6 - Favelas, consumption and violence

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6 - *Favelas*, consumption and violence

The imaginary construction of *favelas*

The image of a society polarized between those who are “integrated” and those who are “excluded” -where a minority middle/upper class reap the benefits of modernity while a majority live in “another world” of cultural, social and economic marginality- has both permeated the political discourse and been adopted by international organizations and NGOs. This vision is sustained as much by the natural tendency to think in opposites as by its capacity to mobilize moral sentiments and prejudices. It has, however, no basis in social reality.

The vast majority of the Brazilian population is integrated into the values and expectations of the global society. They have access to a variety of public services and struggle on a daily basis to acquire the goods offered by the market—with some degree of success, as we will see. At the same time, they suffer from poverty, social inequality, and severely limited access to public goods, in particular police protection. Violence, itself a product of egalitarian expectations and of young people with no prospects, who seek rapid social inclusion (i.e. easy money and recognition), is also the principal generator of exclusion, since it leads to the stigmatization of *favela* residents as a group, to a dynamic of confrontation with the police, and to the destruction of social relationships and trust under the weight of repression by both criminals thugs and the police.

The *favela* is one of those social categories that originate in a precise context and historical reality, but with the passing of time lose their original meaning acquiring multiple connotations. The word *favela* -in the sense of a dense urban conglomerate- emerged in Rio de Janeiro in the early decades of the twentieth century to describe populations that were a product of illegal occupations, generally on near middle class neighborhoods. The shantytown dwellings, or *barracões*, were made from unstable materials, without any prior planning or urban design, and without access to public utilities. In general, the inhabitants were extremely poor, without steady employment, and mostly immigrants –in particular from the Northeast who fled draught and , poverty to settle in Rio de Janeiro. This image, still present in the imagination of those Brazilians who live on the “asphalt” (the name given by the hilltop *favela* dwellers to the “rest” of the city below) has little to do with contemporary reality.

As time passed, and the *favelas* grew and spread to more distant regions, they began to lose their original characteristics. Within a short time, the shantytown dwellings multiplied, not only throughout the city center but also throughout Rio’s new upscale neighborhoods in the

south zone of the city. At that time, the term began to be used to describe these low-income communities made up of zinc shanties -a cheap material frequently used in this type of construction. In the 1940s, there were only 60 *favelas* in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Today there are more than 600.

Originally a marginal phenomenon, the *favela* population soon came to represent a significant part of the city, and a reason for political concern. Between the 50s and the 70s, official public policy sought the removal of *favelas* and the transferal of their residents to housing projects, usually in distant regions, far from where residents worked. Naturally, *favela* residents were uncooperative. A few *favelas* were “removed”, but the majority of them remained and continued to expand. This process continued under the passive eye of the military governments, which, lacking a housing policy for the thousands of recent arrivals to Brazil’s cities during its ‘economic miracle’, accepted the “solution” of land invasions² followed by self-construction of a dwelling. Ironically, the housing projects built for the victims of forced removals also began a process of “favelization”, that is, of expansion without urban planning and without any provision of public services.

During the late 80s, with the return to civilian rule, the policy of removal was abandoned, (with the exception of housing at risk of collapse) and a process of *favela* urbanization began, with the development of infrastructure and urban equipment and legalization of land titles. At the same time, *favela* residents transformed their shanties into solid structures made of brick, often with several floors. Today, visitors to *favelas* are surprised by the notable difference from the precarious “*villas miseria*” of other Latin American countries and the solid constructions of these urban nuclei.

The distinguishing mark that has historically characterized the *favelas* of Rio is their extreme proximity to middle class neighborhoods. This has always been a major factor in the constant tension between the more wealthy sectors and the poor, due to the difficulty of isolating one group from the other. At the same time, the proximity of their respective homes, together with that other democratic space -the beach-, has furnished a point of contact between popular culture and the intelligentsia, producing some of the richest phenomena of Brazilian culture, whether in popular music or Carnival, and in general a complex relationship of attraction and repulsion, of conflict and inter-class fraternization.

In spite of the clustered housing and narrow passageways that characterize those *favelas* built on hillsides (and the accompanying problems of trash removal and vehicular access), and the traditional denomination of certain housing projects as *favelas*, it is difficult to make a clear and rigorous distinction, from a legal or socioeconomic point of view, between *favelas* and urbanized low-income neighborhoods. As we will see, Viva Rio is equally active in the latter as in the former.

