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The Favela, The City, Rocinha, and University

Abstract

How can we explain the pattern of urban segregation characteristic of Rio de Janeiro's favelas, located in the richest areas of the city? And what does it reveal about the urban dynamics of Brazilian cities? I will attempt to answer this question through a historical-sociological approach, taking into account the lasting impact of slavery and multiethnic relations on Brazilian urban development and territorial logic, the importance of the favela as an urban form shaped by the modernization process of the country's cities, the relationship between economy, politics, and territory, and, finally, the transformative potential of the ongoing symbiosis between science and the favela. In order to deepen this discussion, I present in a special way the case of Rocinha, with their ostentatious presence on the public scene as a highly dense popular housing cluster.

The favelas of Rio de Janeiro, especially the large ones located in central areas like Rocinha, stand out as an expression of a complex pattern of urban segregation affecting the poor and working-class population. This pattern is quite different from that found in the industrial cities at the core of capitalism, as well as in São Paulo, where poverty was initially hidden behind factory warehouses in gloomy neighborhoods and later pushed en masse to distant peripheries.

In the case of Rocinha and other favelas in similar situations, their presence is ostentatious, imposing itself on the public scene as a highly dense popular housing cluster. It is strategically located along the axis connecting the two most valuable real estate markets in Rio de Janeiro: the South Zone and Barra da Tijuca. How can this pattern of segregation be explained, and what does it reveal about the urban dynamics of Brazilian cities?

I will attempt to answer this question through a historical-sociological approach, taking into account the lasting impact of slavery and multiethnic relations on Brazilian urban development and territorial logic, the importance of the favela as an urban form shaped by the modernization process of the country's cities, the relationship between economy, politics,

and territory, and, finally, the transformative potential of the ongoing symbiosis between science and the favela.

The Interplay Between Favela and City

To better frame our reflection, we must begin by considering the specific characteristics of Brazilian cities with a colonial past. By the early 20th century, as the country transitioned from monarchy to republic, these cities were still profoundly marked by the burden of slavery, which remained officially in place until 1888. In a country still dominated by large rural estates scattered across its vast territory, the few more populous urban centers—besides Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, only Salvador and Recife had more than 100,000 inhabitants in 1900—had a massive Black presence (both Black and mixed-race individuals) but were controlled by white elites.

Although these elites did not refrain from using techniques of what Gilroy (2012) calls "ethnic terror," commonly employed in post-slavery American societies, they did not entirely prevent the emergence of circuits of exchange and cooperation within these cities. These circuits involved small services, as well as cultural and immaterial goods produced by the Black population. In cities like Salvador and Rio de Janeiro, these circuits were far more than a secondary flow; in many cases, they played a decisive role in shaping urban dynamics. The fact is that these cities, shaped by their colonial past, entered the republican era as arenas of conflict, barely concealing their ethnic dimension. More than processes of mixing or syncretism, they were marked by disputes.

For this reason, the interpretative framework proposed by Gilberto Freyre and later updated, with slight modifications, by Antonio Risério (2012) appears inadequate. Risério argues that Brazilian cities were primarily shaped by mixture and proximity, in contrast to Hispanic colonial cities, which were supposedly characterized by clear segregation between classes and between whites and non-whites. According to his argument, the "hierarchical and informal, violent and playful, unequal and gregarious" nature of Brazilian cities reflects the mestizo character of Brazilian society, reinforced by the "survival and affirmation of African cultural forms within our built environment" (ibid.).

In a different direction, we suggest that it would be more pertinent to consider that the strong Black presence in Brazilian urban life forged a logic of *porosity* rather than mere "permissiveness." It was only through this insidious presence in the interstices of neighborhoods that a situation was avoided in which whites would have been confined to racial citadels. In Rio de Janeiro, the capital of both the Empire and the Republic (until 1960), this logic is particularly relevant. Luis Costa Pinto, in *O Negro no Rio de Janeiro*, observed—based on the results of the first census conducted by IBGE in 1940—that without the presence of favelas, there would be no Black people in Rio de Janeiro's South Zone (Costa Pinto, 1998 [1953]).

