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In Praise of Unfettered Revolt

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A Crime Called Freedom: The Writings of Os Cangaceiros, Volume One

by Os Cangaceiros

Translated by Wolfi Landstreicher

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For over two decades the anonymous social rebels collectively known as Os Cangaceiros blazed a trail of unfettered revolt across the European social landscape. They traveled the continent intervening in wildcat strikes, riots and other explosions of social tension and class violence, contributing what they could to the struggles of those with whom they found affinity. Many of these writings against prison, most translated into English for the first time, have been collected in *A Crime Called Freedom*. Containing Os Cangaceiros' writings from their eponymous magazine and elsewhere, the collection consists of eight essays, two chronologies and a handful of letters. The writing sparks with life and creativity, never the dull litany of political injustices and prescriptions for their change

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that one becomes used to finding in so many anarchist and communist theoretical texts. Instead of a laundry list of criticism, Os Cangaceiros give us critique-in-action; never content with words alone, the texts found in this collection were one manifestation of the unceasing rebellion of their lives. The origin of their name is telling of Os Cangaceiros' political trajectory: The original cangaceiros ("social bandits") were Brazilian peasants of the late 19th and early 20th centuries who rose up against a life of servitude, and sought vengeance against the ruling order. Appropriating the wealth of the landowners at gun- and knifepoint, they found refuge in the welcoming arms of their own class, the poor and dispossessed of colonial society. Much like their historical namesakes, the modern Os Cangaceiros refused to live within the accepted bounds of an oppressive society. Their roots lay in the events in France in May and June of 1968, when for a brief moment workers and students seemingly brought the country to the brink of a social revolution. Among those on the streets were the petty criminals, hooligans, and juvenile delinquents calling themselves *les Fossoyeurs du Vieux Monde*, or the Gravediggers of the Old World. Having once tasted freedom, they were not content to rest on their laurels after the return to relative normalcy in July, opting instead to continue fighting against the world as it is by whatever means necessary. However, unlike many of their contemporaries, they did not form themselves into a tight-knit cell of "specialists in armed struggle," but chose instead to live lives of absolute freedom within the confines of modern capitalism; they chose to live as criminals, or rather they continued the criminal lives they had always led, but with a renewed vigor and an invigorated disgust for society. The revolutionary graffiti that had spread across France during the uprising provided the inspiration for their way of life: "Never work, ever!," "Boredom is counterrevolutionary," "Don't beg for the right to live — take it," and "Live without dead time." A refusal of work, law, morality, and civilized values became their *modus operandi*. Through the 1970s they moved nomadically across southern France

and Italy, engaging in struggles against police, politicians, and bureaucracy wherever they went. This way of life led to members of their loose-knit group — now widely known as Os Cangaceiros — ending up incarcerated on a frequent basis, and they began centering their activities on the prison-system in which they were increasingly enmeshed. Their personal experiences of prison provided the basis for their truly radical attack on prisons and the judiciary. They could never avoid making the connections between life within prison and outside of it; they saw that prison struggles are not isolated events, but are rather manifestations of the same social war that is flaring throughout society. While many prison reform activists condemned prison riots as counterproductive at best, Os Cangaceiros saw them as a desire for revolt that cannot be denied. In “Prisoner’s Talking Blues,” they write:

It is impossible to separate the fate reserved for prisoners inside the walls from the conditions reserved more generally for the mass of poor people in society... The revolt that resounds inside the prison walls is a continuation of the one that resounds outside, in the neighborhoods on the outskirts, and is a consequence of its repression. (53)

Most “anti-prison” activists concentrate on reducing overcrowding, improving conditions or decreasing recidivism rates, but for Os Cangaceiros the only solution was the abolition of prisons and the destruction of the society that creates them. They saw prison reformers not as allies, but as part of the problem.

Those who speak to us of overcrowding in the prisons are the very ones who have filled them until they burst! Obviously they are turning the question upside down. For us, it is not a question of building more prisons, but of emptying those that already exist. (76)

A truly radical critique of prisons must of necessity break with attempts to reform the prison system; instead, it must attack this system at its very roots, viewing it as a key element of class society and a tool that society uses to crush resistance in all of its forms. Os Cangaceiros saw that prison is used to systematically crush the rebellious spirit and to keep society safe from the lower classes, the criminal element, and those with visions of a different world. A social order dependent on prisons gradually becomes a great prison itself, with bosses, teachers, social workers, and politicians as the jailers.

Freedom is the crime that contains all crimes, and it is against this crime that the old world defends itself. The state is physically eliminating all the beautiful young people who aren't resigned — the same young people who die, murdered by cops or reactionary pro-cop vigilantes. The state buries those that the law can trap alive in its prisons as long as possible while terrorizing those who manage to stay outside. For these, it pays educators and other pests to demoralize them and make them forget their comrades in jail. (78)

Against this continual assault on communities in resistance Os Cangaceiros counterpoised the weapon of active solidarity. They sought to eliminate the false distinction between “political prisoners” and “social prisoners,” and it was this understanding that led to their most daring attack on the society of confinement. Os Cangaceiros’ struggle against prisons took many forms, but none was more infamous than “13,000 Escapes”: A Dossier Against the “Project of 13,000 Places”, the main text of which is included in this collection. Its name references a French government project to modify the penal system so that it could accommodate an additional 13,000 maximum security prisoners. Appearing in 1990, “13,000 Escapes” contained not only detailed information on the

campaign of vandalism and sabotage undertaken by Os Cangaceiros against this project, but also somehow obtained blueprints, internal communications, and other government documents exposing the inner workings of the new prisons and those undergoing renovation. The covert dissemination of 13,000 copies of this dossier was a bombshell, creating a public scandal on the outside and providing a useful tool for escape attempts on the inside. The authorities scrambled to deal with the political fallout, but despite police investigations and a nationwide manhunt, none of the individuals responsible were ever caught. The informal nature of Os Cangaceiros effectively prevented police infiltration of their circles and their identities still remain unknown, to the great frustration of the French state and Interpol. The group simply disappeared soon after “13,000 Escapes,” never acting under that name again.

Until now, very few of Os Cangaceiros’ writings have been available to an English-speaking audience, making the publication of this slim volume of writings a striking achievement. Most of the essays in this collection had been previously published in an Italian translation, while the rest had only been published in the original French. *A Crime Called Freedom* includes a new introduction by the translator, Wolfi Landstreicher, along with the original introduction to the Italian collection. This English translation is from the Italian, not the original French, yet the translation has surmounted its inherent limitations to capture both the poetry and the venom of these texts in all their fullness. The ideas in this book are dangerous; hopefully they will find the receptive readers they deserve.