

Whose Internationalism? State Violence and the Limits of Geopolitical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the limits and possibilities of internationalism beyond state-centric and geopolitical framings. At a time when celebratory discourses of a rising “Global South” and expanding multilateralism proliferate alongside alarming displays of imperial aggression and interventionism, I argue that this tension exposes the contingent, often fictive nature of a rules-based international order. Rather than investing in institutional reform, I shift the conversation on multipolar and democratic aspirations to the ways in which the peripheries of national and international systems reveal more complex and situated configurations of power and resistance. Referencing favela-based movements against state violence in Rio de Janeiro, I foreground grassroots efforts to build counter-archives that repurpose the international in transversal and transcalar ways. Drawing on Afrodiasporic thought, the article situates securitization regimes within a longer genealogy of racialized governance that underpin established orders and signal tactical possibilities for transforming them. I conclude by questioning what imperialism and anti-imperialism mean today, calling for a reimagined internationalism grounded in peripheral praxis.

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INTRODUCTION

The language of multipolarity has long featured in analyses of international politics, resurfacing periodically in moments of perceived crisis and becoming increasingly prominent over the past decade. Across policy circles, media outlets, and critical scholarship, it has come to articulate positions that both champion and reject claims to a declining unipolar world order based on the hegemony of the United States government. The apparent rise of new global powers, namely the Chinese government, brings forth questions around a potential rebalancing of international order underway, or, at the very least, in dispute, with varied projections regarding the status of the hierarchies inherited from twentieth-century imperialism. Yet this debate makes an assumption that deserves closer scrutiny: that imperialism requires a unipolar platform whose diffusion into multipolar arrangements necessarily weakens its grip.

Turning to the peripheries of national and international systems can be instructive in this debate. Colonial and postcolonial histories belie a common expectation that decentralized governance equates to more participatory forms of collective organization – whether at a local, national, regional, or international scale – and make clear the instability of this assumption. From slavocratic plantation economies to late capitalist financialization trends, historical lessons abound that point to complex networks and opaque configurations of power that do not operate exclusively through the mechanisms of a centralized administration. What comes across as multipolarity on the geopolitical map may, in practice, mask a reconfiguration of domination, rather than its dissolution.

This common assumption raises a more fundamental problem regarding the frameworks through which we analyze international politics. Concepts such as

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multipolarity, sub-imperialism, and Global South often remain tethered to a state-centric imagination. They privilege interstate relations, elite diplomacy, and macro-level alignments, but, more than that, they operate analyses of state power often decontextualized from its uneven developments and contradictory realities. The mainstream archives of Eurodescendent political science are largely responsible for propagating these interpretative vices and historiographical framings of a once-centralized state increasingly decentralizing itself in the face of neoliberal globalization. Whether through myths of social contracts that legitimate domestic regimes or principles of national sovereignty that sustain the belief in an international rule of law, these archives reveal the insufficiencies and complicities of political analysts with governing elites both to the north and south of the equator.

Consider the disjuncture between international projection and domestic reality. States positioned as leaders of an emerging Global South frequently present themselves as defenders of sovereignty, sustainable development, and South-South solidarity. Meanwhile, these same actors suppress dissent, dispossess communities, and foreclose popular aspirations within their own borders. The rhetoric of resistance to imperial powers at the international scale not only coexists, but strengthens practices of domination – both at home and abroad – in ways that negate a straightforward alignment between multipolarity and emancipation.

The Brazilian context within which I write is a case in point. With a Workers' Party in government for the better part of the last two decades, we can observe the ways in which these disputes function both within and beyond our borders, where, amid a bipolarized landscape, the same political force that has become a symbol of progressive movements across the Global South is responsible for presiding over and legitimating some of the most virulent programs of military occupation of peripheral territories and state-led massacres. These movements have also facilitated the overall political, economic, and social dynamics of state action and omission that entrench racial segregation, class exploitation, and sexual violence as the norm, rather than the exception, upholding existing institutional arrangements, even under nominally democratic regimes.

In other words, the geopolitical rendering of the world risks reproducing the problems it seeks to resolve by narrowing our field of vision. If we shift our perspective toward the peripheries of state and interstate institutional power, a different picture emerges that does not map neatly onto geopolitical blocs. The maps drawn up by social movements that contest state violence and abuse of institutional power rechart contemporary analyses, which often confound the diagnostic for the symptomatic. Reconceiving internationalism in this perspective may guide us to a better understanding of what imperialism and anti-imperialism mean today.

