SUBVERTING THE OLYMPIC PROJECT:
THE ANTI-HEGEMONIC STRUGGLE OF AN URBAN SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN RIO DE JANEIRO

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ABSTRACT

Unequal urbanization processes in Brazil materialised a contradictory situation of deep housing crisis and numerous empty urban spaces. Rio de Janeiro's reshaping for mega-events such as the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympics in 2015 is a complex case of strategic planning aiming to attract transnational investment.

In this work I examine a squatter movement in Rio de Janeiro that configured itself as a subversive group with revolutionary practices and anti-capitalist projects. I argue that this specific experience can present essential insights for sociological research, indicating an alternative perspective and revealing disguised conflicts.

This article's goal is to give voice to a vulnerable group and create an open and dynamic theoretical framework that is nourished by this insurgent perspective. The development of this work is based on the dialogue with one of the leaders of this social movement and the outcome was the identification of essential topics: a) social movements' context in Brazil, b) the formation of this squatter movement and the ongoing neoliberalisation process in Rio de Janeiro, and c) the squatter movement as a utopic enclave, seeking to articulate a thicker resistance network.

1. INTRODUCTION

The main motivation of this article is to produce a piece of work that is concerned with empowering a subversive anti-capitalist group by developing the present theoretical framework in dialogue with its particular conflictual perspective and giving visibility to a specific struggle. In this article I argue that it is crucial that radical sociological works accept the challenge of developing its intellectual agendas in an open dialogue with already existing subversive groups, not only analysing them but actually creating the possibilities for their perceptions to nourish new epistemological frameworks.

This article is based on interviews with one of the leaders of a squatter movement in Rio de Janeiro called Lurdinha. In this interviews it is possible to grasp the way in which this social movement engages with the political conjuncture, their understanding of reality, context, resistance strategies and alternative horizons.

In the interviews it is possible to extract three crucial topics in their development as a subversive collective: 1) Reflexive understanding of their context supported by their daily practice of critical analysis, situating themselves in a complex network of power relations, 2) Ongoing development of their collective as a community, proposing a subversive political agenda, 3) Constant improvement of resistance strategies, producing different understandings of reality and alternative anti-capitalist projects.

> We need to understand that we must work collectively for our emancipation. We need to occupy spaces, we need to demand respect, we need to stop letting NGOs answer for our movement. We need to stop relying on the government, we need to stop thinking that the government's proposals are always the best proposals. We need to stop getting stuck in the middle of the police, the militia and the government; they are all part of the same gang. We are the ones that don't have a gang. We are the ones that didn't discover a way to get together. (Lurdinha, 2012)

It is clear in this fragment of the interview that this social movement developed a complex diagnosis regarding their context and actions. It is crucial to stress the constant effort of talking about a collective ("we") and to direct their demands in a broader and revolutionary fashion, not focusing on getting a house to live. At this moment, she talks about their demand for respect and need to consolidate their own voice. It is also clear how they locate themselves in a revolutionary position where the State power cannot solve their problems since it belongs to an antagonist group. In the end is also possible to identify her claim for a better articulation and construction of an identity-based social movement.

Roy (2009) argues that social theorists must engage with the construction of a "Global South" theory, challenging mainstream theory from a European-American viewpoint. This article's proposal is to take Roy's idea even further, not only examining insurgent theoretical frameworks but also giving voice and empowering specific radical social movements. The bibliographical selection of the present work also reflects the urge for hearing already existing theoretical formulations from the "Global South", in this case with Brazilian scholars.

2. RIO DE JANEIRO AND THE OLYMPIC DREAM

In the genocide of poor people the capital does not cry, the capital brightens. (lurdinha, 2012)

Neoliberal politics in the 1980s had enormous impacts throughout Latin America. In Brazil, it produced the deepening of the housing deficit due to the reduction of social policies and mass unemployment. Without State support, the poor population couldn't afford to formally acquire a house and was forced to move to inadequate settlements and create different collective strategies in order to survive.

