

THEORIZING SLUM POLITICS IN RECIFE, BRAZIL

Community leaders symbolize the
inconsistency of the urban situation

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RESUMEN

En este artículo nos centramos en Coque, un barrio pobre en el centro de Recife, Brasil, que se ha convertido en un lugar ejemplar de procesos de gentrificación, y donde los residentes establecidos coexisten con los recién llegados, los más pobres del barrio, que viven en tugurios. Vemos la situación urbana como fundamentalmente inconsistente, y por lo tanto definimos barrios pobres usando el concepto de “éx-timidad (una relación íntima que proviene de afuera); la “parte que no hace parte”. Esta parte está íntimamente conectada con el barrio, sin embargo, al mismo tiempo esta exterior al barrio. Aquí los más pobres viven en tugurios, localidades de las cuales se duda si son parte del barrio. Retomando la noción de “esperanza” de Brian Massumi – que localiza el concepto fuera del marco convencional de optimismo o pesimismo – teorizamos la política del barrio como una política esperanza posibilidad. Esta política se entrelaza con una política de mayor cobertura en toda la ciudad, pero no es lo mismo que ella. Líderes comunitarios son parte de la política del barrio, como una política de la esperanza. Al mismo tiempo, participan en la “política convencional”, que se desenvuelve en las oficinas (políticas gubernamentales) y en tiempos electorales (política electoral). Participar en estos diferentes tipos de política crea toda clase de inconsistencias. En la sección etnográfica nos centramos en un líder comunitario que representa la inconsistencia de la situación urbana. Al contrario de los estudios de casos que representan los líderes comunitarios como estrategias, este líder está lleno de contradicciones. De hecho, él es consciente de su inconsistencia. El punto crítico que hacemos es que esta inconsistencia reside en sus conexiones con la “parte que no hace parte” del barrio. Para el líder, esta parte sigue siendo un símbolo de esperanza y desesperación.

Key words - favela, “parte que no hace parte”, Recife, líderes comunitarios, esperanza

1 The political importance of slums

By 2030, the global number of slum dwellers is expected to increase to about 2 billion (UN-Habitat, 2003). This unfolding slum-growth could have major consequences for social and political life in cities since slum dwellers construct livelihoods and engage in politics in ways that are difficult to capture in dominant theorizations of the urban. Therefore, it becomes urgent to study ethnographically what is happening in slums.

A major theoretical contribution has come from urban theorist Mike Davis's *Planet of Slums* (2004, 2006). Davis blames the continued mushrooming of slums, amongst others, on the IMF and World Bank, whose Structural Adjustment Programs required a reduction in government social expenditure. The result that Davis portrays is a dystopian one; cities with numerous superfluous marginalized laborers, superfluous civil servants, and ex-peasants, that have turned into informal wage workers or self-employed entrepreneurs, with no adequate health or social security coverage.

Yet, could the Left be on to something with slum dwellers and/or squatters? Davis entertains the possibility of slums becoming new sources of revolution. However, he is pessimistic about this possibility for progressive politics in slums. According to him; “the Left [is] still

largely missing from the slum” (Davis, 2004). He portrays slum dwellers as being more prone to accept gangs and fundamentalist religious influences, rather than have truly political potential.

Building on Davis, philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2004) sees slums as sources of political struggle on the global level. He characterizes – in an overly romantic way – the explosive growth of slums as “perhaps the crucial geopolitical event of our time”. According to him; “our main hope for a truly ‘free world’ lies in the desolate universe of the slums” (ibid). Paradoxically, according to Žižek, the negative characterization of slums provides elements for hope and possibility.

In this article, we sympathize with Žižek's ideas. His counter-intuitive idea that slums can be seen as spaces of possibility is interesting. In this article we want to make that argument by drawing on the case of Coque; an informal neighborhood in central Recife, Brazil. Yet, in order to do so, we need to clarify our conceptual framework by making three analytical distinctions. First, we explain the difference between the slum (or favela) and the community (or comunidade) in order to theorize the difference between slum politics and other types of urban politics such as electoral and governmental politics (section 3). Thereafter we establish the distinction between “hope” as a political category and the notions of optimism and pessimism (section 4). In section 5 we connect these ideas

to the case of Aderbal, one of Coque's community leaders. In the conclusion, we use the case to elaborate on the concept of slum politics.

