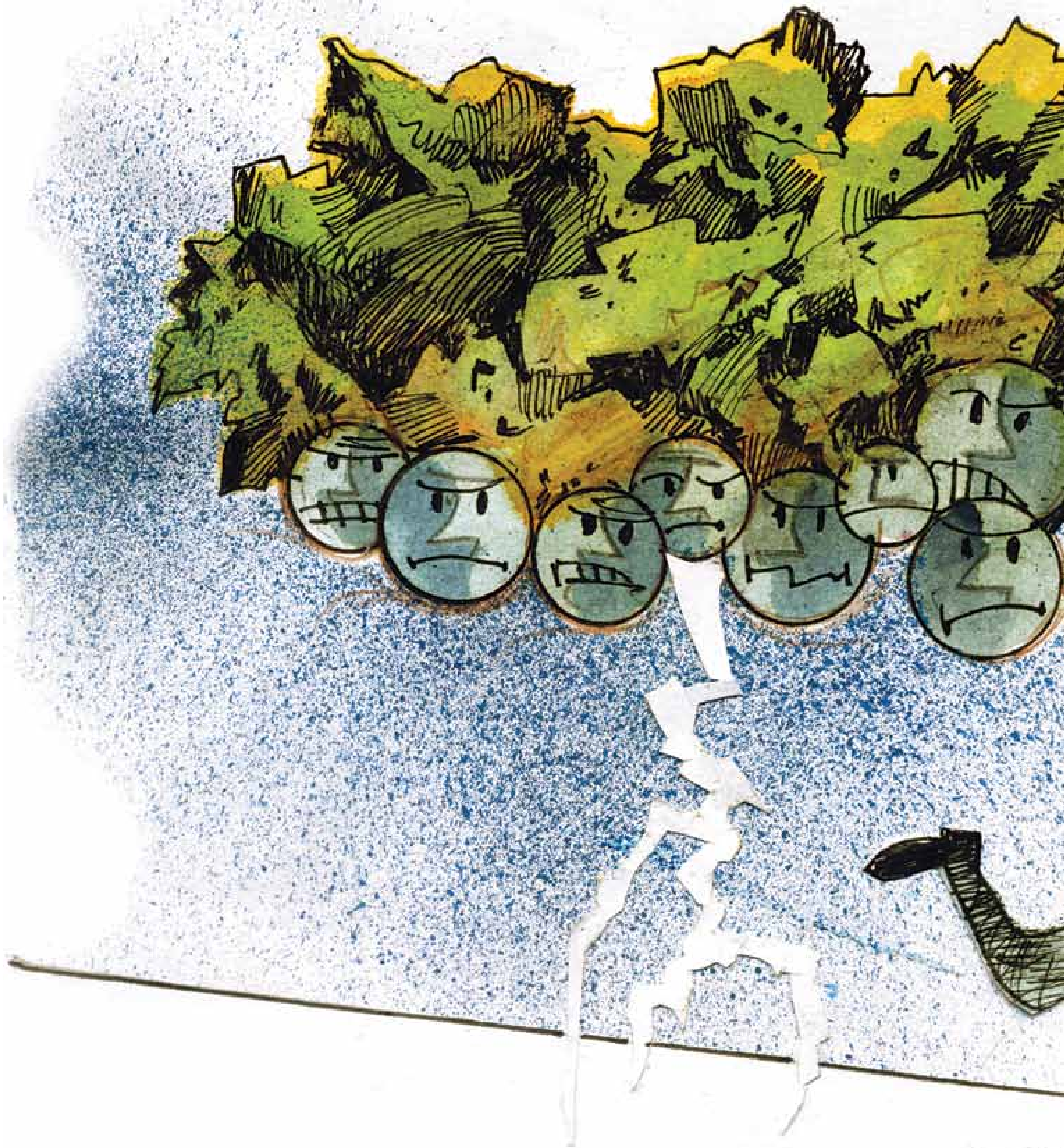

ILLUSTRATIONS MARIZA

Days of fury

New study by José de Souza Martins reveals that more than a million Brazilians have taken part in or attempted an act of lynching

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It was the second day of January 1998, a 58-year-old stonemason had his arms tied behind his back with barbed wire and was lynched by a mob in Caboto, in the metropolitan region of Salvador, after having argued with and wounded two neighbors with a scythe. On February 14, 2008: a teen, age 15, was beaten up by other inmates at the Fundação Casa in Franco da Rocha, in metropolitan São Paulo; the assailants thought he had "ratted" on other offenders. On May 3, 2014, a young mother, 33, was brutally assaulted on the beach at Guarujá, on the southern coast of São Paulo, having been mistaken for an alleged kidnapper of children who was practicing "black magic." After being reported in the press, these stories became mere statistics.

