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Gabriel FELTRAN (ed.), *Stolen Cars: A Journey Through Urban Conflict in São Paulo* (Oxford, New Jersey, John Wiley & Sons, 2022, 272 p.)

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São Paulo is the “city of cars” in Brazil. Large avenues and fossil-fuel-powered vehicles form the basic mobility infrastructure of the city. In the streets of São Paulo, the private car became a symbol of progress in the course of the massive urbanisation that took place between 1950 and 1970. The centrality of the car is also notable for its association with the rise of violence as the logic of the production of urban space in the 1990s. Apart from walled gardens and courtyards, there are no fortified enclaves without cars. Almost a quarter of the national vehicle fleet and almost half of vehicle thefts are concentrated in São Paulo. Despite the ubiquity of cars, few sociological studies have focused on vehicle traffic, and even fewer have attempted to understand inequalities and violence from this perspective.

*Stolen Cars* creatively reflects on the categorical mediation of these essentially urban objects and opens up a transnational research agenda on a market that has been little studied in urban theory. The analysis starts from the observation that once a car is stolen, many people start making money from it. The book unravels urban conflicts by arguing about their amazing potential for capital accumulation. The categorical mediation that cars perform appears here not only between legality and illegality, but also between the different ways in which stolen-car trafficking unequally distributes money and violence in the course of the conflicts that arise over car theft. The book argues that cars not only connect these categories, but also allow us to understand the radical alterity between the different “normative regimes” that co-exist in São Paulo’s urban life. Influenced by the work of Brazilian urban sociologist Luiz Antônio Machado da Silva, the authors argue that these “normative regimes” are relatively autonomous and generate conflicts that remain unresolved in republican, multicultural or racist understandings of democracy.

The central argument of the book is that inequalities at the margins are maintained through a significant use of violence, which serves as a fundamental element of the connections between the different market

“patches” that ultimately form the intricate fabric of global capitalism. Social actors are analytically interconnected, but the empirical relationship between the accumulation of violence on the one hand and economic value on the other creates an abyss in the city. Violence creates margins, and the higher we go up the social hierarchy, the more economic value is concentrated there. The higher one’s position on the social scale, the lower the possibility of one’s meeting a violent death. The relational aspects of these markets, revealed here as rhizomatic, do not prevent the reproduction of permanent inequalities clustered around bipolar categories such as legal–illegal, white–black, rich–poor, centre–periphery.

Gabriel Feltran and his team of ethnographers present a rare transnational and collective ethnography created at multiple sites and using a variety of different methods. The book is based on five “typical journeys” of stolen cars, whose stories are used to capture the scale of this market across Brazil. It follows scenes of violent robberies and thefts, cars destined for auctions, insurers scouring the city for stolen cars, the activities of security companies and the police, stolen cars crossing national borders, debates in parliament and the role of mechanics and dismantlers, and follows the stolen cars’ journeys up to the moment when they become scrap metal in junkyards and their carcasses end up at the bottom of the city’s rivers.

Drawing inspiration from contemporary ethnographies of objects and lives in the ruins of capitalism, *Stolen Cars* challenges normative assumptions that portray illicit markets as a product of the disorder or incompleteness of cities in the Global South. The book is empirically grounded in real-life situations, the quantification of value chains and the way the circulation of stolen cars actualises the machinery of inequalities; it takes these elements and classically formulates them through the long tradition of Latin American urban studies of the equation between urban accumulation, poverty, violence and urban form, as synthesised in Lucio Kowarick’s key concept of the “urban plumber”. Feltran provides a cogent argument for the intertwining of legal and illegal economies in shaping economic systems and transnational mobilities. By linking this sociological tradition with contemporary ethnographies, the book contributes to contemporary urban theory.