2 How to characterize slums?

Žižek (2005) proposes to perceive of slums in Badiou's terms;

As one of the few authentic 'eventual sites' in today's society — the slum-dwellers are literally a collection of those who are the "part of no part," the "supernumerary" element of society, excluded from the benefits of citizenship, the uprooted and dispossessed.

It is worthwhile to quote Žižek (2004) here at length;

Even more than the classic proletariat, [slum dwellers] are 'free' in the double meaning of the word – 'freed' from all substantial ties and dwelling in a free space outside state and police regulations. They are large collectives, forcibly thrown into a situation where they must invent some mode of being-together, while simultaneously deprived of any inherited ethnic and religious traditions.

Although there is a logic in the functioning of Coque that resonates with Žižek's statements, his description is a very broad one, and if not a caricature (see also Pithouse, 2006). It is highly speculative and ethnographically ungrounded. Yet, he has a number of strong points, particularly in that we can speak of 'a part of no part' – of "a collective thrown into a situation where they must invent some mode of being together".

First, Žižek's thesis of "free and freed collectives dwelling in a 'free' space outside state and police regulations" can never be substantiated. In the form of redevelopment schemes and police actions, residents of Coque are very much subjected to state and police regulations. Coque is not a periphery, it is economically and politically integrated with the city. However, this happened under special circumstances. Like other poor neighborhoods, it has been incorporated outside of the formal plans of the city, making Coque part of the city, but in a way that is negative and even perverse (de Vries, 2016a, b). Coque has always been described as a problematic community, characterized by crime, promiscuity, and informality (Silva, 2009, Neto, 2010), making it a target of evictions. In 40 years Coque lost 51% of its territory ((R)existe, 2013a).

Second – regarding slum dwellers as 'free from all substantial ties' – Coque's residents are still tied to each other in "mutual support networks" (Auyero, 2001) as well as to the strategic location near the "formal city". Furthermore, kinship- and other "substantial" ties are important. And yet again, there is a kernel of truth in Žižek's assertions, since it is striking how fluid and fragile

these political and kinship relations are.

Slums can thus not be defined by a single parameter. They are too multifaceted, heterogeneous, too changeable, and frequently they have blurred boundaries (Nuissl and Heinrichs, 2013). So, what makes slums different from other neighborhoods then? Our answer is the persistence of extreme poverty, and the remembrance thereof. When making this argument, it is crucial to contrast the slum/favela with the community/comunidade (Hellweg, 2014).

The comunidade is an authorized entity receiving state protection and as such it operates as a legitimate part of the city. In Recife, the favela is a derogatory term, used to designate locations where the very poor live, a non-place characterized by criminality and promiscuity. Favelas are usually "invaded" areas inhabited by newcomers. Residents of the comunidade have ambivalent relations with the favela. Many come from the favela and/or have close relationships to these areas, but at the same time, these are painful memories, since residents of the favela are accused of being marginals, opportunists, etc.

In Lacanian parlance, the favela is an "extimate part" – an intimate part that is not considered in the whole (Pavón-Cuellar, 2014). This is our interpretation of Žižek (2005) quoting Badiou's term "part of no part". In the next section, we define slum politics in terms of this "extimate" "part of no part" that is entwined with, but could be separately identified from, a more encompassing citywide politics.

3 Types of politics

Javier Auyero's Poor People's Politics (2001), an ethnographic study of punteros (brokers) in an urban shantytown hit by neoliberal austerity measures in Buenos Aires, is a relevant starting point for theorizing slum politics. Auyero criticizes conventional notions of "clientelism" that see it as coercive vote selling. He prefers to speak about "problem-solving through personalized forms of political mediation" (2001, p. 213) that happens in a "problem-solving network" (2001, p. 80).