We need to rethink the questions that we are asking. Rather than taking multilateralism and international law as the solution in much the same way that democracy has

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become a proxy for domestic peace and justice – in effect, naturalizing legalistic fictions of power – we must interrogate the forms of power that persist and mutate across different transnational configurations and alliances. By reworking the fundamental categories and scales of analysis forged within imperial visions of a world in constant movement, we can repoliticize the debate beyond claims to the juridico-normative infrastructure that serve to stabilize and legitimize prevailing power structures. Looking at practices of state violence shines light on the conditions, limits, and externalities of geopolitical analysis. The resistance of peripheralized territories produce counter-archives and counter-cartographies that offer up a more grounded, historically informed, and politically attuned approach to reclaiming the international, which takes seriously both its promises and the limits of the forces that brought it into being: the state.

VISIONS FROM THE PERIPHERIES

October 28, 2025 entered into Brazilian history as the day of the most lethal police operation on record in Rio de Janeiro. For most of that Tuesday and the following Wednesday, operations halted the city, with roadways and services caught in the crossfire and blockades set up by both state and para-state agents. At the same time, headlines updated the death toll on live radio and television, reaching more than 120 people exterminated in the favela complex of Penha and the neighboring favela complex of Alemão in the north zone of the city with a metropolitan population of more than 6.7 million, the second largest in Brazil. Of the bodies accounted for, largely due to the efforts of area residents' search and retrieval in the favela's hillside forests, the overwhelming majority were identified as young Black men and boys living in poverty.

In the aftermath of the massacre, social movements and kinship networks long engaged in defending the territory against state violence and public neglect insisted on recognizing the continuum of violence shaping favela residents' everyday lives across the country. Penha and Alemão are no exception: home to more than 112,000 people, majority Black and relegated to informalized modes of work and social subsistence. Once the center of a Quilombo community and organized abolitionist movements, the territory has suffered state repression since before its favelization, that is, since before its consolidation into self-built urban settlements constructed in the face of systematic abandonment. In the majority of favelas and urban peripheries in Brazil, the state makes itself present/absent primarily through its military apparatus, providing minimal and precarious support for the creation and maintenance of social and economic infrastructure, as well as access to citizenship rights and protections.

On the Friday that closed that final week in October, still largely marked by school shutdowns and broad-based restrictions on mobility and commercial activities across the city, social movements called for a march to concentrate at the site of the

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massacre. Under heavy clouds and armed police barricades, people shouted: “Sem hipocrisia: essa polícia mata preto e pobre todo dia” (No more hypocrisy: this police kills Black and poor people every day). From the windows of nearby homes, terrified faces looked out onto signs that read “Basta de ditadura nas favelas” (Enough of dictatorship in the favelas). Below our feet, the asphalt was still stained in blood.

The refusal to render extraordinary or exceptional the massacre that, due to lack of cadaver drawers, piled bodies outside the state government's Forensic Medical Institute for days, tells us how life, death, and myriad forms of social death are treated in the peripheries of national and international order. In the nominally democratic context of Brazil, the state's role in the distribution of violence and authority is revealed through daily spectacles of carnage and overall disregard for the majority of its population.

Organized Black movements in Brazil have long labelled such violence genocide. As Abdias Nascimento (2016) declared to Pan-African and international forums in the postwar period, contrary to common international conception, Brazil is not a racial paradise. Multiple concepts name the racial-sexual terror that conditions everyday life for the majority Black population of the country: “masked racism” (Abdias Nascimento 2016, 5), “racism by denegation” and “racism by omission” (Lélia Gonzalez 2020, 127, 220). Broader formulations of racism through miscegenation and ideologies of whitening (Beatriz Nascimento 2018, 113), together with extensive conceptions of racial capitalism (Clóvis Moura 2024, 31), explain an established politics by extermination. As argued by Black Brazilian public intellectuals for over half a century, it is not only by means of formal or ostensive segregation – like those inherited from Anglo-Saxon modes of colonization observed in places like the United States or South Africa – that racism is upheld as the ideological justification for violence, expropriation, and neglect. In her characterization of the Brazilian and Latin American experience, Lélia Gonzalez (2020, 130) argues that contemporary hierarchies of domination are configured by assimilationist practices and ideologies of whitening inherited from Iberian colonial governance and subsequent forms of internal colonialism, deepened by US imperialism on the continent which continues to rearticulate the multiple authorities in dispute. Through the alignment of local and foreign governing elites, the normalization of racism as transversal to state-sanctioned regimes of governance makes possible massacres such as the one carried out on the 28th to occur with widespread indifference and acceptability.

