to May 13. As a consequence, it is possible to affirm that there was an official decision of the Public Security

⁵ In some cases, they are also referred to as Extermination Groups, but they act similarly to the Death Squads.



command for the police forces to leave for repression actions from that moment (AMADEO, 2019, p. 334).

Thus, the killings were plotted by the government bureaucracy with the military bureaucracy, so the executions were not actions taken without the consent of higher authorities.

Currently, there are abundant indications that the high command of the police – under the applause of representatives of the elites⁶ and, later, of the Public Ministry of SP, itself – decided to "go up" "without pity or mercy" of the population in an abusive and indiscriminate way, killing already at the beginning more than 100 people, much of it in circumstances that had little to do with the supposed "legitimate defense" (the so-called "acts of resistance followed by death", who have given a real "license to kill" to the police in various regions of the country). In addition, hooded police officers who were members of death squads killed hundreds more in the dead of night. These police officers conducted random "hunts" of poor young men, some because of their alleged criminal records or tattoos (taken as signs of a link to crime), and many others based on mere prejudice by color and appearance: racism pure and simple. The famous "being in the wrong place at the wrong time"... (MOTHERS OF MAY, 2018, p. 108).

Thus, in addition to suffering inestimable losses for loved ones murdered or disappeared, mothers still carry the suffering of non-clarification and non-resolution by the State in the face of the Crimes carried out.

It turns out that even after more than five years, we still don't really know what precisely happened during those days. Among hundreds of uninvestigated cases, there are even many missing young people, with indications of having been enterrad@s in mass graves. *To this day there is not even an official state report that attempts to explain and give a minimally satisfactory answer to society about the events of "May 2006".* They gave up even any formality, simply remaining silent, enjoying their secular impunity (MÃES DE MAIO, 2018, p. 107).

With the current COVID-19 pandemic and the exponential death caused in Brazil, managed by a bureaucracy that reproduces the conditions of expansion of these deaths, the image of mass graves was debated by Araújo, Medeiros and Mallart in the following formulation: "in this way, at the same time that these images of the ditches feed an atmosphere and an imaginary of death, the dead themselves are made invisible. Simultaneously, what we have is the materiality of death *versus* the invisibility of the dead" (ARAÚJO; MEDEIROS; MALLART, 2020, p. 7).

It is possible to affirm that a similar effect of materiality of death *versus* invisibility of the dead was produced with the scale of the killing in the Crimes of May. This invisibility is produced by the State, and identified by the mothers, as in the excerpt above, in the form of a silence. A state silence that operates a denial and naturalization of deaths, and that is not confused with eventual silences

⁶ "As evidenced by the Letter of the MP of São Paulo, stamped by dozens of prosecutors on May 25, 2006, recognizing and welcoming 'the efficiency of the response of the Military Police', on page 239 of 'São Paulo sob achaque', a report published in May/2011 by the NGO Justiça Global and the International Human Rights Clinic of Harvard University" (MÃES DE MAIO, 2018, p. 111).



observed in certain mothers, which can represent both an imposed silence (MORAWSKA, 2018) and a form of resistance to everyday violence (DAS, 2020).

Reporting the experience regarding the research on the May Crimes, Javier Amadeo, one of the coordinators of the study conducted by CAAF-UNIFESP, describes a *modus operandi* of the executions carried out. "First, *the curfew*: a common element in several cases was the warning by the Military Police of a curfew for the civilian population" (AMADEO, 2019, p. 340).

"Secondly, the *choice of victims*: several reports indicate that military police officers would have approached people with passage through the police or 'suspects' linked to the crime, and the vast majority of these people approached would have been murdered hours later" (AMADEO, 2019, p. 340).⁷ "Thirdly, the *hooded attack*: groups of hooded people, usually in unmarked cars, would have attacked and killed the victims previously approached and others who were together" (AMADEO, 2019, p. 340).

Finally, *the arrival of the police and the alteration and destruction of evidence*: another common element in these attacks was the rapid arrival of police vehicles, in many cases without sufficient time to have been activated, and the removal of the bodies, the removal of projectile shells and the alteration of the crime scene to hinder the investigation of the deaths (AMADEO, 2019, pp. 340-341).

These four elements raised by Amadeo raise some questions for reflection on these extermination practices. This *modus operandi* shows that the murders were previously planned and had the participation not only of those who pulled the trigger and those who drove the vehicles, but of the police officers on duty who went immediately after to the places of the homicides to alter the scenes of the crimes and hinder the investigations.