Such punteros have a lot in common with the Brazilian líderes comunitários (community leaders) who are often seen as falsely projecting themselves as community representatives, while being paid for personal gains. Yet, there is a distinction between "community leaders" and "political brokers". A "political broker" (cabo eleitoral) relates to electoral politics, whereas community leaders relate to slum politics (Koster and de Vries, 2012). Although community leaders are also involved in electoral- and governmental politics, they represent the needs and aspirations of the slum, making them main protagonist in slum politics.

Auyero (2001) does not make these distinctions between three types of politics that community leaders are involved in, and that impact on poor urban informal communities. We describe them in terms of the places where they take

place. Electoral politics refers to the spectacular politics of party competition and promises during electoral campaigns and administrative periods. This type of politics is about patron-client relations, about all practices that are instrumental for getting votes, assuming or maintaining public positions, and making money as such.

Governmental politics is about managing and governing populations, the politics of programs and projects. These lend themselves to all kinds of exchanges. Whereas electoral politics happens in public spaces, governmental politics takes place in the offices of the City Hall.

Slum politics, in turn, is about claiming the right to be counted and recognized, and about the care for the other. This is the product of an interrelation with governmental and electoral politics. It is the outcome of both outside interventions and intimate relations with the favela, where the very poor live in *palafitas* (stilts), and whose being part of the *comunidade* is contested.

4 Redefining hope

If slums and slum politics are defined in terms of an “extimate” force, then the spaces of hope are in the “real” slum; it is in these spaces of “despair” that we can start thinking of slum politics as a politics of hope and possibility. If this exists, it is because of the possibility of the emancipation of “the part of no part”. Yet, this can only be imagined when thinking outside the conventional notions of optimism or pessimism.

In order to make this point, we have to redefine the notion of hope. We do so by drawing on Brian Massumi’s view on “hope” that places it outside of the conventional frame of a rational assessment of the situation, such that it becomes “something different from optimism” (Zournazi and Massumi, 2002). Since “rationally there really isn’t much room for hope” (*ibid*), it should be disconnected from “an expected success” (*ibid*). Here Massumi searches for “a margin of maneuverability” (*ibid*) that can be found in an empowering uncertainty that is provided by the “uncertainty about where you might be able to go” (*ibid*).

As such, hope is about “focusing on the next experimental step rather than the big utopian picture” (*ibid*). Hope is “more like being right where you are – more intensely” (*ibid*). It is thus not about belief, but it resides in our capacity to see things that hitherto remained invisible. It is where you least expect it. It is not about the future but about the now that can at the same time represent despair and hope.

This resonates with our experience in Coque, where it seemed that hope was rather a certain practice, an attitude in life. Hope, it seemed, was one of the few resources that Coque’s residents had in their lives and politics. What was striking was their insistence in looking at life from the bright side. Their resistance to pessimism that could be seen in the continuing fantasizing and joking about life.

And this all while being marked by memories of suffering and/or humiliation of living in the favela.

We argue that, if a disconnection exists between hope and optimism, it is because hope is grounded in “the desolate universe of slums” (Žižek, 2004) – of the favela, of the “extimate” “part of no part”. This shared background of living in the favela is what – in the eyes of favelados – makes that apparently opportunistic and “politically unconscious” community leaders like Aderbal can be viewed as legitimate community leaders. This is the topic of the next section.

5 The case study

Paradoxically, Aderbal is not an “ideal type” leader to make our claim that slum politics is a politics of hope and possibility. His mode of operation fits very much with the conventional view of poor people’s politics as clientelistic. What makes Aderbal an interesting case, however, is his inconsistency. Contrary to so many other case studies that represent community leaders as strategists, he is full of contradictions.

He is aware of this inconsistency, and in fact, performs inconsistency. This makes him a symbol of the inconsistency of the urban situation. As we show in this section, Aderbal indulges in the “excess enjoyment” (Žižek, 2008) that electoral politics provides him, and the recognition that governmental politics gives him. Yet, in his daily activities, he is haunted by the remembrance of the slum, where residents are constantly accused of, amongst others, being marginals, criminals or opportunists.