As an urban form shaped by a specific pattern of relations between whites and Blacks, the favela undeniably predates the official end of slavery—or at the very least, its logic was already embedded in the configuration of Brazilian cities. However, it is equally true that only with abolition (1888) and the establishment of the republic (1889) did the favela as a spatial form gain momentum, becoming an institutionalized logic of urban segregation. From that point onward, the porous ways in which spaces and circuits connecting Blacks and whites intersected began to require more intense negotiations. This is evident, for example, in the relationships established between white landlords renting properties and Black tenants seeking to live in central areas that would later be classified as favelas—a process well documented by Maria Laís Pereira da Silva (2005).

This very porosity is also reflected in the fact that these working-class dwellings in central areas were, from the outset, under constant threat of removal—sometimes carried out, sometimes not—depending on the complex web of political and economic mediations at play. The occupation of Rocinha in the 1920s itself followed this logic, combining the use of both public and private lands, failed attempts at formal subdivision, and the informal settlement of the slopes of Morro Dois Irmãos.

Alongside housing, Black families descended from enslaved people asserted their presence in urban commercial circuits by participating in various forms of small-scale services offered to the white population. These included highly significant cultural and religious services, which earned them some degree of social prestige while simultaneously subjecting them to constant persecution by the police, often encouraged by journalistic chronicles.

These multiple ways of asserting presence in the city make it clear that, when reduced to mere market calculations or a purely rational concern with shelter, the true significance of these territories for their inhabitants becomes incomprehensible.

It is from this process that specific spatial and cultural forms emerge, such as the favelas—expressions of a territoriality that, more than just spaces of habitation, serve as sources of identity and collective struggle. It makes sense, therefore, to think of the favela as a kind of *synthesis* that combines the concrete conditions of Brazilian urban experience with elements of a *cosmogony* rooted in African (and Indigenous) traditions that predate slavery. On a comparative scale, one can understand the favela as a *diasporic construct*, shaped by hybrid forms of articulating the past with the present. As Gilroy (2012) argues, in this context, “tradition is not now being used either to identify a lost past or to name a compensatory culture that would reestablish access to it” (p. 370). This is a *heritagized* past, as proposed by Muniz Sodré (2019), one that is revived through the “group transmission of knowledge, techniques, and competencies” (p. 75); a heritage understood as a collective repository of inheritances, mobilized to navigate a present marked by exclusion. In the case of Brazil, this present is defined by a city that, in its attempt to conform to a European civilizational ideal, sought to render the newly emancipated Black population invisible.

From its inception, then, the favela has existed under a dual sign—both as a space of exclusion, reinforcing the erasure of Black presence in the city, and as a space of resistance: a *symbolically charged space-time* of habitation, a site for the cultivation of a Black cosmogony, and, through that, a form of *urban insertion*. For this reason, the favela should not be interpreted as a mere Black enclave within a predominantly white city. Instead, it is a *territory* shaped by its foundational contradictions: **exclusion/inclusion in the city; invisibility/visibility; submission/resistance/insurgence**. As a territory, it is a space of social, ethnic, and class relations, forged as an integral part of the city’s dynamics.

Anchoring our analysis in this perspective helps us better understand how the favela evolved with the mass arrival of migrants from rural areas and the Brazilian interior to urban centers like Rio de Janeiro. Upon arrival, these migrants encountered pre-existing favelas or simply identified available land for new occupations—often on riverbanks or steep hillsides,

which were soon perceived as *favelas*, mimicking the already established urban form in the city's imagination.

In this regard, it is particularly revealing how Rocinha—an occupation on the slopes of Morro Dois Irmãos—began to be recognized as a favela precisely during the peak period of migration, mostly from the Brazilian Northeast. As Mariana Costa (2022) highlights, this identification primarily emerged in journalistic narratives, which warned of the supposedly harmful process of Rocinha's *favelization*.

By this time, the word *favela* had already been firmly established as a noun; *favelizar* had entered the lexicon as a verb, and *favelado* had come to define a particular social type within the city. Despite the pejorative connotations attached to these terms by dominant actors in urban life—including economic and media elites—the concept of *favela* remains an ambiguous one: simultaneously a marker of stigma and a symbol of resistance.