Another characteristic feature is the curfew issue. Police do not acknowledge that they ordered any *curfews* in May 2006, but several residents report hearing such an order (GOMES; ASSUMPÇÃO; SILVA, 2019). At first, the reaction of several people was one of indifference, given that "the family members express that this touch did not have a direct meaning in their lives, because they did not understand that their relatives could be among the lives threatened" (GOMES; ASSUMPÇÃO; SILVA, 2019, p. 365).

However, in the next moment, when in addition to the news of the *curfew*, rumors spread about the executions carried out, indifference gave way to fear, a fear that began to be aroused even by media coverage and political authorities. Arantes (2007), when analyzing the panic that formed in the city of São Paulo, reports that sectors of the media, the State and even renowned intellectuals began to report

⁷ This demonstrates that the choice of victims was not so random, as some authors suggest, but was based on racial, territorial and class criteria. And these criteria were perceived both by the Mothers of May, as well as by some analysts, such as Sanjurjo and Feltran: "the Mothers of May and other collectives of relatives of victims of police violence seek to emphasize the racial (black), class (poor) and territorial (peripheries) criteria of the repression perpetrated" (SANJURJO; FELTRAN, 2015, p. 43).



the wave of murders (always thought of as committed by the PCC, never by state agents) as "our September 11".⁸ The idea was evoked that "we were being attacked by enemies", and therefore it was necessary for the police to react and resume public order. The *curfew*, therefore, dramatizes a state of panic and terror provoked *in loco* in the peripheries and *ad nauseam* in the media coverage.

Several traces of this *modus operandi* of executions are seen in other massacres committed by police officers. As a result of the action of the State in the May Crimes and after them, by denying basic support to the relatives of the victims, a perception is observed among the mothers that the *families' sense of justice* had also been hijacked:

There are hundreds of mothers, thousands of relatives and amig@s who had, in the space of little more than a week, their loved ones cowardly murdered, and to this day they continue without any decent satisfaction on the part of the Brazilian State. The vast majority of cases remain archived, without proper investigation to search for the Truth of the facts; without Trials of the real culprits (the agents of the state and its other armed arms); without any Protection, Indemnity or Reparation by the institutions that took away their/our youth. A state that still insists on hijacking also the feeling of Justice of these/our families (MÃES DE MAIO 2018, p. 118).

The May Crimes were, therefore, this terrible event that gave rise to the May Mothers Movement as its side effect, after having imposed on these mothers the loss of people who organized meanings in their lives, meanings that had to be rearranged. The May Crimes, however, were not an isolated episode, but are part of a long history of genocide, massacres and massacres that constitute the *democracy of the massacres*.

3 THE DEMOCRACY OF THE MASSACRES

The year 1990 represents a milestone for the history of contemporary mothers' movements in Brazil. Just two years after the promulgation of the "Citizen Constitution", which represented an apogee in the process of redemocratization after 21 years of military dictatorship in the country, the first recognized slaughter of the new democracy occurred: the Acari Massacre in Rio de Janeiro. Freitas thus narrated the event:

The drama of Acari began in July 1990, with the disappearance of eleven people, three girls and eight boys. Of those eleven, eight were minors. The "Eleven of Acari", as they became known, actually disappeared in Magé, in a place belonging to the grandmother of one of the disappeared. These are mostly belonging to the favela of Acari, or its vicinity. Apparently, the group traveled to flee from police officers who were trying to extort money from some of them who had been involved in robberies and thefts of truck loads. Bandits or not, the concrete fact is that these young people were removed from this site on a night in July 1990 by men who called themselves police officers and were never seen again (FREITAS, 2002, p. 70).

⁸ This analogy is loaded with meanings, giving rise to multiple analytical comparisons. Taking as a parallel Butler's (2019) interpretation of the succession of September 11, 2001 in the United States, I understand that in both cases the idea of the State giving a "response" due to "enemy attacks" is verified. However, unlike in the American case, in São Paulo the State never admitted that it "attacked back", as a response to the PCC, claiming that there were only confrontational situations that led to the deaths of "bandits" who continued to attack. Still, the multiplicity of meanings that the analogy carries reserves significant importance.



The forced disappearance of the ⁹ 11 young people from Acari led to the constitution of the first movement of mothers of victims of the democratic period, the Mothers of Acari¹⁰. The Mothers of Acari, therefore, have central importance for the subsequent movements of mothers, and were the subjects of research in areas such as journalism (NOBRE, 1994), social work (FREITAS, 2002), sociology (ARAÚJO, 2007) and anthropology (VIANNA, 2015).