A critical point we make is that this inconsistency resides in his “extimate” connections to a “part of no part” that we described in section two. For Aderbal this part remains a symbolic given that embodies both hope and despair. In the current section, we describe this “extimate” connection as his relationships with poor women in his food distribution program, as well as in his inconsistent family live.

5.1 Introducing Aderbal

Former favelado Aderbal is a tall, 49-year-old, dark-skinned, hyperactive líder comunitário. He is at times jokingly called a *pé-leve*, a bummer. Most of his life he lived in Coque, working in the transport sector before pursuing a political career. He grew up near Coque, in a poor swampy neighborhood that is currently a nature conservation area. In the 70s, he was relocated to a poor neighborhood further away from the Recife’s center. After some years, he returned to Coque. His house started “from papelão [cardboard]”, with “only a single bed” that would be soaking wet in times of heavy rainfall. Now his house continues to grow; currently, the third floor is being constructed.

While walking through the conservation area, Aderbal

emotionally tells about his relocation:

We wanted to construct a life in here. And came the politicians. And got us out. There was a man who did not accept the resettlement money and did not want to leave. With force, they got him out of his house and broke down his house. I got out, I was young, but I remember these stuff [crying]. It was the biggest humiliation of the people. Now people talk negatively about Coque, but Coque is a place where people struggle. All to stay here ((R)existe, 2013b).

Back in Coque, it was through football that he got involved with politics at the end of the 90s. He started his political trajectory as a campaigner (*cabo eleitoral*) and is now in one of the highest positions of the PREZEIS (Plan for Regularization of Special Zones of Social Interest), a unique participatory slum governance system that aims to protect ZEIS areas from real estate speculation, provide social services to these areas, and legalize property rights of invaded areas (Nuijten et al., 2012). However, Aderbal was initially never interested in *negócio político* [political business]. He recalls his first participation for election to represent Coque as community leaders in the PREZEIS as only to *tira onda* [fool around].

Although Aderbal's main activity in Coque is the distribution of goods, amongst others, he also arranges work for people, helps people to fill in forms, he arranges for the streetlights to be fixed, he informs the police about dangerous areas in the community, he informs people about upcoming projects in the area, and he organizes festivities.

On a daily basis, Aderbal goes from meeting to meeting, to the City Hall and the URB [Recife Urbanization Company]. In the car, he often drives fast, often with Funk music on the background, and with his phone in one hand. With the other hand, he switches between the clutch and the steering wheel. The song entitled *Poderoza* (powerful) often blast out of the boxes in his car that also has a small TV screen in it.

Looking at Aderbal's material possessions, he has outgrown the favela, something that has been possible due to his career in politics. His connections to the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB), that govern at the state and city level, provides him – and the community – with resources. He is however aware that this might one day be over. The distribution program reminds him of the time that he himself was a *favelado*.

5.2 Aderbal's distribution practices

Aderbal distributes fruits, vegetables, diapers, and Tupperware to women living near two distribution locations in Coque. Like the *punteros* (Auyero, 2001), he does not see this as politics, but as voluntary work.

He recounts that the *deputado* gave him the contact information of the headquarters of the Extra supermarket in São Paulo. After a number of calls, they helped him to arrange with Extra in Recife to supply him with unsaleable, over-date, fruits and vegetables.

Damilo – part of Aderbal's "inner circle" (Auyero, 2001) – helps Aderbal with the transport of goods from the supermarket to the distribution points. Today he arrives in his *Combi* minibus with potatoes, onions, peppers, tomatoes, pineapples, and papayas. We drive to the distribution point that is located at *Rua da Zoada* [street of noise], at a few minutes driving distance. In *Rua da Zoada*;

The City Hall gets things done, but the people break the stuff they get. They make their own favela and then complain about the City Hall afterwards [...] they love to live in the dark! To deal their drugs.