Favelas, in part because of their proximity to middle class drug consumers, have been transformed into a privileged space where gangs of drug traffickers control the physical space

² “Invasion” refers to the illegal occupation of public or private land, almost always uninhabited, on which *favelas* are then constructed.

and generate a dynamic that strengthens old prejudices, associating the majority of *favela* inhabitants with a phenomenon of which they are in fact the principal victims: armed violence. In this way, discrimination against *favelas* has resurged in the social imagination over the last few decades. *Favelas* are no longer associated with a precise socioeconomic or legal reality, which, as we have seen, has tended to dissipate over time, but with the phenomenon of violence and the culture of informality.

The Social Reality of the *Favela*: Consumption

The majority of the criteria that were associated with *favelas* are now out of date. Today, *favelas* are often in better conditions than poor neighborhoods, sometimes because *favelas* are older and have been receiving public investment for some time. The majority of them have access to light, running water, sewage, and -though these are more precarious- telephone and trash collection. The typical characterization of *favelas* as illegal occupations does not always apply; many *favelas* were created by owners legally dividing their lots, while, in other cases, the state has begun a process of legalizing property titles. The percentage of *de facto* homeowners in *favelas* (property titles are often not formally legalized), is about 90%. A significant percentage of *favela* residents have regular work, and a good part of the *favela* population is no longer made up of immigrants from rural areas or from other states.

The world of the *favelas* is profoundly heterogeneous, both in terms of the internal social reality of each community as well as the huge differences between them. Houses in those *favelas* closest to the wealthy south zone are prized for proximity to commercial areas and jobs, allowing residents to economize time and money on transport. Likewise, the views from many of the *favelas* located on hillsides are among the most beautiful in the city, and some houses are lucratively rented out during holidays. The rental price of commercial space for shops along the main streets, due in part to the difficulty of access to side streets, is comparable to rents in middle class neighborhoods.

A study by the *Favela, Opinion, and Marketplace* research group, which will be described in more detail later, had some surprising results: 51.3% of *favela* residents belong to class C; 24% to class B (17.3% in class B2 and 6.8% in class B1), and an unexpected 2.5% in class A2. Less than 1% belongs to the lower class E. (Class determination is based on the so-called “Brazil Criteria for Social Classification”, which focuses mainly on access to consumer goods and housing conditions, assigning class ‘A’ to those with most access and E to those with the least.)

In spite of the difficulty of access to consumer goods –stores are located far away from these communities, and credit is expensive and difficult to obtain- families are able to save money and invest in products such as home appliances and entertainment equipment. 96% of those interviewed had color televisions, 55% had a VCR, and nearly 57% had washing machines. *Favela* residents who have a live-in housekeeper made up about 2.4% of the total. The

percentage of residents with their own vehicle was 15%, in spite of the difficulty of driving through the narrow, winding streets of the *favelas*.

In spite of the surprising number of consumer goods found in *favela* homes, a main indicator of the difficulties in social integration can be found in the education portion of the survey: 25.4% of the adults interviewed had not completed the first four years of elementary school; 37.5% finished the first four years but not the second four years; 13.6% completed secondary education, but did not begin or abandoned a university course.³ Only 1.0% completed university. Another relevant piece of information should be added to this data: 25% of the young people between 15 and 25 years of age have not completed their basic education, limiting access to the job market and encouraging involvement in drug trafficking activities.

All these indicators show that within the universe of urban poverty in large Brazilian cities, there is a distinction to be made between individual consumer goods and collective, public goods. In terms of the capacity of individuals and families to acquire consumer goods, *favela* residents are included; in terms of collective goods, especially education and security, they continue to be excluded, with deleterious effects on quality of life and chances for employment. Moreover, the association of *favelas* with violence has recreated the stigma of living in the *favela*, which in many cases leads residents seeking employment to give false residential addresses.

The Institutional Reality of the *Favela*: Neither War nor Peace

The 1970s and 80s were a period of expansion of so-called civil society and grassroots organizations in *favelas*, arising from community leaders, many of them associated with the Catholic church and liberation theology. This period also witnessed the rapid growth of Protestant churches and congregations, which today have come to represent one fourth of the *favela* population. The interaction between these elements and the overall political system produced a complex dynamic, which was transformed and disfigured with the widespread appearance of gangs associated with drug trafficking.