Since this moment, several movements of mothers have emerged throughout Brazil. Within the limits of this article, I highlight two more, which have unique relevance to the May Mothers Movement. Still in Rio de Janeiro, in the early 2000s:

The years 2003 and 2004 were an important milestone in the growing mobilization of the social base, led by relatives and friends of victims, against violence in the country. On April 16, 2003, four young men were killed in a police operation in the Borel favela, in the Tijuca neighborhood, in the North Zone. The police justified the deaths by stating that the young people were members of criminal groups, a fact later denied. In addition, cadaveric reports showed that the youths were executed, and witnesses said at least one of the youths tried to dissuade officers from the suspicion that they were thugs and asked authorities to identify himself, but was not answered. From this case, a group of Borel residents, supported by social movements, organized a movement against police violence known as "Can I identify myself?", alluding to the last sentence said by one of the victims of the massacre (SILVA; SAINTS; RAMOS, 2019, p. 22).

From the emergence of the Movement "Can I Identify?", in a short time, a new network emerged as a movement of mothers and family members in Rio de Janeiro:

One year after the massacre, the residents of the Borel favela met with similar movements from other favelas and hills of Rio de Janeiro, as well as NGOs defending Human Rights, such as the Center for Global Justice, and social movements, such as the Popular Struggle Front, the Proletarian Culture Center and the Center for Popular Movements, to hold a large demonstration in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro. This demonstration marked the act of formation of the Network of Communities and Movements against Violence (SILVA; SAINTS; RAMOS, 2019, p. 22-23).

Founded in 2004, the Network of Communities and Movements against Violence in Rio de Janeiro has become a reference for the struggles of mothers' movements in this state and beyond. Above all, one of its native categories, *Era das Chacinas*, served as an inspiring basis for the Mothers of May Movement to¹¹ formulate its understanding of the contemporary Brazilian political regime.

⁹ On the category of "forcibly disappeared", cf. Araujo (2014). Similar categories can be seen in the Brazilian case, such as that of "political disappeared" (AZEVEDO, 2019), and in the Argentine case, such as "detainees-disappeared" (SANJURJO, 2018). For other questions about disappearances, cf. Ferreira (2015).

¹⁰ I am aware that there are Mothers' Movements in Brazil long before the Mothers of Acari, such as the "Mothers' Clubs of the Periphery", quite active since the time of the military dictatorship in Brazil. That said, due to the limits of this text, I choose to consider in the analysis only the movements of mothers of victims that have emerged in the current democracy.

¹¹ In addition to the Mothers of Acari and the Network of Communities and Movements Against Violence, which are references on Brazilian soil for the emergence and formulations of the Mothers of May, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo of Argentina – a group of Mothers that has been articulating since 1979, in the midst of the Argentine military dictatorship – are another clear inspiration for the Mothers of May Movement.



The Mothers of May point out that the Crimes of May 2006 were "undoubtedly the largest and most emblematic Massacre in recent Brazilian history, being a milestone of what the comrades of the Network Against Violence call 'The Era of Massacres', which began with the Massacre of Acari in 1990" (MÃES DE MAIO, 2011a, p. 19). The Mothers of May are inspired by this category of the Network, and from it express their own equivalent nomination for the post-1990 period: *the democracy of the massacres*.

In Part 2 of the text Crimes of May and the Democracy of the Massacres, *entitled The Crimes of May 2006*, published in 2011, the Mothers of May evaluate what the May Crimes were in the face of the history of the massacres that occurred in Brazil:

The May Crimes, in this sad context, certainly represent the most emblematic case of this Democracy of Massacres. Together with the historical significance of the Carandiru Massacre (1992) – the largest prison massacre in the history of the country, to date without due trial and accountability; the Candelária Massacre (1993) – given the symbolism and planetary repercussion of such cowardice committed against children and adolescents sleeping, already on the street, in front of one of the main churches in the center of Rio de Janeiro; and the Eldorado dos Carajás Massacre (1996) – the most violent killing in the countryside of this democratic era in Brazil, a slaughter that also goes unpunished, even though it brutally victimized dozens of landless rural workers who legitimately fought for their rights (MÃES DE MAIO, 2018, p. 106).