Over the past 60 years, more than a million Brazilians have taken part in—or attempted—an act of lynching. This finding, a symptom of a disease that afflicts Brazilian society, is the conclusion reached by sociologist José de Souza Martins, who has spent more than three decades studying lynchings in Brazil. "The frequency of lynchings in Brazil demands that we learn more about vigilantism, a practice endemic in our society," says the author of *Linchamentos: a justiça popular no Brasil* (Lynchings: Vigilantism in Brazil) (Contexto, 2015), a study funded by FAPESP and the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).

Professor emeritus from the USP Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Literature, and Human Sciences (FFLCH-USP), Martins began his research into lynchings in the 1970s while he was investigating the conflicts and tensions characteristic of the social movements taking place in Brazil's interior regions, especially along the borders of the state of Amazonas, where he observed outbreaks of looting and vigilante practices. He incorporated many other incidents into his study, some actually documented in the press, along with three field studies carried out in the interior regions of the state of São Paulo, in western Santa Catarina State, and in the scrublands of Bahia State. Over the years, he developed a catalog of 2,028 cases, which focused primarily on the years between 1945 and 1998. During that period, 2,579 individuals were the targets of either attempted

or consummated lynchings. Only 1,150 (44.6%) people were rescued (by police in more than 90% of the cases). Another 1,221 (47.3%) were overcome by public fury, beaten, and attacked with clubs and rocks and by kicking and punching, in that order and in that progression. There were even extreme cases in which eyes were gouged out, ears cut off, or men castrated. Martins' unprecedented study reveals that among these, 782 (64%) died and 439 (36%) were wounded. Martins argues that his figures show that lynching has become part of Brazilian social reality and is gradually becoming less anomalous. In other words, a day of fury, once a rare event, has now become a daily occurrence referred to in the plural: days of fury.

Parallel to the main body of his research, the sociologist followed up on 2,505 other episodes, updating his data through 2014. He adopted an experimental procedure: the daily monitoring of incidents. He also enriched his study with research conducted in other countries at different periods of time, having consulted libraries and archives in England, Italy, and France. In addition, he reviewed bibliographic information from the US—the principal theoretical model in the field; after all, the roots of the term "lynching" date back to the 18th-century Lynch Law. The term reached Brazil in the 19th century. "The first lynching that occurred in Brazil was recorded in 1585. At the time, such an act was not called "lynching." Instead, it referred to a practice already found in various countries that causes a mob to kill someone for some reason," Martins says. "The Americans have compiled the largest number of studies, but they are limited to certain fields. Mainly they wanted to find out who was lynched, who performed the lynching, and what was the likely cause," says Martins, who expanded the scope of his analysis by using 189 fields to collect data in an effort to thoroughly probe the sociological environment surrounding lynchings.

As a sociologist, Martins keeps in mind that one should study lynching not to judge but rather to determine whether or not a lynching is comprehensible, i.e., to understand the participants' point of view. "Lynching is a cowardly form of capital punishment. The victim of the person being lynched is already dead or has been violated. A crowd gathers to do justice on behalf of that victim and reacts against a situation that, in their milieu, has become morally intolerable," he explains. "Someone who lynches realizes that he is committing a crime. If the lynching takes place in broad daylight, there will be fewer participants. At night, however, the number of participants almost doubles—and the degree of cruelty increases—since there is an expectation of impunity. Getting involved is an irrational act, but in the hearts of the participants there is an awareness of what is right and what is wrong. People think they are punishing someone who, from their perspective, deserves to be punished. At the same time, they realize that they are not the ones who should be administering the punishment."

RAZOR'S EDGE

To Martins, lynchings are an expression of a crisis of social disintegration. "The crimes that provoke lynchings are interpreted by the lynchers as crimes against the human condition. They are not everyday crimes like stealing a wallet," he says. "If someone rapes a child, for example, that means that rules were broken and that the police and justice system have failed. The public finds itself between blind justice and cynical justice—a justice system that the public can no longer accept and that de-legitimizes the principle that crime must be confronted. And this leads to explosions of public fury."