The associations that came about at the end of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s were seen as a new type of social movement, critical of the old clientelism and skeptical of political parties. Even before being decimated by drug traffickers, these associations had begun to lose their force with the democratic governments, ultimately colonized by political parties and by state government organs. Under the justification of partnerships with local institutions for development of infrastructure, partisan and government bodies transferred important resources to *favelas*, which became the root of internal conflicts and new forms of clientelism. At the same time the dizzying growth of evangelical groups transformed the values of part of the population, emphasizing personal concentration on work and family and channeling solidarity into doing "works" for the church -distant from the collectivist and

³ In Brazil, education is divided into basic (*ensino fundamental*), made up of two four-year "series"; secondary, a three-year course (*ensino médio*), equivalent to high school; and university-level (*ensino superior*).

ecumenical spirit of the grassroots movements. Maintaining a good distance from the world of politics and the secular institutions, evangelical churches were better able than the progressive Catholic Church to separate the mundane and the sacred. The majority of drug traffickers who want to be “reborn”, then, turn to the evangelical churches.

By the beginning of the mid-80s, drug trafficking had grown to become the principal center of power within the *favelas*. The majority of community leaders had to shrink, accommodate, or associate themselves with the traffickers; if not they could run the risk of being shot down, as happened with dozens of them who questioned the power of the traffickers.

The tendency to explain the social importance of drug trafficking by the generalized poverty or the lack of public services -which would lead *favela* residents to accept their “protection” or employment in traffic-related gangs- is only partially correct. As we have seen, public services have improved, and the levels of poverty and the lack of hope for the future among youth, though important factors, do not by themselves explain the importance of drug trafficking in these communities. At best, these factors provided an adequate medium for the culture of drug traffic to take root in.

The deep insertion of drug trafficking, and the level of violence associated with it, is a product of decades and decades of history in which the state has continually left the *favelas* in the hands of local strongmen, who impose order through violence and ties of protection and clientelistic subordination, maintaining relations of favoritism and corruption with police and politicians.

Life in the *favela* is dominated by a culture of informality, i.e. a culture where the strategies of sociability are constructed at the margins of, or in contraposition to, the state. This informality is present in the construction and expansion of residences without official authorization, in the use of the most varied tactics to avoid paying light and water bills, in stores and businesses that are not legalized and therefore do not pay taxes, and in the omnipresent distrust of the police. This long-standing culture of “illegality” and the rejection of the state facilitate the attraction of young people to drug trafficking activities. Marijuana and cocaine trafficking in the *favelas*, in turn, is associated with the international phenomenon of drug traffic, quite simply one of the most profitable businesses in the world, and one which demands little or no educational qualification from its employees.

Finally, in the case of Rio de Janeiro, the high levels of violence associated with drug trafficking are fed by the lack of effective national weapons control policies. Relevant factors range from police officers themselves, often involved in selling these weapons to traffickers, to the economic interests of the powerful Brazilian firearms industry, which “legally” exports large quantities of weapons that later re-enter Brazil illegally, creating a triangle of illicit trade that amply supplies drug traffickers.

Drug Trafficking and Violence in Rio de Janeiro

The history of drug trafficking in Rio de Janeiro has a unique trajectory. The phenomenon of large-scale drug trafficking -related to cocaine produced in Colombia- arose in Brazil at the end of the 70s, transforming Rio into a hub for international connections, as well as a center of local consumption. With this transformation, the drug trade came under the control of a particular structure: the *Comando Vermelho*, or Red Command.

The *Comando Vermelho* was born in the prisons of Rio de Janeiro during the 70s under the military dictatorship, a period in which prisons were full of left wing revolutionary guerrillas. Common criminals learned from them the importance of organizing collective solidarity and mutual protection to ensure better conditions in the prison and pay for legal defense. They also absorbed the basics of critical discourse. Thus was born what would end up being known as the *Comando Vermelho*, a structured organized crime collective, which would later split into various in-fighting factions. In spite of the many changes it has undergone over the intervening years, the organization has maintained certain key traits: a large number of its superior members are still found in prisons, where they continue to exercise command through a complex support network -through fear and cooptation of guards and lawyers, and, in the last few years, directly through smuggled cell phones. It is not surprising that drug trafficking has been one of the first organizations to understand the potential of alternative uses of cell phones, nor that they have become massive consumers of these products.