Brazil is characterized by deep wealth concentration and unequal access to public equipment. Urban inhabitants grew from 1/3 of the national population in the 1950s to 2/3 in 1980s. In 2008, the housing deficit reached 5.546 million housing units. At the same time, the number of empty potential housing units is 7.202 million. In 2015, the figures haven't changed much and the housing deficit is approximately 5.430 million housing units[1]. What these numbers show is a contradictory reality where despite the existence of potential housing units that could solve the housing deficit there is no access to them by the poorest families.

The end of the military dictatorship in Brazil, in 1985, and the resulting redemocratization process was marked by the social movements' struggle for popular housing and it was in this context that the National Fight for Housing Movement (MNLM) was created. This movement is present in 18 Brazilian states and proposes the organization and articulation of the labour class towards the unity of its fights, for a social interest housing policy and urban reform, building a socialist, egalitarian and democratic society.

Rio de Janeiro is inserted in a complex and multifaceted process of inter-local competition where different discourses and public policies are activated to generate the best conditions for the attraction of investments. Mega-events are a successful way of engaging in enormous urban transformation projects that involve powerful actors. In this work, I argue that the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro is a crucial moment that need to be understood within a larger history of transformations and social injustices occurring in the last decades.

2.1. Neoliberalisation process in Rio de Janeiro

In Rio de Janeiro, it is crucial to understand that a neoliberal urban management takes place in connection with political powers aiming for the real estate market growth through the massive investments in international mega-events preparation. In this work I argue that the neoliberalisation process in Rio de Janeiro can be understood through the Strategic Planning of the City of Rio de Janeiro (PECRJ), in 1993, and currently the 2016 Olympics preparation.

Neil Brenner (2010) explains that this process does not occur homogeneously in every capitalist nation and can vary significantly depending on local peculiarities. The pathways in which the institutionalization of certain neoliberal practices, political powers, national elites and social resistance strategies produce different outcomes and actually existing neoliberalisation processes.

The context of hyper mobility of transnational capital and inter-municipal competition produces a strong pressure for local powers to engage in varied strategies to attract investments, from new urban equipments and touristic events to receiving international events and reshaping entire neighbourhoods. In Rio de Janeiro, the effort to generate an "entrepreneur soul" and a fictitious international vocation to the city is unambiguous.

Barcelona's Olympics in 1992 is a good example of how an international mega-event can produce a "successful" process of urban reshaping and even the creation of a new model of city strategic planning. Rio de Janeiro imported not only the idea but also Catalan experts (Tubsa – Tecnologies Urbanas Barcelonas S.A) to develop the city's strategic planning. Vainer (2010) explains that Rio de Janeiro's strategic planning is a result of the articulation of the municipal power, industry federation and trade association, leaving no space for popular participation.

The PECRJ, following the expertise of internated "successful models", tries to implement a separation from urban projects and politics. The pathway chosen for Rio de

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[1] Housing deficit in Brazil / Cities Ministry, National Housing Secretary – Brasília. Available in <www.cidades.gov.br>.

Janeiro should be accepted by city dwellers and a business-friendly context must be created for the city. The Olympic project is an example of a supposedly not debatable reality that is a natural outcome of the city's vocations and every citizen must cooperate for the "city's success".

> Rio de Janeiro's mayor created a series of euphemisms to justify the expulsion of poor families from their homes. The mayor is in service of capital as a manager in the municipal sphere, materializing a cruel social conjuncture. Nowadays cities are being sold internationally, especially Rio de Janeiro, and hosting mega-events is the crowning of this project. (Lurdinha, 2012)

Borja and Castells (1997) explain that strategic planning is based on public-private partnerships, social consensus, efficient use of supplies and long-term strategies. The concrete impact of this mode of governance in Rio de Janeiro is a reshaped urban life in the city where social inequalities are deepened.

The PECRJ, following the expertise of international "successful models", tries to implement a separation from urban projects and politics. The pathway chosen for Rio de Janeiro should be accepted by city dwellers and a business-friendly context must be created for the city. The Olympic project is an example of a supposedly not debatable reality that is a natural outcome of the city's vocations and every citizen must cooperate for the "city's success".