Frantz Fanon referred to the racialization of the human and non-human through a logic of zoning, which remaps the boundaries, borders, and limits of racialized territories where violence functions as the norm, rather than the exception, of government. In this sense, the “zone of non-being,” as Fanon (2008, 26) refers to it, shines light on a condition produced by the European transatlantic slavery trade, where Africans and their descendants were positioned outside the realm of humanity and denied recognition of political, legal, and even ontological existence. In Brazil, Fanon's zone of non-being finds its purest expression in the favelas: majority Black territories of self-construction and

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autonomous community organizing that have existed since the formal passage of the abolition law. This law, which in 1888 became the last to formalize abolition in the Americas, declared the extinction of slavery in two short articles, and was accompanied by a series of state initiatives that burned the archives and actively worked against any possibility of social, economic, or political integration of formally emancipated peoples into Brazilian society and workforce.

Public intellectuals of the Black movement launched the updated translation of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* for the Brazilian public, and called for a deeper reflection on how we read and respond to an international system forged by colonial occupation and division. In the preface entitled "The language of revolution: Reading Frantz Fanon from Brazil," Thula Pires, Marcos Queiroz, and Wanderson Flor do Nascimento write:

We find in *The Wretched of the Earth* the description of a world in which violent praxis is totalizing. For the colonizers, violence provides the grammar mobilized to guarantee their supremacy and their possibility of being as an attribute exclusively theirs. It is through violence that they imposed and continue to impose values (ethical, moral, religious, cultural), knowledges, and politico-economic-aesthetic models that defined and define the licit and the illicit, the normal and the abnormal, taking themselves and their practices as the narcissistic point of reference. (Fanon 2022, 11, translation ours)

The diasporic perspective championed by Black movements in Brazil is key to understanding the transnational dynamics through which violence is produced and reproduced to sustain dominant configurations of international systems. Reclaiming the category of genocide, instituted in the postwar period in the image of the European experience of the Holocaust, exposes the limits of an internationalism that neglects colonialism and state violence as constitutive of the international system. It highlights the limits of categories such as civil war and interstate conflict to grasp the inequalities of power that give rise to a masked genocide. That is, recognition of genocide within international frameworks is conditioned by a reliance on state legibility, which privileges forms of violence that resemble identifiable warfare or clearly attributable intent. When mass violence is carried out through institutions that act as the state itself – police operations, legal orders, or bureaucratic-administrative practices – it is often reframed as governance, security enforcement, or internal disorder, rather than extermination. This proximity to the state form obscures the continuity between sovereign authority and lethal violence, making such processes difficult to classify as genocide. As a result, violence against racialized populations is frequently rendered unintelligible within dominant categories like civil war or interstate conflict, even when it is systematic and historically patterned.

The ongoing anti-Black and anti-Indigenous genocide in places like Brazil, and much of the American continent, can only be adequately understood as an extension of Europe's modern colonial slavocratic project; as such, it exposes the complicities of an

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internationalism that looks at the world through the eyes of the state. In this context, the peripheries, far from being marginal to international politics, are, in fact, central to comprehending the costs and externalities that effectively settle the account maintaining current institutional arrangements at home and abroad. Far from evoking visions of a backward past, the peripheries reflect back the future that awaits us all: the moment of reckoning with the externalized costs that accumulate and must be paid in full.

The massacre of October 28, 2025 stands as no exception or local deviation to be contained within the language of crisis or security failure; it offers a more global perspective on how the international system functions. It makes visible the continuity between domestic regimes of state violence and the broader architectures of global governance, where the state operates less as a coherent sovereign actor than as a selective technology for distributing protection and exposure to death. Read through Fanon's zone of non-being and the critical vocabularies forged in Black Brazilian political thought and action, violence emerges not as a rupture, but as a constitutive praxis of modernity instrumentalized across scales and borders. In this way, the peripheries cease to appear as marginal spaces of exception, and, instead, reveal themselves as the sites where the costs of world order are accumulated, rendered visible, and normalized. It is from this standpoint that the limits of geopolitical analysis become most evident, and from which the necessity to rethink internationalism beyond the state becomes not only possible, but imperative.