The book’s analysis begins by showing how stolen car violence is concentrated in peripheral spaces. This violence does not necessarily only opposes the rich and the poor. In these spaces, different unequal groups are in conflict with each other, and this conflict produces binary classifications such as “workers” and “criminals”. The use of lethal force by police is concentrated at the boundaries between the wealthier,

predominantly white areas and the poorer, predominantly black areas. Killings occur when individuals violate the rules of urban conflict and do not recognise the authority of the police in their area. A thief attempting to steal a car in an elite neighbourhood is more likely to be killed than one stealing in an impoverished marginal neighbourhood. Thieves avoid the use of violence and specialise in non-violent tactics in elite areas. The state's response focuses on punishing thieves as a means of creating a moral and religious community of "cidadãos de bem" (a conservative expression of the political subject of democracy: a white, middle-class, heterosexual man) This perpetuates a cycle of violence in which the lowest actors in the illegal markets are brutally repressed by the state and quickly replaced by others. The criminalisation of young black men allows criminal groups to outsource the violent work to them and to concentrate on more technical specialisation and entrepreneurial opportunities (Chapter 2).

Vehicle tracking and recovery, security and surveillance technologies, and an increase in car sales promoted by insurance agencies are the result of circuits of car theft. Here we see that these marginal business circuits overlap with the core circuits of financial capital. The role of the insurance industry goes beyond promoting growth in the car market to include building a network that links the protection of private ownership of stolen goods with capital accumulation by responding to car theft in a way that prioritises recovery and profit over punishment. This network underlines the insurance industry's significant intermediary role in the compensation, restitution and recovery of cars (Chapter 3).

The auction universe's connections to insurance companies show how money flows from illegal markets into legal markets regulated by global white urban elites (Chapter 4). The reproduction of inequalities through car salvage is brutal: in a single day, a white manager of an insurance company can earn 928.7 times the minimum wage (per month) for his company; the auctioneer, another white manager, earns 46 times that wage; the marginal actors who buy cars at auctions or transport stolen vehicles can earn a maximum of 0.5 of a minimum wage; finally, the black *favela* thieves who feed this machinery and face a high likelihood of arrest and violent death earn only 1.5 times the minimum wage per vehicle.

In the stolen car industry, the internal rules codified by the criminal organization Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) within the "world of crime" co-exist with the formal state rules (especially in the case of the "removal law"). The two sets of rules operate situationally, for example in the daily lives of small car-parts dealers, who tend to take money from the police, thanks to loopholes in both crime and state systems. When the

police act illegally, they demand bribes in return for turning a blind eye, thus solidifying the gap between the “normative regimes” (Chapters 5 and 6).

The analysis of two competing insurance products in the industry, offered by major financial institutions and associations in the popular vehicle market, shows how criminalisation is primarily responsible for creating categorical differences. The regulation of legal and illegal activities is a contested area where actors struggle to accumulate capital, often resorting to violent means. The act of criminalizing certain activities reinforces the reproduction of urban inequalities, perpetuating a self-perpetuating cycle of crime and security mechanisms (Chapter 7).

Finally, illicit economies observed from the global margins are important bridges for the production of economic centralities and a constitutive dimension of globalisation that reinforces the economic centrality of global cities. The book shows how small border cities are linked to São Paulo and Berlin through transnational illegal markets in cars, drugs, contraband and money laundering (Chapter 8).

I would like to offer some research possibilities that come to mind after having completed the thought-provoking journey of *Stolen Cars*. Further elaboration on the conceptualization of criminalisation is essential, as it has the potential to be a foundational concept in examining the production, stabilisation and transfer of economic value and prices in different spheres of global capitalism, amidst a landscape of pervasive improvisation. Second, by examining criminalisation, we can uncover additional dimensions of car circulation, particularly the invisibility it imposes on the violence associated with stolen cars, and in particular how it elides the loss of black men’s lives. By following these stolen cars further, we can explore how inequalities and violence extend beyond the book’s focus on men and uncover other interactions between the gendered and racialised dynamics that are interwoven in this urban economy. For example, research could focus on the efforts of black and poor women who are simultaneously grieving for (or coping with) the incarceration or killing of their sons and fighting to make their struggle known, while managing the demanding dual roles of underpaid domestic work and of caring for the children and households of white middle-class and elites in gated communities.

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