Gangs of traffickers inserted themselves in the *favelas* with the support of local groups, in a scheme of fragile alliances with local gangs. The basis of drug trafficking is territorial control, and the struggle between the groups is about control over individual *favelas* or parts of them. It sustains itself by selling cocaine and marijuana, which has meant that practically no synthetic drugs, such as crack, circulate in Rio de Janeiro. This type of drug is rampant in São Paulo, but so far, attempts to bring crack to Rio have been unsuccessful.

Traffic has its material base in the *favela*; from there, traffickers organize the distribution of drugs and recruit members. It is estimated that the drug trade employs somewhere around 1% of the *favela* population. Internal community relations are founded on the long-standing distinction between two identities: “workers” and “criminals.” Criminals expect the workers to keep quiet and not cooperate in any way with the police. In exchange, the criminals assure order, which includes occasional help for people who need money, conflict mediation and punishment of thieves (generally a gunshot through the hand or foot) and of child-molesters (normally a death sentence, often accompanied by torture). Their interest is not solely in keeping the police out; traffickers also find confirmation of their power in the ability to “impose order.”

Police in Rio de Janeiro have a long history of disrespect and brutality with the poorest population of the city. They are also part of a web of corrupt practices fed for decades by their complicity with an endemic form of ilegal gambling known as the *jogo do bicho*, or “animal game”⁴. Politicians are also complicit with the *jogo do bicho*, receiving financial

⁴ In the *jogo do bicho*, essentially an illegal lottery, gamblers place bets on numbers that correspond to certain animals. The winning animal pays out a certain percentage of the pot, the rest going to the *bicheiro* (the

campaign support from the game's "owners" and operators. The militarization of the police under the rule of the military regime further distanced the police from their own functions and made them even less prepared to deal with civil crime. The judiciary, in turn, continued to function with outdated and inefficient processes, sometimes itself co-opted by drug money. As for the penitentiary system, the history of the *Comando Vermelho* bears witness to its incompetence and counterproductive role.

The long tradition of mistreatment and abuse at the hands of the police has led many young people to identify with drug traffickers. The relationship between the police and drug traffickers can be described as sadomasochistic. On the one hand, the police represent the principal enemy of drug traffic, killing hundreds of its members and employees every year. On the other hand, the police participate in the enormous profits of the drug trade, whether it be through arms sales, ransoming traffickers and bosses, or accepting bribes to allow shipments to pass.

Initially, drug traffickers relied on light weapons and recruited primarily adults; children, if involved, had minor, helping roles. Over the years, however, the weaponry used by traffickers has gotten more and more sophisticated, and the recruitment age has gotten younger and younger -currently it is common to see children entering the drug trade at 12 or 13 years of age. *Favela* life is increasingly penetrated by a culture that associates carrying a firearm with manhood, not to mention a significantly higher income than the majority of legal workers within the community. This is a phenomenon common to other third world cities, related not only to obtaining "easy" money but also to masculine affirmation, which sees guns as a source of power.

Since 1982, the homicide rate in Rio de Janeiro has risen dramatically, from 23 per 100,000 inhabitants equal to New York in that year, to 63 per 100,000 in 1992, reaching a high of 80 per 100,000 in 1994 before settling down to an average of 45 per 100,000 since 1999. Because they are citywide averages, not even these figures convey the full severity of the problem. In middle and upper class neighborhoods of Rio, the homicide rate is no higher than in many of the world's large cities, including the first world. In poor neighborhoods, however, the homicide rate is much higher, exceeding 100 per 100,000 in some cases.

An increasing share of these homicides victims are children, adolescents, and young men. In 2002, firearms were responsible for close to one third of all deaths of children under the age of 18. In 1999, firearms killed 113.8 young men for every 100,000 inhabitants, a rate comparable to the mortality index in regions engaged in armed conflicts that are unanimously considered wars. But Rio de Janeiro is not a war zone: there is no foreign invader, nor is it correct to speak of a civil war, since society, as a whole is not divided. The rich do not actively fight against the poor or vice-versa. In fact, the poor are the most common victims of firearm homicide.

bankier", or "owner" of the game). *Bicheiros* traditionally use their profits to win political influence and community standing, often subsidizing popular community projects such as samba schools.

But if this is not war, it cannot be said that Rio de Janeiro, or the other great cities of Brazil and the third world where the phenomenon of armed gangs has reached epidemic proportions, is living in a time of peace. The question of war and peace is not simply one of denominations. At the end of the day, are the thousands of armed children working in the drug trade to be known as “soldiers”, as they call themselves, or as criminals under the orders of drug traffickers? If they *are* soldiers, what about their superiors, who do not consider themselves commanders, define themselves as “managers”? What kind of business controls large sections of the city and dictates the rules of the social order within its territory? What kind of state is fatally unable to control its own police force, the final guarantor of the social order? What kind of “non-war situation” is this, that in the last few years has killed more children per inhabitant than the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, or many declared armed clashes in Central America?