Faced with this scenario, the identification of the current period by the Network of Communities and Movements Against Violence of Rio de Janeiro *as the Era of Massacres* is again evoked as a way of associating the numbers that evidence the genocidal scale of the deaths, with the categorization offered by the Mothers' Movements:

As we have been able to shout in so many other moments (as in our book 'Mothers of May – from Mourning to Struggle' – We for us, São Paulo, 2011), it is for no other reason that *noss@s companheir@s* of the Network of Communities and Movements against violence in Rio de Janeiro baptized the democratic period that we have come to live, after the promulgation of the Federal Constitution of 1988, of 'The Age of Slaughter', the most appropriate name for the current phase of this long history of Massacres that conforms us. After all, following the much-vaunted 'democratic opening' and the promulgation of the so-called 'Citizen Constitution', less than two years later, the Acari Massacre would announce what awaited us ahead... (MOTHERS OF MAY, 2018, p. 104)

The confirmation of this genocidal process¹² is pointed out from the very continuity of the massacres and massacrings: "and, since then, a succession of massacres and massacrings concentrated, of

¹² Ramos (2020) demonstrates the historical process of emergence and modifications to which the notion of "genocide" was subjected. As a turning point, the author cites Abdias do Nascimento (2016), which operates a reversal of the "two central notions provided for in international law [regarding genocide] - those of act and intention. The black genocide in Brazil is a process and its intention is not expressed, but 'masked'" (RAMOS, 2020, s/p). Flauzina (2006) considers that from the work of Nascimento (2016), *The genocide of the black Brazilian: process of a masked racism*, which dates from 1976, to the campaign "Reaja ou Será Morto, Reaja ou Será Morta", founded in Salvador in 2004, there are plenty of indications that "in this genocide, obviously, there is no lack of illustrations, only statements. The effort, in this sense, is not to prove its material existence, abundantly diagnosable, but to overcome the political obstacles that prevent its recognition" (FLAUZINA, 2006, p. 121). In this sense, the category of genocide is both native, because used by the Mothers of May and other movements of mothers of victims, and academic, and in both cases its historical and political character



poor, black and peripheral workers constantly resurfaces, as if tracing knots and blurs in the already very high, cold and constant curve of the statistics of daily homicides in Brazil" (MÃES DE MAIO, 2018, p. 104).

As a substantial example of their argument, the mothers list a set of massacres and massacres that occurred in Brazilian democracy, in various territories, between the years 1990 and 2011 (date of writing of this text):

And so followed the emblematic Massacre of Acari (1990), Matupá (1991), the Carandiru Massacre (1992), Candelária and Vicar General (1993), Alto da Bondade (1994), Corumbiara (1995), Eldorado dos Carajás (1996), São Gonçalo (1997); Alhandra and Maracanã (1998), Cavalry and Vila Prudente (1999), Jacareí (2000), Caraguatatuba (2001), Jd. Presidente Dutra and Urso Branco (2002), Amarelinho, Via Show and Borel (2003), Caju, Praça da Sé and Felisburgo (2004), the Slaughter of the Baixada Fluminense (2005), the Crimes of May (2006), Complexo do Alemão (2007), Morro da Providência (2008), Canabrava (2009), the massacre of Vitória da Conquista and the April Crimes in the Baixada Santista (2010), the massacre of Praia Grande (2011)... (MOTHERS OF MAY, 2018, p. 104)

Vedovello is part of this list of massacres recalled by the Mothers of May, including those of the Naval Favela (1997), Castelinho (2002), Unaí (2004) and Jacarezinho (2007), which occurred until 2011, and other massacres that occurred from 2012 to 2015:

Slaughter of the ABC, of Saramandaia, of the Teles Pires Village, of Penha, Japeri, Favela da Chatuba, Várzea Paulista, the Crimes of June, July, August, September, October, November and December in SP (2012), the Slaughter of Jd. Rosana, Funeral Village, Chacina da Maré (2013), Massacre of Belém do Pará (2014), Chacina do Kabula (2015), Massacre of Pavilhão Nove (2015), Massacre of Manaus (2015), Massacre of Barueri and Osasco (2015) (VEDOVELLO, 2015, p. 137).

As it turns out, the list presented by the Mothers of May, and later supplemented by Vedovello, raises at least one massacre or massacre per year, from 1990 to 2015. This list could also be complemented by other cases in the period reported, such as the Crimes in Altamira (1989-1993), the Haximu Massacre (1993), the Columbus Massacre (2003), the Guáira Massacre (2008) and the Pedrinhas Massacre (2010).

In addition, we could complement this list of massacres and massacres from 2015 to 2020, bringing cases such as the Mogi das Cruzes Massacres (2014 and 2015), Costa Barros Massacre (2015), Great Messejana Massacre (2015), Curió Massacre (2015), Londrina Massacre (2016), Licorice Massacre (2017), Manaus Massacre (2017), Cajazeiras Massacre (2018), Palmatia Massacre (2018), Altamira Massacre (2019), Paraisópolis Massacre (2019), Ibaretama Massacre (2020), Complexo do Alemão Massacre (2020) and Jacarezinho Massacre (2021).

is highlighted. It serves, therefore, as a heuristic and dialogical resource in relation to the native category of democracy of the *massacres*, that is, as "an analytical category that aims to cover, without pretension to replace, the semantic field of native categories" (MARQUES; COMERFORD; KEYS, 2007, p. 35).