Social consensus is crucial for this kind of project and it can only be arranged through strong and permanent city marketing programs, creating symbolic and discursive strategies to legitimate projects that were chosen by economic elites. In this case, the discourse is that municipal urban projects have nothing to do with politics. Discussions, conflicts, debates and different perspectives should be activated in different places and scales, not in the municipality. It is unambiguous that this kind of urban formation denotes the "commoditization" of the city and suppresses political action.

3. MNLM: SUBVERTING THE CITY

Through fight and grit we get the house by force! (Lurdinha, 2012)

The National Fight for Housing Movement (MNLM) is a popular social movement founded in 1990 in Brazil with representatives from 13 states during the I National Unification Gathering of Housing Movements and nowadays the movement reaches 18 states. MNLM's organization is based on municipal, state and national coordination, external articulation with other social movements and participatory decision-making, developing a series of specific and connected demands.

Social movements that appeared after the military dictatorship (1964-1988) are identified with the housing deficit struggle and it is in this context that MNLM emerged. It is crucial for this social movement to engage on an ongoing project of proposals aiming for structural changes in the current urbanization model and a horizon of true social transformation. MNLM understands that the housing problem cannot be solved only by popular housing, but with structural changes in the economic model and in urban development.

> Our mission is to encourage the organization and articulation of the working class in its quest to unify its struggles towards achieving a workers-controlled housing policy of social interest with urban reform that guarantees universal social rights, thus adding to the construction of a socialist, equalitarian and democratic society. (Movimento Nacional de Luta pela Moradia, 2010)

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MLNM's self-presentation text in the paragraph above is direct in stressing the need of the articulation of the working class aiming for an alternative society. It is important to notice that Marxist categories are often in their discourse and their understanding of state and capital is multidimensional, imbuing their direct demands with a broader utopian energy.

For this social movement the anti-capitalist fight is related to the land access and housing trends, and more crucially to the challenge of private property. This social movement is characterized by the challenge of the status quo developing different perceptions of social housing structures and city life. It is important to understand that MNLM focuses on the empowerment of marginalized populations that don't have access to their basic rights.

Kowarick (1993) explains that in Brazil the political process after the military dictatorship consolidated important democratic apparatus but basic civil rights could not be guaranteed: physical integrity, access to housing, health service and social assistance. It is fair to state that the legal tools already existing in the Brazilian Constitution, after 27 years, are not fully applied to the poorest classes. Therefore, social movements in Brazil, fighting for the rights of an unprivileged social stratum, are crucial for broadening of popular participation and producing a more democratic reality.

Contemporary unequal processes of urbanization produce variegated contradictory outcomes that are heavily felt by disadvantaged populations. In the face of deep inequalities, exclusion and marginalization, MNLM aims at articulating and organizing resistance strategies by collectively analysing social reality and developing resistance strategies.

MNLM is a social movement engaged with various forums, congresses and conferences, developing an argumentative and confrontational political culture. Its participants tend to join the movement for long periods of time, aiming to solve territorial problems, housing problems, educational problems, and health problems. Its downside is the fact that when immediate issues are disentangled many participants tend to leave the daily activities of the movement.

3.1. Contrasting projects: The Olympic Rio vs. The Insurgent Rio

Rio de Janeiro at the present time is a case of a market-driven city, which massive propaganda reifies the city as a competitive entity with vocational affinity to attracting tourists and mega-events, such as the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympics in 2016. Castells and Borja (1996) argue that strategic planning need to be legitimated by the population and the best way of presenting urban projects is by producing a discursive strategy that suggests a crisis that must be solved.

City marketing and image-making are crucial operations in this scenario where a certain discourse must work to create all the conditions for an already chosen pathway of urban transformations. Vainer (2010) explains that the population, in this case, is confronted by the idea that being in favour of these projects is being in favour of the city or the country, being patriot or even "doing what is right". This discursive formation is often oppressive to anyone that opposes (being called an antipatriotic, pessimist or alarmist), offering no space for debates or discussions and implying the idea of the inexistence of any alternatives.