STATE GAMES

At all levels, the Brazilian government responded to the massacre in the name of the "War on Drugs." Public executions, staged in a country where the death penalty is not legal, were written off as "collateral effects" of Operação Contenção – literally translated as Operation Containment – purportedly targeting drugs and organized crime. In the words of the then governor Cláudio Castro, who declared the operation a success: "Aquele que não entender que a segurança pública é o maior problema do Brasil hoje vai se arrepender e pedir perdão à sociedade. É por isso que o Rio de Janeiro sai na frente. Não nos furtaremos a fazer a nossa parte." (Those who fail to understand that public security is Brazil's greatest problem today will come to regret it and ask society for forgiveness. That is why Rio de Janeiro is taking the lead. We will not shirk our responsibility to do our part.) As a privileged site of ongoing experimentation, as well as the import and export of public security programs and tactics across the region, the city occupies a nodal point within the transnational networks of military tactical exchange.

This framing does not emerge in a vacuum, but reflects the persistence of a Cold War logic that never fully disappeared, as we saw at the beginning of the year with the

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spectacularized broadcast of the US invasion of Venezuelan territory. In this regional context, the Cold War was not at all “cold,” scorching territories and livelihoods through oftentimes indirect means of governance, state-sponsored coups, economic blackmail, and militarized control.

Youth movements from favela territories have long been calling the bluff on the “War on Drugs,” and denouncing the perpetrators and interests behind the proposed battlefield; rather than drugs, the effective targets are racialized bodies and territories rendered internal enemies of the prevailing capitalist governing project. In an interview with Sueli Carneiro, a leading reference of the Black women's movements in Brazil, the organization Movimentos created space for an intergenerational dialogue, which gave emphasis to the lack of vigilance that formal democracy instills in our political imaginaries. Reflecting on decades of activism that have spanned periods of formal dictatorial and democratic regimes in Brazil, she alerts us: “Quem nasceu com luz elétrica, não tem medo da escuridão.” (Those of us who were born with electric light, do not fear darkness.).

The reconstruction of political memory is vital to understanding what brought us to the current moment and how we name things. After all, the ways that we understand the past directly impacts on how we conceive the present time, and how we imagine the limits and possibilities of a future. Beyond its promises and self-images, we must stop and ask ourselves what does democracy actually look like in practice, and what has been legitimated in its name.

This scenario challenges how we analyze the state, and shows the limits of Eurocentric theories and frameworks, such as the social contract, the principle of sovereignty, and the rule of law, in explaining state presence and absence in the peripheries. Neoliberal actualizations of these concepts, which narrate an increasing decentralization of state and government mechanisms in late capitalism, do not account for the ways that the colonies were governed, from the beginning, in decentralized and exogenous ways. To grapple with the limits and possibilities of the international system, it is necessary to clarify how we conceive its primary agents: the state. What does it look like to conceive the state from the zone of non-being?

We must take as our starting point that, since colonial times, the primary mode of state governance has been violence. As a totalizing praxis, it has informed and mediated disputes on all sides. To theorize the state and the interstate system through the perspective of the zone of non-being, therefore, requires first addressing this condition, before proceeding to analyze its varied manifestations.

The Brazilian system of slavocratic rule illustrates this point. Centered on the institution of Casa-Grande (translated as the Master's House in the context of a plantation economy), this structure fused hierarchies of rule across “public” and “private” spheres. By securing the home as the site of dominion with its own judicial codes, economies,

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military force, and even chapel, it explains the pervasiveness of senhorial (seigneurial-like) domination in political and institutional practices today. More than a metaphor for a patriarchal slavocracy, the Master's House is the foundation of contemporary forms of government, securing the same families in power for centuries through patrilineal inheritance, and accordingly distributing juridico-normative protections and constitutional rights. The ways in which liberal political and legal architectures cohabited with slavery in Brazil has much to inform contemporary debates.