These surveys would still be greatly expanded when we consider several other massacres, massacres and exterminations committed by police in prisons, urban and rural evictions, in street demonstrations and in murders of fewer people by police action, such as the death of the girl Ágatha Felix in Complexo do Alemão, and in the enforced disappearances of Amarildo in Rocinha and Davi Fiuza in Salvador. Not to mention the actions of paramilitary and militia groups (who, among many other people, murdered Councilwoman Marielle Franco and her driver Anderson Gomes) and the army (as in the episode of the 80 rifle shots fired at Evaldo dos Santos Rosa's car in Rio de Janeiro).

The massacres are, therefore, a common experience in the peripheries of Brazil for decades. But what characterizes a massacre? Contrary to what some might assume, "slaughter" is not a legal category:

Although common, slaughter is not a legal concept. The deaths of several people in a planned action appear in the police inquiry or in the judicial process as "multiple homicides". In this sense, the word slaughter is what anthropologists call a native (or emic) category, that is, it operates in the practical world and its meaning has a historical value for certain societies or social groups (SILVA; SANTOS; RAMOS, 2019, p. 12).

More than dwelling on the origin of this term¹³, I consider it indispensable, in this article, to think about the procedures and meanings of the massacres. This time, I share the understanding of the massacres as a dramatic ritual of pre-established ends:

We start from the idea that massacres are a radical expression of lethal violence as a political resource of social control, that is, multiple murders are commonly used as a public demonstration of power, used both by criminal organizations and by public agents, especially in the context of institutional instability or dispute over territories and markets (SILVA; SANTOS; RAMOS, 2019, p. 5).

As for the common procedure in massacres and their messages, combining ritualization and visibility, Silva, Santos and Ramos affirm:

The first point that stands out is that the phenomenon of slaughter tensely combines ritualization and visibility. Most of the time, slaughter is a ritual execution of people taken as enemies or undesirables, carried out by more or less anonymous killers. In this sense, the massacres can be interpreted as public messages, in order to create fear and dread to a wider public, and a demonstration of power and authority conquered and/or guaranteed through lethal violence. In most cases, the massacres are ritualized, repeated acts in different cases, traces are strategically left at the scene of the crime and the identity of the killers or

¹³ In this regard, I quote anecdotally: "The American newspaper *Washington Post* described the word 'slaughter' as the most frightening in the Brazilian Portuguese. In a specific report on the peculiarity of the word and the scenario of violence experienced in the country, journalist Shannon Sims pointed out: 'The word slaughter comes from the slaughter of pigs in slaughterhouses, and literally means massacre or slaughter. But ask any Brazilian, and they will tell you that there is another, more disturbing meaning [...] Throughout Brazil's modern history, the word slaughter has come to refer to the massacre of people after the death of a police officer. The implication is clear: slaughter is murder in reprisal by the police on a frightening scale'" (SILVA; SAINTS; RAMOS, 2019, p. 13). In response to this inference, Silva, Santos and Ramos comment that the article of the newspaper is interesting to question the etymological meaning of the word in the Brazilian context, but state that "we cannot restrict the occurrence of massacres to acts of retaliation carried out by police forces, although this type of situation is one of the main facets of this phenomenon in some states" (SILVA; SAINTS; RAMOS, 2019, p. 13).



masterminds circulate publicly in the form of rumors (SILVA; SAINTS; RAMOS, 2019, p. 13).

Massacres, therefore, are taken here as dramatic moments of ritualization of the death of various people, as a way of eliminating enemies or undesirables, carrying out revenges, conquering markets or territories, and transmitting public messages that are expressed in fear, panic and terror, mobilizing deadly violence as a demonstration of power. These events, in turn, generate rumors, which also produce several effects.

The rumor can be understood as a consequence of an event outside the routine, as something reformulated in successive communicative acts, which can refer to recent or old events, derived from problematic and ambiguous situations, whose action of the State can contribute to this inaccuracy, generating a narrative of low degree of formalization and in which the communication channels are not operating to the satisfaction (DAS, 2020; MARK; GUTTERES; MAGELLAN; BARROS, 2020).