4. UNHEARD REVOLUTIONS: SURVIVING THE MEGA-EVENTS

MNLM focuses on the occupation of abandoned private and public buildings, targeting empty and unused properties. MNLM does not occupy environmental protection areas or productive properties. In some cases, the occupation process starts with spontaneous and independent actions of families, being followed by the support and organization of MNLM.

The next step is to connect these families with the broader housing struggle agenda, via cultural events, meetings, workshops, and congresses. MNLM is concerned with the politicization of the occupiers, enhancing their self-steam by linking their housing problems with a bigger context marked by unjust public policies by challenging the stigmatized perception that this situation is their personal fault.

MNLM's occupations are collectively planned and organized, from the topographic study of the property and preparatory meetings to the registration of occupiers. The definition of date and time of entry in the property is carefully debated taking into consideration a logistic study. After occupying it is crucial to register the occupation process with photos, videos and reports, establishing shared activities, cultural and religious ceremonies and general services duties.

The property's material preservation is crucial for this collective. The occupiers have to be creative to deal with health and basic sanitation issues in these abandoned properties. The collective meals in some cases are made with donated food from people or social entities. The occupation can be extremely challenging with the lack of water, sanitation, electricity, and insufficient protection from the weather. The collective action is their strongest response to that situation and they are often victorious in developing their material conditions.

Many occupiers are informal workers or unemployed so the income generation is also faced in a collective way. The occupiers seek different ways of providing capacitating courses and forming cooperatives with public resources by searching partnerships with juridical, technical and social projects.

The debates held in the occupations often introduce topics related to ethnicity and gender, focusing on the unjust inequalities that are heavily felt by blacks and women. In this sense it is clear the effort to develop an identity-based, well-informed and critical group capable of dealing with their violent context.

Another crucial feature of MNLM is the women's protagonism in the development of the collective. Women are affected more severely by the unequal conditions of life in cities and in this case they stay more at the occupation sites, taking care of children and participating in discussions and debates about housing projects and broader activities.

In the interview Lurdinha (2012) explains that the legislation is selectively used by the Judiciary in Brazil, being only efficient when protecting the interests of property owners, and incompetent when in defence of social demands. The removal of occupant and repossession are often quickly dealt with and violent procedures are often made with human rights violations. For her it is clear that in practice the market law is stronger then juridical norms, institutionalizing social injustice. The state, when dealing with these issues, is more present as a repressive force than anything else, criminalizing poverty.

Housing movements are often contradictory to public opinion. There is a huge effort by mainstream media and official means of communication to link the occupation of empty building to criminality and violence. The occupation of empty buildings is often depicted as "invasions" that confront private property illegitimately, producing the criminalization of such movements, even if Brazilian Constitution and international institutions legitimate their claims.

4.1. Manuel Congo: The Utopian Enclave

In 2007 MNLM started an occupation called Manuel Congo, named after the leader of the biggest slave's rebellion in Brazil, in Cinelândia (one of the most important sites for popular demonstration in Rio de Janeiro's city centre). After 8 years this occupation is one

of the most successful operation for MNLM. It's a symbol of resistance and survival in one of the most contested areas of the city.

An online documentary (Rio on Watch, 2012) dialogued with Lurdinha (that is also one the leaders of this occupation) and discussed their internal organization and daily activities. She explains that all occupiers decide everything collectively and engage on a cooperative life-style. In Manuel Congo they decided to create a "Bill of Rights" where the rules of conduct are settled and exposed. In this case, each occupier performs 2.5 hours of voluntary work per week. This is based on a collectively produced schedule for shared responsibilities, such as the cleaning and maintenance duties.

Lurdinha (Rio on watch, 2012) explains that they aim to develop a community that is able to deal with this cooperatively so the children in the occupation are not only their parents' responsibility. To deal with the education problem in Rio de Janeiro they created a system of collective supervision of children, where they deal with the children's commute to school, their performance and behaviour.