The Constitution of 1824, ratified more than six decades prior to the formal abolition of slavery in Brazil, upheld liberal principles, such as citizenship, individual rights, and legal equality, while preserving slavery by treating enslaved people as property under the very right to property that it guaranteed. Only under the penal code was the personhood of enslaved peoples recognized by law. Marcos Queiroz's (2024, 64) historical reconstruction of liberal rule attributes these functional contradictions to "Haitianism," centering the Haitian Revolution as the first revolution led by enslaved peoples in the Americas that resulted in the creation of an independent state and persisted as a constant source of elite fears and controls. In this context, Queiroz (2024, 16) argues that this general panic shaped the state system to combine liberal ideals with strong mechanisms of control and exclusion. More than a problem of selectivity or incomplete development, the grounds for structural and supervised exclusion were established in ways that continue to legitimate contemporary modes of governance. Brazil ranks third in global records for mass incarceration, behind the US and China, and hosts rates of lethal state violence that surpass those of many countries declared in civil war or as sites of recorded genocides around the world.

Through the lens of Haitianism, the problem of securitization is revealed as not merely political rhetoric, but as a mode of governance structured by the anticipation of racialized revolt among subjugated peoples and systemic instability. A theory of the state and interstate system that takes seriously this reconstruction of memory compels a recentering of the zone of non-being in how we conceive the very design of governance mechanisms.

To think through securitization structurally demands attention to how political authority mediates and actively organizes social, economic, and cultural relations in ways that pre-empt contestation. In this framework, securitizing regimes do not merely respond to threats; they produce the conditions under which certain groups and territories are permanently rendered legible as a potential danger. From this perspective, securitization is not reactive, but productive; it constitutes subjects and territories as dangerous in advance and structures political, economic, and cultural life around their containment. The key word here is containment.

Securitization works by depoliticizing underlying conflicts, such as class domination, racial hierarchy, economic exploitation, and sexual violence, and translating them into

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questions of security and order. What appear as struggles over rights, resources, or recognition is reframed as a problem of internal threat management. This move displaces political contestation into the domain of emergency governance and military rule, normalizing extraordinary measures as everyday mechanisms of government.

The illusion of a lost or threatened order and stability reinforce this securitizing logic. The claim that order must be “restored” or “defended,” whether through appeals to democracy, constitutionalism, or international law, does not necessarily challenge securitization; in fact, it often deepens it. These frameworks thus function as normative coverings for the same governing logic, presenting coercive structures as required corrections to disorder, rather than as expressions of power.

Calls to “reclaim democracy” or “uphold international law” risk reproducing the foundation of this analytical framework: that there exists a stable, neutral order that has been disrupted, rather than a historically produced hierarchy maintained through continuous exclusion and containment. The appeal to order becomes a self-legitimizing cycle, where perceived instability justifies securitization, and securitization is then interpreted as the necessary restoration of stability negotiated through complex transnational networks.

Looking at the state through the perspective of the zone of non-being enables us to perceive how securitization functions not as an exceptional distortion of liberal order, but as one of its constitutive logics; that is, a way of maintaining hierarchical social structures by continuously producing and managing “threatened” and “threatening” subjects and territories, while the language of order and legality obscures this ongoing process. At stake is a continuous process of producing threat to stabilize hierarchy, while masking its political foundations.

The scaling up of state-centric optics compose the basic frameworks of a geopolitical analysis. Failing to grasp these internal dynamics of prevailing governance logics helps cover up these conflicts while elaborating analyses that depart from illusions of order, sovereignty, and representation. In doing so, it misses where the real fault lines and battle lines are drawn across transnational cartographies of power, including where lie the trenches in which these conflicts are being fought.

WHERE IS THE INTERNATIONAL?

In the wake of the massacre, social movements mobilized across multiple, deeply imbricated scales of action. This mobilization included the retrieval of bodies and counter-forensic analysis; grief support organized by the movement of mothers of sons exterminated by the state; everyday care work for children and families of the deceased;

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the production of data in disaggregated and intersectional categories; and the pursuit of justice and reparations both within and beyond state institutions.

The day after the massacre, a coordinated appeal to United Nations special agencies and the Inter-American Commission had already been prepared and filed alongside appeals to federalize the case to the Brazilian Supreme Federal Court. At the same time, declarations from international organizations – ranging from those within the UN system to the likes of Amnesty International – affirmed, together with Brazilian civil society organizations, that the nature of the mass violence qualified an investigation under the classification of massacre. Coordinated counter-information campaigns began to circulate posted on social media and whispered on city streets. In spite of this, the official statements of all levels of government continued to evade responsibility for the action of state agents, both by declaration and by omission, compounded by attempts at intimidation and criminalization of human rights defenders.