Martins places lynching in the arena of collective behavior and, at the same time, within the realm of a community crime committed between the multitude and the anti-multitude. "It means that in this society people are living like outlaws, as defined by sociologist Everett Stonequist. These are people who are living on the razor's edge of social transition, in a society that is based on societal relationships of a contractual nature that explode from time to time with mob behaviors, but is also structured as a community and family-oriented world," he says. According to Martins, the major cities of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador rank highest in number of lynchings. This information is consistent with the survey conducted by the USP Center for the Study of Violence, which, between 1980 and 2006, counted 580 lynchings in the state of São Paulo, 204 in Rio de Janeiro, and 180 in Bahia.

"It typically occurs in the larger cities but is committed in the name of small-town values," Martins observes.

In his latest book, the sociologist presents original insights developed from a cross-referencing of the 189 fields he investigated. For example he identifies what he calls the "durability of hate" – in 70% of the cases, hate lasts approximately 20 minutes; later, it can extend for 24 hours. In other cases, it might even persist for more than a month, or a year; such is the impact of the original crime that provoked it. "In general, lynching is not a premeditated crime. It is committed while people are in an emotional state provoked by the original crime," he says. The author also introduces a "cruelty index" that he uses to illustrate the contrast between blacks and whites: "If the motivation is the same, an offender, whether white or black, will be a target of lynching. However, if the offender is black, a greater degree of cruelty is involved, which may include actions such as gouging out the eyes, or cutting off the ears or penis of the accused," he says. Contrary to what one might think, however, financial status is not much of a factor in these cases: both the wealthy and the poor take part in lynchings, and individuals from both classes are victims of lynchings.

To Martins, lynchings are an expression of a crisis of social disintegration

ALL AGAINST ONE

There is an immense amount of folklore behind lynchings, which today is aggravated by multimedia tools. The case of Fabiane Maria, brutally lynched in Guarujá, became symbolic because of the presence of smartphone cameras. The "news" that a blond woman was kidnapping children to use in witchcraft spread via the Internet, and Fabiane, a brunette who had put red streaks in her hair on a sunny Saturday afternoon, passed by a friend's house to pick up a Bible, stopped at a little shop and, in a series of coincidences, paused to console a little boy who was crying in the street by giving him a banana. That was all it took for a resident to identify her as the "witch of the coast." In a matter of minutes, she was surrounded by thousands of raving, violent people. "People have ultramodern media available, but they live in a completely rustic world. A lynching is attempted every day in Brazil. There are no rules. And so people invent ad hoc rules to do 'justice' here and now," he says, critically.

At 76, José de Souza Martins has published more than 30 books. Recently, he also released *Diário de uma terra lontana* (Diary of a Distant Country) (Fundação Pró-Memória, 2015) and *Desavessos: crônicas de curtas palavras* (Misfortunes: Chronicles in Short Words) (Com-Arte Editora Laboratório, 2014). Martins is now working on another book, this one about the ritual dimensions of lynchings as a sacrificial blood rite. A sociologist with an anthropological sensibility, Martins plans to decipher the "protocol" that is implicit in lynchings. "There is a sequence. First, pursue. Suddenly, 2, 3, or 4 become 8, 9, 10, or 100. All against one. If the accused is too far away, people throw stones. If he's closer, they take up clubs, sticks—a cane or a broom, whatever is handy. Then comes the beating with kicks and punches. In the logic of a lynching, there is no such thing as 'giving up.' The lynchers attack, but they stop and wait for the subject to appear defeated. If the victim stirs for even a minute, they attack again."

So far, Martins has found that 7.8% of the cases he has studied involved the lynching of an innocent party—a high rate, in his opinion. The final impression is that, in a fractured society, anyone at all could become influenced by the violent impulses of a mob. "In Santa Catarina, there was an attempt to lynch a judge from the Superior Court who was there on vacation with his family, because he was using an official car. A priest in the Ipiranga neighborhood of São Paulo was surrounded by furious parents because he wouldn't let the kids play in the church courtyard. This proves that no one is immune to a lynching," he concludes. ■

Projects

1. *Conditions of the sociological study of lynchings in Brazil* (No. 96/09765-2); **Grant Mechanism** Regular Research Grant; **Principal Investigator** José de Souza Martins (USP Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Literature, and Human Sciences); **Investment** R$11,725.73 (FAPESP).
2. *Lynchings in Brazil* (No. 94/03202-0); **Grant Mechanism** Regular Research Grant; **Principal Investigator** José de Souza Martins (USP Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Literature, and Human Sciences); **Investment** R$4,311.02 (FAPESP).