Manuel Congo challenges the occupiers to develop a new understanding of interaction, building a project for a new society and fighting for a new reality. She explains that they work collectively to answer questions like: What is your community like? What don't you like about it? What do we want our community to be like? What do we do in order to build this community the way we want it to be?

MNLM argues that Manuel Congo is a positive example that demonstrates that an alternative sociability is possible. For this social movement this experience must be used as inspiration to a broader political action of occupation of empty buildings, serving as a guideline for public policies to legitimate these communities, since all unused spaces must be challenged and accomplish its social use. Examples like Manuel Congo show that MNLM is very successful in maintaining a permanent pressure for public resources, keeping the mobilization stable and enduring diverse obstacles.

5. CONCLUSION

The interaction between social movements and public power has many variables and MNLM's experience with participatory public projects is interesting to grasp the complexity of this method of urban planning. It is important to understand that even in recent participatory experiences that social movements are part of, generally these spaces are for consultancy but not for effective political decisions, being very limited by the lack of information, orientation to citizens and a highly technical language.

In these places there is no space for the discussion of priorities and public resources destination. Even when urban policies engage with participatory forums, these spaces are formulated by the capitalist state rationality. Randolph (2007) explains that popular participation is often used as an instrument to legitimate certain projects and produce a false feeling of consensus, without challenging the status quo. It is crucial to fight for a democratic power to decide, discuss and rethink the city and its projects.

MNLM opposed to many participatory spaces arguing that these kinds of spaces for popular participation are strategic participation spaces, being used only for a false understanding of decision-making and justice. They validate specific projects and provide a superficial discussion. MNLM suggests that this illusion of participation must be demystified since it only serves to legitimate the actual plan where the population had minimum influence, giving a democratic aura that is unreal.

MNLM's perspective on reformist and revolutionary debates are quite interesting and explore a different understanding that breaks this binary. MLNM proposes a debate that

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rethinks the rigid separation between reformist and revolutionary movements definitions. This urban social movement understands itself as a group of resistance in a capitalist context, aiming for better life conditions for the working class, strengthening insurgent tactics and articulating collective forces that have an anti-capitalist horizon.

> Even if it seems like this fight is in the institutional level, this fight needs to be nourished on the street with a process of occupation. A complete street dispute with the occupation of every public and private empty building! (Lurdinha, 2012)

The actions implemented by the movement combine the institutional level (conferences, public hearings, public management partnerships and public policies councils) and social mobilization (caravans, marches, journeys, public acts and occupations). MNLM's tactics vary from the insertion of militants in political-institutional representation spaces, influencing public opinion to organizing cooperatives for generation of labour and income.

Even if apparently reformists they understand that these actions can germinate a bigger transformation process, improving the objective conditions of the working class. They develop a counterculture, aiming for new understanding of ongoing and collective political action. In this case, the process is as important as the results, since is must provide them with autonomy, critique and self-critique, self-steam and protagonism in their daily-lives.

MNLM does not accept the established legal model, aiming to empower those who cannot be heard and have their citizenship denied. This movement proposes a resistance strategy that empowers the labour class, challenging current unequal power relations.

Their revolutionary perspective aims to articulate the underprivileged class: homeless, landless, unemployed, indigenous, informal workers and precarious workers. It is not about homogenising different fights or denying peculiarities but politicizing what is common to these fights, organizing and developing a reflexive anti-capitalist perspective.

Social mobilization is the central force of MNLM generating demands and developing strategies. This social movement focus on dialoguing with different institutionalized political powers, at the same time, articulating popular movements and participatory spaces. This capability of dialogue with other movements, unions and universities is crucial for the occupying processes and MNLM always connects its fights with other social movements and political processes in the city.

In this article, I argued that MNLM's experience can highlight crucial topics for a sociological work concerned with social movements and contemporary unequal urbanization processes. It is essential to give voice and empower these subversive groups and grapple with their revolutionary perspectives. In this work I suggest that MNLM is a special social movement since it focus on specific urban rights for underprivileged groups while grasping a broader anti-capitalist horizon, activating varied and multi-scaled strategies, engaging in symbolic and material fights, and producing daily revolutions.

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