At arrival, Damilo complains "Porra!", referring to the fact that he has to maneuver his *Combi* between the sewer holes in order to get towards the distribution point. It is one bucket per family Damilo explains, pointing at the row of buckets outside of the building. The two begin to empty the *Combi*, always a moment for making jokes that are often sexual or racial. Damilo says that Aderbal "eats a lot of bananas, that's why he got strong". "You also have to eat more bananas before you get so strong", Damilo continues, while laughing due to the multiple interpretations of such a saying.

Meanwhile, the women are gathering at the distribution point. They hold their babies in the arm, while children are screaming around them. Aderbal is preparing the fruits and vegetables in such a way that facilitates him to quickly fill the buckets. The women wait outside and cannot see what Aderbal is doing inside. Everyone keeps a close eye on their buckets. The rule here is "first come, first served".

There is both tension, laughter, and exchange of gossip and daily news at the same time. A woman with a flip-flop in her hands runs behind her crying son. There is constant yelling for people not to slip in front of others. Aderbal walks from inside the distribution building to the women waiting in line outside, while he occasionally shouts to the people standing in line that they should keep calm and that there will also be a distribution on Friday if they don't receive anything today.

The women are teasing each other and Aderbal. One woman jokingly says; "Aderbal is my man, I'm going to have children with him". She is wearing school uniform pants and a ripped t-shirt. She later says that she is 52. After talking for a while, she starts pointing to the women waiting in line. She starts teasing them; "she is 23 and has four children, she has 11 children, and she, her mother, has 12 children. Some of the women call her the baby factory".

Although not all the food is distributed, after little more

than an hour, Aderbal decides that it is enough. While walking back home, between one of his phone calls, he asks “Did you see how they liked me?”. In response to the answer that there are many women with children, he replies that – giving a sexual tint to a discourse used by right-wing politicians against the poor – “the women like sex, and they like kids, because of the money they get from the Bolsa Familia [social government program]”.

This scene very well expresses Aderbal’s style of operation as a typical broker who provides services to the poor in the service of a political patron. Aderbal will use his influence among these women to have them participate in electoral politics. It shows also how survival and patron-client networks overlap (Auyero, 2001).

The critical point, however, is that Aderbal is able to sustain this network because he himself was part of the favela, a fact that generates unpleasant, painful, memories. There is a marked inconsistency between the right-wing politics he represents – full of obscene excessive enjoyment (Žižek, 2008) – and his awareness of the “part of no part”, something his wife confronts him with.

5.3 Aderbal’s wife Jucelia

Aderbal lives together with the 48-year-old, Evangelical, Jucelia, who is also a former favelado. She has held a number of jobs as a housekeeper. Jucelia cooks and washes the clothes for her family. She cleans the house twice a day. When Jucelia talks about Aderbal she refers to him as o patrão [the boss]. At times she then says; “my life is one full of patrões”, referring to all the men around her. According to her;

On the street he [Aderbal] is different. From the money I get from the people [a gente], I buy food for inside the house. Nevertheless, he does not think like that. I believe that if your situation gets better, the situation of your family must also become better. He thinks first of the community and second his family. For me, it is first family and after that o povo [the people].

Jucelia slept most of the time on the couch because she had a severe conflict with Aderbal. The conflict had to do with Aderbal’s contact with other women, who were attracted to him by his status and money. Sometimes there were rumors that he had bought presents for them or that he received sexual favors from them. Jucelia is very much ashamed of this.

When confronted with the question of what the impact of his practices are for Jucelia he replied;

She does not like politics, but I love her and there is nobody who could take her place. She is the best housewife. We have suffered a lot together. But there are a lot of women that like me! I do not want them all! But I am like

this; if they are open and offer themselves, then I will eat [consume sexually]. Do you understand? But Jucelia is the best! We have suffered a lot together. A lot of women want me to separate from her, but without her, I will die. In case she dies I would soon after.

Aderbal definitely enjoys the attention he receives from the recipients of the food distribution program. However, it is not sufficient to see Aderbal behavior as an example of sexual exploitation by an opportunistic broker. The eroticization of relationships with disenfranchised women living under dismal conditions is a way of masking and revealing a shared condition, that of the “part of no part”.