Rumors, therefore, constitute the "spectacularization of death" (SILVA; SANTOS; RAMOS, 2019) which are the massacres. That said, I should also point out that some "mass killings" are not referred to as massacres, as is the case with massacres, and even the May Crimes. In my experience of contact with the Mothers of May, I do not recall hearing them refer to the May Crimes as a massacre. I think perhaps we could say that in the Crimes of May 2006 serial massacres occurred in the span of nine days, understanding that the massacres are multiple murders carried out at the same time and place¹⁴.

In the *Final Letter of the First International Meeting of Mothers of Victims of State Violence*, which took place between May 11 and 13, 2016, the Mothers of May, among other social movements, affirm:

Currently, in Brazil, more than 60,000 PEOPLE ARE MURDERED – OF FLESH, BONE AND MANY STORIES – PER YEAR, with the vast majority of young black people living in the peripheries; Currently, in this territory that they call Brazil, we boast the absurd rate of MORE THAN 700,000 ADULTS INCARCERATED IN TRUE MEDIEVAL CELLS, mostly young black primaries, not to mention TENS OF THOUSANDS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS PAYING BRUTAL SUFFERING IN NON-SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL MEASURES and many others imprisoned in total institutions of "mental Sa ude"; Today, still in this infamous commodity-Brazil, we face a countless number of violent approaches, daily torture and a growing criminalization of all our people and our social movements. Here from within this MILITARY DEMOCRACY, this true DEMOCRACY (MAÃES DE MAIO 2018, p. 10).

In the above excerpt the mothers raise a series of criticisms: to the Brazilian genocide on the scale of thousands of annual deaths, to the hyper-incarceration of young blacks and children and adolescents in "non-socio-educational measures", to the imprisonment of people in "total institutions" of "mental Sa ude" (that is, of asylums, therapeutic units, psychiatric hospitals, etc., considered as

¹⁴ Dias (2015) uses the expression "cycle of executions" to refer to the murders committed in 2012 in São Paulo.



driven by profit), to the prevailing market character in Brazil, to the daily violations and criminalization of black people and social movements, and to Brazilian democracy that is very close to dictatorship for these populations. I will focus on that last point.

It is interesting to note that, if, on the one hand, the Mothers of May place the period of redemocratization as the initial milestone of *the democracy of the massacres*, on the other hand, they also affirm that there is a continuity between democracy and dictatorship in Brazil with regard to the relationship of the State with the exploiting and oppressed classes and groups. Let us take a closer look at this issue.

In an article entitled *The dictatorship continues in the peripheries*, carried out by journalist Thiago Borges, Débora Maria declares about the dictatorship: "the dictatorship is not over. It is very present in our peripheries and has a certain target: the black, poor and peripheral, who do not have access to justice, who does not work for us" (BORGES, 2014, s/p). Then, he says: "Let's stop saying it's over because it's not over, otherwise we wouldn't be here. If it was over, it was for the bourgeoisie. Incidentally, slavery never ended either. Today's slave quarters are the periphery" (BORGES, 2014, s/p). And he asks: "What has changed [since the end of the dictatorship]? Nothing. There is no expertise [of the crimes committed], there is no investigation" (BORGES, 2014, s/p). Finally, he exposes his assertion: "And when we talk about demilitarization, we talk not only about the police, but about politics, society and the judiciary. Because the pen is a weapon that does not come out bullet, but is the one that kills the most" (BORGES, 2014, s/p).

The way I understand the exposition of Débora, co-founder and coordinator of the Mothers of May, I consider that she is here evoking a common imaginary about dictatorship and democracy, in order to operate a rearrangement of this logic. The current idea (especially in the media, academia and progressive circles of society) of a dictatorial state is of a state that, legally or illegally, kills, tortures, kidnaps and disappears with citizens considered internal enemies, interferes with the "proper functioning" of public institutions and establishes its rulers in the absence of elections by the population.

A democratic state, on the other hand, presupposes having free elections, institutions functioning autonomously, and guaranteeing individual and collective rights and freedoms for the population. In this sense, while it is assumed that a dictatorial state kills, tortures, kidnaps and disappears citizens considered internal enemies, for a democratic state it is considered an assumption that it offers security, freedom of expression, political rights, health, demonstrates openness towards the demands of the population and is transparent about the treatment offered to its citizens.

Given the absence of this presumed conduct of the democratic state, some would say that democracy is at risk. I think this conception is based on a notion that the democratic state is evaluated in a quantitative sense: it is more or less democratic, according to certain conjunctions, and the more



it corresponds to the common expectation of a democratic state, the closer it will be to an "ideal democracy" and the farther it will be from the dictatorial state, and the less it corresponds to such an expectation, the more distant it will be from the "ideal democracy" and the closer it will be to the dictatorial State¹⁵ (PINHEIRO, 1991; ADORNO, 1995). It is in this context that the evaluations of "democracy at risk" emerge (SINGER; ALONSO; STARLING, 2019).