After a technical visit by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in December of 2025, a formal report was published, concluding that the operation reflected a pattern of excessive and militarized policing. The report situates the violence within a broader structural pattern of state security practices that are deeply shaped by racialized, classed, and territorial inequalities, disproportionately affecting Black, poor, and peripheral populations. It highlights how policing in urban peripheries operates through militarized logics that normalize extreme lethal force in racially marked territories, alongside persistent failures in forensic procedures, crime scene preservation, and institutional accountability. In sum, the report calls attention to the ways in which these dynamics reflect entrenched forms of racial and socioeconomic stratification in public security governance, where marginalized communities are systematically exposed to higher levels of state violence. It calls for structural reforms to policing, strengthened independent investigations, and guarantees of truth, justice, and reparations for affected communities.

A forum of Brazilian social movements and civil society organizations accompanied all stages of this process, articulating between local, national, and international scales to maintain pressure and demand responsibility. Through this perspective, the international system operates less as a site of transformation than as a bypass within the interstate order, particularly given the uneven and often tactical modes of engagement available to peripheralized territories. Recourse to international spheres of influence thus composes one, among many, efforts to hack the system, often through indirect channels given the condition of state violence, neglect, and persecution. The recourse to the Inter-American system is illustrative: while such cases have contributed to struggles over legitimacy, memory, and reparation, they rarely produce structural transformation of the state forms that generate violence in the first place. Instead, they frequently function as delayed mechanisms of recognition, mediated through power asymmetries both domestically and those forged by North–South hierarchies. Moreover, these cases often contribute to the depoliticization of the underlying conflicts

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that sustain and reproduce these modes of governance through the architecture of universal human rights.

This raises a more uncomfortable question regarding the means available to respond to state violence, their implications for affected communities' autonomy, and how practices of citizenship, cultural norms, and political institutions are contested and reshaped. It demands that we confront the limits of international law itself, which functions more as a normative horizon than as an enforceable legal apparatus. The tension between recognition and transformation remains unresolved, as gains in symbolic legitimacy are frequently offset by the absence of material change. Recent claims brought before the Inter-American Human Rights System have opened a debate on whether democracy itself can be framed as a human right, particularly in regards to offering guarantees for civil participation and the effective exercise of constitutional rights. This ongoing discussion, in the context of democratic backsliding and institutional crises in Latin America, points to the complexity of designing mechanisms for popular participation that do not feed into foreign interventionism and political manipulation.

What emerges from initial organizing efforts following the Penha Massacre is not a singular strategy, but a layered set of practices oriented toward three interconnected objectives: counter-forensics and independent data production, formal reporting and documentation, and processes of articulation between local, city, state, national, regional, and international forums as an integrated feedback loop. These are not linear stages, but overlapping tactics that seek to navigate through institutional blockage, or bypass them altogether. The question that remains, then, is what these processes reveal about the structural limits of existing international mechanisms, and what alternative forms of responsibility might be imagined from them.

As evidenced in the efforts of social movement forums established to deal with the aftermath of the Penha Massacre, the periphery's relationship to the international is primarily a frustrated one. It is shaped by a system designed by and for state actors, in which legal recourse functions as one, among several, unreliable resources in the struggle for internal legitimacy. Before any renewed discussion of internationalism, this sobering recognition helps us resist both idealized abstractions and opportunistic invocations of international norms and institutions.

For those trained within the academic canon of International Relations, the existence and efficacy of international law have long been a matter of heated debate, with norm and regime theories often proposed as a more accurate approach in light of weak enforcement infrastructures. Yet, paradoxically, in moments of apparent crisis, appeals to multilateralism and international law proliferate as fragile affirmations of our weak capacity to imagine alternatives. How and why this has become the default response must itself become a site of collective reflection.

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These tensions within the language of multipolarity position it as an alternative to a unipolar conception of imperialism in ways that parallel the renewed invocation of democratic legality and constitutional order in domestic contexts, such as the Brazilian, where the rule of law becomes both horizon and constraint. In this sense, geopolitical framings risk reproducing the very state-centrism that they claim to displace in looking to the international, further entrenching the problems that they seek to resolve through the reification of “poles,” rather than the analysis of relations. These dilemmas ultimately take us back to wonder if we are asking the right questions at all. And, if not, what would it mean to repurpose the international, not as a stable architecture of order, but as an open field for political struggle, historical revision, and collective organization?