In reality, the *fluid nature* of the term *favela* reflects the fact that, as a *sign*, it embodies a collective and deeply contradictory construct. This is because the favela, as both territory and collective representation, has been forged by multiple hands: by the city's wealthier white classes, who have sought to crystallize the favela as a fixed pattern of segregation—one that, while clearly demarcating the boundaries of an exclusionary city, still keeps a labor force of poor workers nearby, willing to perform low-paid and precarious jobs. But the favela has also been shaped by the urban poor themselves, who—now far more multiethnic due to migration—have gradually *redefined* its meaning, asserting it as a legitimate *territory*. Because it is shaped by so many hands, the favela contains this *ambiguity*, which often makes it seem enigmatic: both an expression of a *continuous logic of exclusion*, crafted and reproduced by the city's elite and middle classes, and a *source of belonging and collective struggle* for the poor.

The territorial strength of favelas assumes fundamental importance in defining situations of encounters and conflicts that arise between Black people established in urban life and poor white people, who often came directly from an extremely impoverished rural life in the large estates of the Northeast, with no urban culture whatsoever. From this process, beyond mutual prejudices, also emerge marriages, friendships, and new collective organizations, in dynamics that could only fully develop under the comfort produced by the shared territorial identity provided by the favela. The history of Rocinha is a strong expression of this process.

This aspect is fundamental to understanding how, in the end, favelas survived the countless attempts to “extinguish” them, to use a term dear to the vocabulary of *remocionismo*. In fact, as we have already observed, they have always been more than just shelter, which is why housing policies that combine removal with the construction of housing projects in the peripheries have always been outright rejected by their supposed beneficiaries.

This is why the notion of a “divided city” is so misleading when trying to grasp the urban dynamics of Rio de Janeiro, a notion that gained enormous prominence following Zuenir Ventura’s book of the same name (*Cidade Partida*, 1994). While on the surface it aims to denounce the existence of borders and segregation, in reality, this notion empties what, especially in Rio, may be its main peculiarity and, as we will see, its greatest strength. Because, in truth, there have never been walls—not even symbolic ones—separating the favela from the neighborhoods adjacent to it; despite this, the image of the divided city reifies this premise in order to offer, as an alternative, forms of “integration” marked by social functionalism.

What needs to be illuminated is precisely the network that interconnects the favelas and the city, not the wall; it is in the network that favela territoriality is realized; it is the scale of the network that can help us understand the most perverse processes, especially the attempt—never completely achieved—to criminalize favelas to better justify police operations that, when closely examined, do not follow the logic of the wall but rather that of the network involving the trade of drugs, weapons, and other goods. A focus on the network can help us better perceive these marks of the past and the opportunities they bring for imagining other models of the city and other paths for its democratization.

Territory, politics, and market

The best way to think from the perspective of the network is through the articulation between territory, politics, and market. Our hypothesis is that in favelas and peripheries, the outcome of the clash between the logic of territory and the logic of the market tends to animate the struggle for territorial power, creating a scenario that allows for both the formation of violent local strongmen, powerful enough to impose exploitative practices unthinkable outside these territories, and the emergence of new forms of struggle for rights and the valuation of other forms of capital—social, cultural, and symbolic, to evoke Bourdieu’s well-known conceptual typology (1992). In any case, a good understanding of this dynamic, which

involves economic, political, and territorial dimensions and constitutes a kind of dialectic between the commodification of territory and the territorialization of the market, allows us to shed light on the worst expressions of urban neoliberalism, thereby contributing to valuing territorial forms of resistance aimed at the struggle for rights.

The debate on the relationship between favela and market was redefined from the 1990s onward. From disputes around the theory of marginality, which viewed the favela population as being on the margins of the urban economy (Perlman, 1977), we have arrived at its almost complete opposite, which speaks of the economic and political strength of favela and peripheral territories. Feltran's (2014) studies on the monetization of social relations in favelas and peripheries highlight a new configuration, facilitated by the greater availability of credit for low-income families as well as by the increase in their purchasing power. Here, Feltran's analysis converges with that of Vera Silva Telles (2010), who proposes paying close attention to the networks that permeate both the formal and informal economy, which ultimately render the use of these categories invalid for guiding urban economic policies.