5.4 A conflict around the favela within the comunidade

Community leaders re-establish their relationship with this “part of no part”, with the favela, on a daily basis. However, not all community leaders work to mobilize these poorer sections. On the contrary, some are paid to suppress contrary mobilizations. Community leaders, therefore, play an important role in conflicts around new land invasions. At times they represent favelados and at times forces that want to evict people that live in palafitas or new land invasions.

On Labor Day 2014 a group of people decided to break into a fenced area near Coque, located between two factories, where previously the railway passed. According to another community leader of Coque – with connections to the Workers Party (PT), and who was involved in organizing this invasion – the area is public land. Whatever material available that could be used to build a shack was used by the occupiers. Community leaders registered people arriving at this squatter settlement.

There were attempts of the police to evict people from this land. However, according to the community leader; “since it was not private area and we [the squatters] had all the necessary papers, they did not remove the people [a gente]”. Yet, also in Coque, there were forces that seemingly wanted to see the squatters evicted.

Aderbal would say things like;

This is private land [...] since this invasion the bagunça [mess] in our city began [...] they all have a house, they all have, and they simply want to benefit, however one day the police will get them all out [...] if there are 50 people who need a house, then that is too much.

He believes that – yet again using a rightist political argument against the poor – “these actions are just to rent out again” or “just to sell it afterwards”. Still, he is not against the invasion; “Now they [other community leaders] are saying that I am against. I am not against. I am against that these are not people who need a house”.

Aderbal, as mentioned, knows what it is to be dispossessed, hence the distinction he makes between those who deserve housing support and those who don't. It is not easy for him to identify wholeheartedly with the repressive forces that set out to evict the squatters. Aderbal's inconsistency reveals the injustice of the urban situation.

capable to expose the inconsistency of the urban situation, the fact that the city is divided, that it is antagonistic, and that it contains a supernumerary category of a group that is not included and whose belonging is always put in doubt.

6 Back to slum politics

We have argued in this paper, using an "unideal" case, that slum politics can be seen as a politics of hope and possibility that emerges from the needs and aspirations of the favela in and near the comunidade. Squatters are favelados who embody rupture and prevent the real estate powers from further colonizing and gentrifying comunidades such as Coque that are located in strategic parts of the city. The lines of rupture established by the "part of no part" provide the basis of a politics of hope in conditions of despair. Slum politics becomes emancipatory when this part presents itself and proclaims that it has been wronged and that it has the right to be part of the city. Slum politics then happens through distribution programs, but also through mobilizations and occupations by the "extimate" part of the comunidade, through the work of intermediation of community leaders. That community leaders may embody the very contradictions and inconsistency that characterizes the urban situation is demonstrated by the case of Aderbal.

We have made this argument by drawing on Brian Massumi's conceptualization of hope. Massumi places hope outside of the conventional frame of a rational assessment of the situation. When doing so, we need, however, to allow for the possibility that inconsistency can be the ground for emancipatory action, to see that many apparently opportunistic and "politically unconscious" community leaders may be involved in slum politics as a politics of hope. This was the case thirty years ago when Coque community leaders joined a forceful social movement that fought for the right to the city (Hellweg, 2014).

Aderbal, however, is more an example of how slum politics might also degenerate. This is seen in the sexualization of slum politics, or what Žižek (2008) calls the excessive and obscene enjoyment deriving from the privileges of electoral politics. At the same time, the case study shows how hope is performed by (former) favelado women like Jucelia; women who despite the many blows in their life, retained an immense energy to struggle and make sacrifices.

Slum politics as a politics of hope is seemingly more visible when looking at the practices of a group of other community leaders who are involved in keeping memories of Coque alive. In particular, they keep alive memories of a strong popular movement in the 1980s. By the end of the 1980s, as a result of popular mobilization that included the church, slum dwellers, and social movements, the PREZEIS framework was created. This popular movement was

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Endnotes

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