After all, who needs the international? Those with access to state structures have numerous strategies and means at their disposal, reflecting a fundamentally instrumental relationship. Those excluded from state structures and protections, by contrast, need the international in more immediate ways. Transnational categories of power relations, such as indicators of racialized, classed or gendered relations, have the conceptual and organizing capacity to connect with the international in a more global way, so to speak, effectively broadening the terms of debate over today’s internationalisms.

We need to begin by internationalizing this conversation as both a methodological and political necessity for confronting nationalist and state-centric perspectives. In a continental country such as Brazil, which occupies shifting positions within regional and international arenas, particular attention must be given to the construction of transnational forums. Beyond the logic of representation, recognition and rights, these spaces need to enable the circulation of archives, emancipatory praxis, and coordinated campaigns, actions, and political mobilization through the appropriation of digital infrastructures, among others. By articulating transnational networks it becomes possible to catch a glimpse of ways to repurpose the international.

BUILDING COUNTER-ARCHIVES

Half a year later, on the 28th of April of 2026, social movements reconvened at the site of the massacre in Penha. The day began with an eerily familiar silence, reminiscent of those final days in October. What emerged as an act of remembrance expressed a collective insistence on transforming luto (grief) into luta (fight). After 180 days waiting for a response that never came and being denied access to be heard, people took to the streets demanding truth and justice.

At the center of the mobilization was a newly formed forum of social movements, led by mothers whose sons have been killed by state violence. Their presence reframed the narrative: what the state had treated as isolated incidents and collateral damage

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became, in their words, a means of planned “family execution.” More than an individual death sentence imposed without trial, the executions destroyed entire families and communities. The denial of truth, justice, and the right to mourn leaves a mark on the possibility of reconstruction and future prospects for the community and for all who recognize themselves in this position of structural vulnerability: the more than half of the Brazilian population that identify themselves as Black, overwhelmingly living in conditions of poverty.

In the words of one mother, Tauã Brito, during an interview with the favela news outlet TV Complexo, one of the only media vehicles that was present: “Hoje, esse ato é um ato de pedido de respostas... Até quando a gente vai ficar sem saber o que de fato aconteceu?” (Today, this action is an action to demand answers...Until when will we remain not knowing what, in fact, happened?).

This question remains unanswered. Despite legal requirements mandating the use of police body-worn cameras, only 23% of officers involved in the operation were equipped with them. Of the little footage that has been submitted for analysis, portions appear scrubbed or manipulated. In response, social movements have begun reconstructing the operation themselves, combining testimonies, fragments of video, and independent data to piece together what official investigations have failed, or, more precisely, refused, to clarify.

This denial of responsibility is compounded by the persistence of what mothers termed “auto-investigação,” a kind of self-investigation in which state agents and institutions investigate their own actions. The result is a cycle of opacity, where structural obstacles impede the production of truth and the assignment of responsibility. The dispute over images, for example, which contest what exists, what is missing, and what may have been altered, has become emblematic of a broader problem of the governance of police activity and state agents. At stake is not only the absence of response and response-ability, but the structural difficulties involved in dealing with state violence.

Meanwhile, citizen-produced data maintain that the operation had no significant impact on territorial dynamics, crime rates, or the organization of criminal networks. For the families gathered at the site, claims that signal otherwise ring hollow. “Bandido é o Estado” (The state is the bandit), one participant affirmed, reflecting a sentiment that has gained traction among those who see state neglect and lethal force as part of a continuum of violence. In this view, the same institutions that fail to provide public policy and social support later justify repression as a necessity.

Overlaying these material grievances, forced disappearances, and overall misconduct, is a symbolic violence that cuts just as deeply. Many families describe having their grieving process denied, both socially and institutionally, through narratives that criminalize the victims and even their mothers. Discourses rooted in racist and sexist assumptions, as well as liberal notions of individual choice, frame the dead as authors

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of their own fate: young men and boys who “chose crime” as the “easy way out of poverty” and, by extension, “chose to die.” In this framing, the massacre is recast as a kind of “Faxina da Penha” (Penha Cleanup), a cleansing operation that absolves the state, while redistributing blame onto the dead themselves.