After all, in the monetized world of favelas and peripheries, with access to popular consumption, a market emerges that crosses the boundaries of formal and informal, as well as legal and illegal, without ceremony. Individuals themselves make these transitions, operating on both ends of the economy, buying and selling products and services of various origins. Meanwhile, the small and medium-sized business market gains new density, from pharmacies to construction supply stores, from the construction industry to brokerage services, entertainment, education, dentistry, and small clinics, as well as the clandestine sale of access to digital cable TV networks (*gatonets*), among others.

To make this inventory of key concepts more complete in our analysis of the dynamics of these territories of "new poverty" —to use once again the category adopted by Feltran—it is important to situate these transformations of the urban poor within a broader political framework. For this, the notion of *insurgent citizenship*, on one hand, and that of *violent sociability*, on the other, can be quite useful in articulating the logics of territory as both a structure of power and a site of political struggle for the right to the city.

Formulated by the American anthropologist James Holston (2013), largely based on his study of São Paulo's peripheries, the notion of *insurgent citizenship* seeks to highlight the fact that the

fight for citizenship is also a fight against the privileges of those who maintain what he calls *entrenched citizenship*. According to Holston, self-construction and the entire collective process of building and appropriating territory function as an assertion of citizenship that, in a way, creates a new city for new citizens. Without delving deeper into this fertile concept, it is important for now simply to point out that the notion of *insurgent citizenship* describes a form of political resistance that is inseparable from territory. It represents, so to speak, a kind of *territorialization of politics*, following a trajectory that includes challenging pre-existing urban regulatory frameworks deemed inadequate to local realities, fostering new articulations between public and private spheres, and—most notably—activating economic participation through new circuits of commerce and services. It is also a struggle against a legal and state structure designed to serve the interests of the *entrenched*.

However, while the notion of *insurgent citizenship* has the great merit of emphasizing conflicts with actors external to the territory—especially with the state itself, which predominantly represents *entrenched* citizens—it needs to be reconsidered to account for forms of control and power that are inherent to these territories, particularly as they become increasingly shaped by economic activity. To this end, the concept of *violent sociability*, formulated by Luis Antonio Machado da Silva (2008), proves highly useful.

Drawing from a framework influenced by Anthony Giddens, particularly the notions of routinization of everyday life and reciprocal expectations, Machado da Silva highlights that *violent sociability* is one in which regulation is ultimately dictated by the *law of the strongest*. However, this characteristic is far from being exclusive to favelas and peripheries; rather, it is present in various places and situations that citizens navigate in their daily lives, wherever conduct is regulated by power dynamics that favor the stronger party.

In this sense, Machado argues, the major specificity of favelas and peripheries lies in the fact that, due to the presence of armed groups and even the *de facto* authorization granted to police forces to operate within them, residents are exposed to *violent sociability* at an absurdly high level. This exposure translates into extreme vulnerability to risks and violence, while simultaneously demanding relentless efforts by residents to maintain some level of normalcy in their routines.

With the conversion of favelas and peripheries into sites of multiple markets—of drugs and weapons, commerce and services, housing and construction, leisure activities, and more—the new context allows violent sociability to permeate economic relations. In this regard, the *militia model* of exploiting all popular consumer goods and controlling all economic activities in the favelas and peripheries where they operate represents the most extreme form of domination. Historically, in areas where drug trafficking groups still prevail, control over the economy tends to be less extensive. However, as is well known, the trend is for these groups to increasingly operate according to militia logic—and vice versa. This scenario is evident, for instance, in Rocinha, which is dominated by a drug trafficking faction but has increasingly adopted militia-like strategies, exerting growing influence over various economic activities in the favela, including construction and control over the stock of rental properties.

However, the economic enclosure that turns violent sociability into a kind of language for the local market does not occur without resistance and opposition. On the contrary, this is precisely where the struggle *from* the territory has gained renewed strength as a form of *insurgent citizenship*. The valorization of territory reinforces its communal character, where the market sees only consumers; kinship ties give meaning to land use, where the market sees only new real estate developments; the sense of belonging asserts itself as collective identity, where the market sees only individuals and their desires; the immense efforts by families and community organizations to protect the physical and mental well-being of children and young people emerge, where the market sees only potential consumers of illicit drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and other goods.

It is this dialectic between *territorialization and market* that ultimately allows us to speak of the *territorialization of the market* rather than merely the *commodification of territory*. Or better yet, it is this dialectic between territory and market that enables us to conceive them as poles in which, in some cases, the market dominates, while in others, territory asserts itself as the primary force. Ultimately, it is only a matter of degree, allowing us to compare different urban configurations.