I believe that the Mothers of May Movement brings us to a different way of looking at this conception presented here. I understand that for this movement the democratic state is not so much evaluated in a quantitative sense as it is in a qualitative sense. That is, it is not about "how democratic" the democratic state is (or how close to the "democratic ideal" at one extreme, or to dictatorship at the other extreme, it is), but rather *which* democracy it is.

In this way, the democratic state that does not correspond to the common expectation about democracy does not cease to be democratic for this reason, but establishes a democracy defined by another constituent quality (other than that of "ideal democracy"): an anti-ideal democracy, a democracy of the scarcity of rights, a deadly democracy. This democracy, certainly, reserves many of the traits associated with a dictatorial state, and not for nothing, after all, it is the very maintenance of elements characteristic of these authoritarian state forms that grounds the existence and performance of this democratic state.

In this view, such a democratic state is not seen close to a dictatorial state by a quantitative look, in which its democracy is in the spotlight, but on the contrary, it is the very preservation of the authoritarian elements that constitute such a democracy and perpetuate it. This democracy, therefore, is an authoritarian *continuum*, it is the democracy that endures a dictatorship that has never ceased to exist in certain territories, without thereby ceasing to be a democracy, it is thus the democracy of the massacres enunciated by the Mothers of May. For this reason, I think and take this native category not only as an "object" of analysis, but as an analytical category that expresses a way of observing the social and political reality identified by the Mothers of May.

In the 2012 text, *Demilitarization of the police in Brazil*, when citing data from the Map of Violence of that year, the Mothers of May assert:

over the past 30 years, more than 1 million people have been murdered in the country. In this historical period ironically concomitant with the Brazilian redemocratization, there was a 127% increase in the number of annual homicides in the national territory – of which most victims are composed of poor and black young people, as shown by the various statistics correlated in the study. True war numbers (MÃES DE MAIO 2018, p. 127).

¹⁵ I refer here especially, although not exclusively, to the managerialist approaches that have gained strength in Brazil since the 1980s, and which had as one of its bulwarks in the issue of public security the Sociology of Violence. For a critique of the Sociology of Violence and the way it reinforced managerialism, cf. Marques (2018).



The language of war is here activated by the Mothers of May, and on so many other occasions it is exposed in the speech of representatives of the State. However, it seems to me that such a language of war is appropriated in different ways by mothers and the state. I understand that mothers see the aforementioned war from the struggle, understood as political struggle, without, with this, reducing other dimensions that the polysemy of the word struggle, as a native category, allows (COMERFORD, 1999). I understand that it is in this sense that they speak *of warrior mothers* or *of an army of children*¹⁶.

As part of this process, and as Vianna and Farias well noted, in some Mothers' Movements there is a "discursive fabrication" of the State "as an antagonistic pole to the 'mothers'" (VIANNA; FARIAS, 2011, p. 92). It is in this sense that in this article I take the positions of the Mothers of May before the State.

This antagonism feeds on two interconnected representations that are expressed, at different times, in the form of accusations: the first of them being the State directly responsible for the death itself of its children and relatives; the other, to reinforce the illegality and injustice that would involve these same deaths, by not condemning the guilty and by not making an effort to ascertain the conditions in which the fatal violence was exercised (VIANNA; FARIAS, 2011, p. 92).

On the other hand, the State appropriates the language of war as a way of legitimizing the extermination it promotes against social groups associated with certain territories of its population.

Representing the social conflict in the big cities as a war implies activating a symbolic repertoire in which opposing sides/groups are enemies and extermination, in the limit, is one of the strategies for victory, because it is easily admitted that exceptional situations – of war – require measures that are also exceptional and alien to institutional and democratic normality. In these terms, the discursive device that constituted the main operator of the demand for public order was the construction of two polar images from the metaphor of war: on the one hand, citizens – identified as workers, voters and taxpayers and, in this capacity, good people, honorable, for whom security is a primordial condition for living, producing, consume; and on the other, the enemies represented in / by the *favela* – a category that does not distinguish between residents and criminals (LEITE, 2012, p. 379).

This, by the way, is another element that I believe runs through dictatorship and democracy: politics as war and war as politics. As Foucault once said, "politics is war continued by other means" (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 15). This war, however, is only admitted by the state in the insinuated "war on drugs." Maria Lúcia Karam warned, precisely, that war is not made against substances, but against people (KARAM, 2016).