These narratives are not confined to official statements; they also circulate within sectors of the local population, where constant fear of violence coexists with support for harsh policing. The result is a fractured public sphere, where demands for security clash with calls for justice, and where the value of life is unevenly distributed.

Against this backdrop, the mothers’ movement has taken on a distinctly political role. Their mourning is not private; it is mobilized, articulated, and made public as a demand for accountability. Six months following the massacre, however, families remain without adequate state assistance, reparation, or even clear information about the fate of some victims, including cases of disappearance that remain unresolved.

What persists is not only the absence of answers, but the presence of a continuum of violence: a cycle in which the state first neglects, then punishes, and finally covers up. The return to the site of the massacre did not represent closure. It was a reminder that, for many, the violence is ongoing. In the absence of official truth, memory itself becomes a battleground.

A number of signs read that day “Não esquecer para não repetir” (Do not forget so it does not repeat itself). Herein is born the necessity of a counter-archive, to bring together, make visible, and circulate narratives and demands in defiance of institutional silence.

One week after the massacre, we returned to the classroom and the expected routines of everyday life. In a course on the “Politics of the Global South,” at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, from where I am currently writing, we found ourselves at a loss as to how to “go back to normal.” In the process of marking the interruption – of lives, communities, dreams, and, yes, classes – we came to a collective conclusion: the imperative to construct a counter-archive of the Penha Massacre.

And, so, we began to bring together community-based news, independent data production, and social movement initiatives onto one site on social media – the most accessible way to circulate. We called together and hosted at the university social movements and organizations with expertise in areas such as memory reconstruction (Iniciativa Direito à Memória e Justiça Racial), citizen-led data production methodology (data_labe), favela youth organizing against the “War on Drugs” (Movimentos), and the city’s human rights commission, setting the tone with the participation of Frente Penha (Penha Front), a collective of territorial leaderships in the favela complex of Penha. Our invited guests answered students’ questions and posed back new ones, expanding our

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ways of perceiving and organizing around local, national, and international spheres of action.

The talking circle on December 4th, 2025, revolved around three main lines of dialogue: (i) the territorial and political effects of state violence and militarized policing in favelas, including their impact on community formation, rights, and development; (ii) the role of representation and accountability, from media narratives to institutional responses; and (iii) the politics of knowledge production, particularly with regards to the limits of official data and the potential of counter-archives and community-led approaches to contest dominant narratives.

Testimonies interwove analysis in spoken and unspoken words. Between each round of questions and answers, poetry expressed the inexpressible. A minute of silence commenced the gathering, to ensure that no one forgot why we were there.

Between the stuffy walls of the university, with dragons and regal carvings overhead, we sat together in a circle, refusing to normalize the interruption. It was not the first time that we had to suspend classes due to police operations. Since then, it has not been the last. As I write the final sentences of this article, a sea of messages has flooded in hours before class: “Prof, there is a police operation blocking the expressways, I won’t make it.”

One of the consistent demands of the student movements is to establish a security protocol, so that every time this happens – every couple of weeks – the decision is not deferred among authorities. More than a plea for order, this demand denounces the normalization of systemic violence and disrupted life. Those of us who live, work, and study under these conditions are called to remake our political imaginations. Far from an inevitable breeding ground for conservatism, the structural insecurity of the peripheries creates the antagonistic terrain out of which a transformative politics must be forged.

The ways we treat death says a lot about the ways we treat life. For the Penha Massacre, we stopped and took in the moment of silence. Despite the collective will to make sense of it all and chart possibilities for action, the class quickly recognized that we did not have the language and means necessary, bombarded, as we are, by the ready scripts of distortion and indifference. Students had no trouble critiquing what was being presented to us by media and government alike, yet, when asked to offer up something in its place, most were at a loss of words. So we set out to recreate shared vocabulary and frames of reference that hold as unnegotiable the value of life.

These registers can be accessed here: @Contra.Arquivo. On the tab of reposted publications, you can find live testimonies that must be taken into account in any effort to understand the limits and possibilities of the state and interstate system. In the place of a conclusion, I leave with you, dear reader, an invitation to navigate a counter-archive

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under collective construction. May it serve to generate new questions regarding the kind of internationalism that we need today.

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