Rocinha's initial occupation occurred before the market had firmly embedded itself in favela life. For a long time, its development could be described within the framework of the debate between *marginality theory* and its critiques—that is, a precarious population, almost entirely

dependent on external economic and political agents, yet gradually building a strong sense of belonging through community efforts, from mutual aid projects to collective struggles for daycare centers, health clinics, schools, and other public facilities. Even the arrival of drug trafficking groups happened progressively, eventually giving way to a fierce struggle for paramilitary control of the territory. This transition became particularly visible during Rocinha's *first great war* in the late 1980s, marking a shift in which the armed group began subjugating local associative life. Other major conflicts would follow.

Despite this, Rocinha is distinguished by its remarkable multiplicity of non-governmental organizations and community associations, maintaining a degree of autonomy from the trafficking factions. In Rocinha, *territorialization*, best expressed in the motto "*nós por nós*" ("us for us"), operates as a guiding principle rooted in the strength of the territory itself. This can manifest in a positive key—as a form of struggle, of reinforcing belonging, and of recognition. Such a structure demands that market actors—including drug traffickers—constantly seek legitimacy to operate within the territory.

At the same time, the *asymmetric relationship* with the broader city and public authorities, along with the continuous struggle against *entrenched citizenship*, means that Rocinha's residents inevitably experience, directly or indirectly, the logic of *violent sociability*. A clear example of this can be found in the rental market: to whom does a landlord turn in case of delayed rent payments? Who acts as the guarantor of a lease agreement? Small and medium-sized property owners in the favela often find themselves relying on the local strongman for such matters. To a certain extent, this applies to most economic activities.

Thus, although less overt and totalitarian than in areas dominated by militias, Rocinha's economy is increasingly subjected to paramilitary control. This influence may even extend to the functioning of public services, such as transportation and waste management. This reality underscores the fact that any public security policy that fails to consider the authority exercised by drug factions within Rocinha's territorial economy is likely to fail, as it risks undermining the intricate system in which formal and informal, legal and illicit economic activities are structurally embedded.

Rocinha, however, is characterized by a relative openness that allows for a richer and more complex exchange with the city. In the network it maintains with the city, gaps emerge that

enable the adoption of territory as a source of struggle and resistance to find some success, allowing for greater articulation with public spheres that favor the grammar of rights. It is within these gaps that we can envision a space for an innovative and transformative articulation between science and the favela.

Science and Favela

In Rio de Janeiro, favela and science—or rather, the actors and processes involved in each of these configurations—have developed a closer relationship in recent decades, particularly following the institutional structuring established by the 1988 Constitution. Today, therefore, the effects of this relationship should not be sought only in the favela, as consistent changes are also occurring within science, and not just within social sciences.

Following the lineage of authors such as Michel Callon (1995) and Bruno Latour (1987), one could argue that we are witnessing the consolidation and expansion of *sociotechnical networks*, characterized by the “negotiated translation” of perspectives and knowledge into facts and artifacts. These negotiations are increasingly complex as they must simultaneously incorporate different collective actors from both the scientific world and the urban peripheries. To this conception of sociotechnical networks, we can add another, which concerns the *construction of public problems*, as proposed by Cefai (2013). While Callon and Latour approach the concept of networks from a socio-anthropology of science—inevitably dealing with social groups, identities, and social movements—Cefai takes an inverse path, starting from the tradition of social movement research to also arrive, in a different manner, at the notion of a network. For Cefai, constructing a public problem requires a process of articulation between different actors, generally including civil society as a whole, the media, various segments of the public sector, and specialized academic knowledge.

Thus, the constitution of a public problem depends on maximizing its exposure and forming an informed public capable of organizing its opinion. This elaboration relies on associational life, cooperation, and communication among different actors who recognize themselves in the identification of a shared concern. The greater the diversity of actors involved in a common issue, the more *public* the problem becomes. Here, the participation of universities producing specialized knowledge, the media amplifying opinions and debates,

and reflexively engaged activists all contribute to the formation of public problems within arenas populated by actors with different experiences of the issue at hand. Only when diverse representations condense into a common representation can we say that a public problem has been established.