The war promoted by the State against this "killable" population (FARIAS, 2007), based on "normative conceptions of the human that suspend the validity of the life of subjects and groups,

¹⁶ The expression *Children* of May is used by some Mothers of May to refer both to their children killed in the May 2006 Crimes, and to refer to the militants and supporters of the Mothers of May. In the first case, we have the activation of blood kinship, in the second case, of a kinship beyond consanguinity. The *army of sons* refers to both cases, to a political kinship composed of the dead and the living.



producing a multitude of 'worthless lives'" (SANJURJO; FELTRAN, 2015, p. 40), resembles the scenario described by Mbembe about the massacres against the colonized:

In the same context, colonies are similar to borders. They are inhabited by "savages." The colonies are not state-organized and have not created a human world. Their armies do not form a distinct entity, and their wars are not wars between regular armies. They do not imply the mobilization of sovereign subjects (citizens) who respect each other, even if they are enemies. They make no distinction between combatants and noncombatants or, again, "enemy" and "criminal." [...] In short, colonies are zones in which war and disorder, internal and external figures of politics, stand side by side or alternate. As such, the colonies are the place par excellence in which the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended – the zone in which the violence of the state of exception supposedly operates in the service of "civilization" (MBEMBE, 2017, p. 35).

The death policies (¹⁷ MBEMBE, 2018) of the State have produced such "killable" populations, and this reality runs through Brazilian history, since colonization, empire, republic, dictatorships and democracies:

The democratic order, the plantation order and the colonial order have for a long time maintained twinned relations. These relationships are far from accidental. Democracy, plantation and colonial empire are objectively part of the same historical matrix. This original and structuring fact is central to any historical understanding of the violence of the contemporary world order (MBEMBE, 2017, p. 43).

Thus, the *Brazilian slaughter democracy* reserves to the "killable" not only their condition of killable, but also that of non-mourning, of non-public recognition of an unevenly distributed mourning (BUTLER, 2019). A democracy inherited from colonialism and military dictatorship, structured on many of the social bases bequeathed by these regimes and operating on a *continuum* of their deadly policies in certain territories.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article focused on the birth of mothers after the death of their children. Mothers born collectively, politicizing deaths bequeathed to naturalization, making public losses, pains and sufferings awakened in intimacy. The Mothers of May were born of themselves and their children, of the living and the dead. And they were also born of

paths that sometimes open, sometimes close: a path opened in a present that acts can lead a child to death and close him in the past; and the past, through pain and memory, imposes itself on the present, opening a new path for the child to return in the form of visions and memories (MORAWSKA, 2018, p. 368).

¹⁷ Although the term "necropolitics" is recent, coined by Achille Mbembe in dialogue with Michel Foucault's notions of "biopower" and "biopolitics", the idea of "politics of death" (which is the meaning of the term "necropolitics") long predates the formulation of Mbembe and even Foucault. As early as the 19th century, Marx, for example, had stated about the dynamics of accumulation of capitalism (which we might call a "political economy of death"): "Capital, however, does not live on labor alone. A master at the same time elegant and barbaric, he drags with him to the grave the corpses of his slaves, in a veritable hecatomb of workers who are shipwrecked in crises" (MARX, 1987, p. 68).



One of these paths – which affected all mothers and their children, leading them to death and to a past that always returns, through pain and memory, to the present, through visions and memories such as the one narrated by Deborah – were the Crimes of May 2006.

From an event that was initially unaware of its extent, the mothers, already united and mobilized, began to understand more and more the dimension of these Crimes, naming them as such, and from their experiences, began to develop their own reading, inspired by other movements of mothers, about the political and social configuration of Brazil.

To this configuration, they gave the name *of democracy of the massacres*, a potent native category that shocks certain listeners, but that carries an analytical understanding of extreme elaboration and that, expressing the point of view of these mothers, allows to clarify a reality common to many beyond them.

I think I can say that the Mothers of May thus show that

In Brazilian contexts, necropolitical power is visible in the prison system, in the homeless population, in urban *apartheids* in large and small Brazilian cities, in relevant data, in the genocide of the black population that is mostly young and male, in the outbreak of vigilante groups, in psychiatric hospitals, in the queues of public defenders, in hospital urgencies and emergencies, among many other places (LIMA, 2018, p. 28).

These "invisible victims of democracy", as Deborah comments, even warn certain progressive social movements and intellectuals who often speak in terms of "threat to democracy", while the Mothers of May continue to express about the "threat of democracy" to the lives of their children, their lives, families and communities.



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