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Box F - Interviews with children and adolescents employed in drug trafficking⁵

I: How many bosses do you have?

T: Only one.

I: And if he wants you to do something...

T: You have to do it.

I: What happens if you don't do it?

T: Depends what he asks [...]. If it's to kill someone, I have to do it. If I don't kill then it's my life at risk...

*Soldado*⁶, 17 years old

I: What happens if a person receives [drugs to sell] and doesn't pay back the money afterwards?

T: Ah, if he doesn't pay, he dies, takes a beating. It depends on the boss. If the boss says that he has to die, then he dies.

Soldado, 16 years old

I: To be killed [after breaking a rule], if it's a youth, if it's a boy or a child, does it make any difference?

T: No it doesn't.

Gerente de maconha,⁷ 22 years old

I: Today you're sitting in front of me with a gun, what's the name of this gun?

T: This here's an AR-15 baby [nickname given to an M4 or Colt AR-15].

I: ...and how old were you when you started working with firearms?

T: 14 years old.

I: Did you buy your first weapon?

T: No. The *boca*⁸ gave it to me. Left it with me to do the security...it's from the *boca* but it's mine to carry.

Soldado, 18 years old

I: Do you remember the first time you used a gun?

T: [...] Ah, it was a war [...] against the Terceiro Comando, another faction.

⁵ The following excerpts are from the book *Children of the Drug Trade*, (Rio de Janeiro: 7 Letras), 2003, by Viva Rio/ISER researcher Luke Dowdney.

⁶ 'Soldado', or 'soldier', is an official "rank" within the hierarchy of the drug trade. A *soldado* is "responsible for armed security of faction territory and invading rival faction territory." (Dowdney, 2003)

⁷ Literally "manager of marijuana," *gerente de maconha* is another official position, "responsible for all marijuana sales within a *favela* community." (Dowdney, 2003)

⁸ A *boca* is a sales point for drugs within a *favela*. In this case, the gun in question is the collective property of the *boca* where the interviewee works.

I: And which faction are you from?
T: Comando Vermelho.
I: Were you defending or attacking?
T: Invading.
I: [...] why were you invading?
T: Hum, to get more money.
I: [...] how many of you were invading?
T: Oh a lot, about 200.
I: 200 armed men? Seems like a war?
T: It is a war.
I: [...] when you participate in an invasion, are you paid?
T: No, you don't receive money, but you receive a better position afterwards.
I: How does the community see the people that are invading, after you've invaded a Terceiro Comando area?
T: Ah, they get scared. But after a year or so they start trusting us.
I: [...] and how many people [*soldados*] stay [in the community] after an invasion?
T: Around 70.
I: [...] did many people die during the invasion?
T: A few.
I: How many is a few?
T: Around 15.
I: How long did the invasion take?
T: Four hours.
I: And which guns did you use during the invasion?
T: Two pistols.
I: 200 of you and the police didn't come?
T: Oh, the police only arrive late.
I: Why do they arrive late?
T: Oh they're scared to get shot, to be killed. Because this business is serious!

soldado, 16 years old

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T: ...the police [...] set up the bandits in order to kill them.
I: Why do the police want to kill them?
T: Ah, because that's their job.
I: To kill people?
T: Yes, the police kill the drug traffickers. That's why we have to exchange gunfire with them at night.
I: Have you already exchanged gunfire with them?
T: Yes.
I: How old were you?
T: 12 years old.
I: [...] did they know you were a minor?

T: They knew. They knew I was the *fogueteiro*⁹. There were four *fogueteiros*, and one of the others got it...pa, pa, pa, pa, pa,
I: And why do you think they wanted to kill you?
T: Because I'm a *fogueteiro* [...] we make noise to warn the others that the police are in the *favela*.
I: Have you lost friends in this business?
T: Yes, lots.
I: How did they die?
T: [...] in exchanges of gunfire with the cops, others in the war [with other factions].
fogueteiro, 12 years old

⁹ "A lookout that uses fireworks to warn fellow drug traffickers of a rival faction invasion or a police raid."
(Dowdney, 2003)