The idea of a *network* thus gains meaning as a deliberate form of articulation between different actors, including social movements, research groups, individuals, and media outlets. Constructing public problems, therefore, becomes the horizon for groups vying for space in the public arena to assert their agenda. From this perspective, one can say that the public agenda is established according to criteria of importance defined by the greater or lesser strength of the network of actors mobilized in each case.

Cefai's perspective compels us to reconsider Latour's analysis. While Latour's approach is based on the premise of *translation*, it does not emphasize the role of social actors to the same extent that it highlights the protagonism of science and its institutions. In this sense, the *Latourian laboratory*, which played a central role in his *Laboratory Life* (Latour & Woolgar, 1997), loses its privileged position, as science becomes both more important and more ordinary. This shift is driven by two complementary processes: (a) the democratization of access to universities, which has diversified undergraduate and graduate programs as well as research centers, making science itself more contested; and (b) the breakdown of institutional boundaries due to new forms of communication.

It is not the purpose here to fully explore this fascinating research agenda concerning the transformations reshaping the relationship between science and society. However, mentioning these shifts allows us to more clearly outline the hypothesis that the articulation between universities and social movements, combined with the intensified use of virtual meeting platforms in the post-pandemic context, strengthens and deepens connections within sociotechnical networks that previously communicated little. This process has also created new nodes of engagement, expanding public imagination and enabling new methods of knowledge production. The mass entry of poor, largely Black youth—many from or still residing in favelas—into universities crowns this process of updating the role of science.

Acknowledging this does not mean ignoring the emergence of renewed forms of exclusion, possibly stemming from differences in how popular areas and groups are embedded within

sociotechnical networks. In the case of Rio de Janeiro, moreover, one can assume that due to its *political ecology*—and the way drug traffickers and militia groups control territories and populations—the experimentation with this new scientific framework will inevitably face clear limits to its generalization.

However, the most recent development in this nexus between science and the favela—where science is no longer represented merely by a university research group associating with local actors to construct an object of social interest, but rather becomes the *medium* of communication between diverse actors—unveils new possibilities that have yet to be fully explored. In other words, what we have been witnessing is not merely a quantitative change, a “greater volume of work” on the objects that have shaped the field of urban research, but a *qualitative transformation* in the relationship between science and the favelas, in which the former becomes an *agent of inclusion* and a *synonym for public policy*. It is in this context that UNIR was conceived.

The formation of this new university space assumes, therefore, that today the greatest defenders of the city are found in the favelas and peripheries—more specifically, within their collectives and organizations, which have been fighting for decades for the right to life, education, health, sanitation, and culture. They have been struggling for urban rights, against racism, and in defense of opportunities for children and young people, engaging in multiple and heroic forms of resistance against the fatalism that seems to have overtaken much of our cities. It is within this daily struggle and mobilization—led by those who refuse to accept the myriad injustices to which they are subjected—that we find the spark of change, the essence of *insurgent citizenship*.

Strengthened and supported by networks with universities, these collectives and organizations can help break the pattern of urban segregation rooted in the stigma of the favela and its deeply racialized connotations. In fact, the exchange of knowledge, expertise, experiences, and social technologies that these networks can foster revitalizes the commitment to the *universalization of the right to the city's resources*. For this reason, they also have the potential to serve as *symbolic and political barriers* against the expansion of the *narcomilícia*—which, after all, is not merely a criminal enterprise but also a *mafia-like logic* of profit extraction and concentration of a type of power that directly undermines the very essence of the city.

For this task, universities and research institutions are a *fundamental asset*—both in the training of young researchers from the favelas, as is already happening, and in the construction of research and outreach projects with this objective. It is significant that FAPERJ and FIOCRUZ have been launching calls for proposals specifically targeting organizations from favelas and peripheries. Added to this are the already well-established initiatives of institutions such as *Casa Fluminense*, *Redes da Maré*, *Instituto Maria e João Aleixo*, and a diverse range of projects such as the *Dicionário de Favelas Marielle Franco*, *Plano de Ação Popular do CPX*, and *Expo Favela*. It is within this context that we situate the creation of the Center for Research and Knowledge Articulation at PUC-Rio – Rocinha (UNIR).

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