

# Vulnerability and Risk in the Metropolis of the Periphery

## *Everyday Life in Brazil's Cities*

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AS I WRITE THESE LINES an unprecedented movement spearheaded by young people is taking to the streets of Brazilian cities. The protest started in opposition to a proposed increase in the fares for public transportation. The demands have expanded to a wide range of targets. There are many interpretations of what is happening. A dispute is emerging over the presidential election of 2014 and representatives of the political right, center and left are on the streets. Despite this diversity of protesters, however, one thing is clear: the urban question is at the center of events and there must be a change of course. The presentation I made at the Planners Network/Left Forum panel revealed the main causes underlying the explosions that occurred only a few days later and that led thousands of young people into the streets across the country.

### **The Cities of Peripheral Capitalism**

Floods, landslides, massive traffic jams, increased violence, organized crime, segregation, urban sprawl, continuous flooding, and pollution of air and water. Along with the illegal occupation of marginal land by the poorest people and the exponential growth of the population living in slums, these are the conditions found in the cities at the periphery of capitalism.



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Excluded from the formal housing market, many people occupy sand dunes, mangroves, protected natural areas, watersheds, and the unstable banks of rivers and streams. What in other places might be considered “disasters” are everyday realities.

No matter what you call it—underdeveloped country, southern country, dependent, peripheral, semi-peripheral, developing or emerging—the cities in countries like Brazil continue to function in a way that challenges the new conceptions that they are “newly developed” countries. While modernization advances it is also delayed, a characteristic of peripheral capitalism throughout the history of Brazil, now repeated in the latest phase of globalization.

These are some of the main features of cities on the periphery of capitalism: social inequality and spatial segregation, lack of state control over land use in the city, illegal production of housing by low-income populations (which in some cities can be the majority of the population), a real estate market that is highly speculative and restricted to a portion of the population, and precarious and inaccessible public services. The process of (late) industrialization that occurred in Brazil was characterized by low wages. The production of the illegal city by the residents themselves contributed to the reduction in the cost of labor and therefore favored capital accumulation in many multinational capitals during the second half of the twentieth century, when urbanization and industrialization of the country accelerated. Brazil grew at rates higher than 7 percent between 1940 and 1980 without, however, guaranteeing the civil and social rights of its people.

## **Brazil's Land Use Reforms**

In response to the self-built illegal city, Brazil now has a detailed planning law aimed at bringing about change. But the law lives within a bureaucratized state, which is also slow in acting. In this context, the problems with urban planning are greater. The state is also dominated by traditional patronage as well as influence from economic interests from outside the country.

Since the 1980s, Brazil underwent a remarkable transformation with dramatic changes in demographic, urban, environmental, social and economic conditions. In towns, neoliberal guidelines restricted public investments in social policies, which deepened historic social injustice. As economic growth ebbs, unemployment and violence are increasing. Between 1980 and 2010 the homicide rate rose 259 percent. In 1980, the average number of murders in the country was 13.9 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants but by 2010 it had increased to 49.9.

Paradoxically, it was during this period that a new urban policy flourished, supported by social movements, researchers, architects, lawyers, engineers, social workers, parliamentarians, mayors and non-governmental organizations. They developed the Urban Reform Platform and many municipalities developed a “new type” of democracy and new urban practices. Besides prioritizing social participation—with participatory budgeting, for example—city governments started to face the problems of illegal or informal areas that until then were invisible in urban planning and public administration. This movement succeeded in creating a new legal framework for land use policy, housing, sanitation, urban mobility and solid waste, and new institutions such as the Ministry of Cities, the Council of Cities and the National Urban Conference.

## **Economic Growth, Persistent Inequality**

With the election of Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva as President of Brazil, the economy and employment bounced back and the government introduced social policies to combat poverty and hunger. These included

the *Bolsa Familia* program, which subsidizes poor families, Payroll Credit (*Credito Consignado*), Energy For All (*Luz Para Todos*), *Pro-Uni* (scholarships for poor university students) and *PRONAF* (support for family agriculture). The minimum salary increased 55 percent in real terms between 2003 and 2011. The official poverty level decreased from 37.2 percent in 1995 to 7 percent in 2009. However, inequality persists: the poorest 10 percent earned 1.1 percent of all revenue produced in the country, while the top 10 percent got 44.5 percent of the total.

The federal government launched plans for the resumption of economic growth and the recovery of investments in the economic and social infrastructure through the 2007 Program to Accelerate Growth. In 2009 it launched a housing program called *Minha Casa Minha Vida*, which included subsidies for housing aimed at sections of the population whose income ranged between zero and five minimum wages. This program was designed by Dilma Rousseff—then a leading official and now Brazil's President—and entrepreneurs of the real estate and construction sectors. The intention of the federal government was to cope with the economic crisis of 2008 and contain the possible decline in employment. The exemption from taxes for various branches of Brazilian industry was also part of a federal anti-cyclical economic policy.

Despite all of the legal and institutional advances after nearly 30 years of absence of urban policy by the federal government, Lula resumed investments in housing and sanitation on a significant scale. Paradoxically, this has had disastrous results. It appears as if urban policies are not part of the national agenda. Cities were seen as places for investments to fuel economic growth and employment without regard to urban and environmental consequences. The new urban reforms, once supported by social movements, seemed to evaporate with the decline of the movements whose leaders were swallowed up by government and other institutions.

With a highly speculative real estate market, urban spatial segregation was renewed. In São Paulo, the price of real estate increased 153 percent between 2009 and 2012. In Rio de Janeiro the increase was 184 percent. A

part of the middle class was included in the residential market but not the many layers of urban households who have the greatest needs for housing. Urban land remains hostage to the interests of real estate capital. Violent evictions, unthinkable only a few years ago, were resumed. Fires in slums became more frequent, especially in large areas valued by real estate developers.

### **The New Crisis of Mobility**

The deficits in the urban transportation sector have exacted the greatest sacrifices of the population, especially the poorest people who live in the peripheries of metropolitan areas. Since the 1980s, government at all levels has not paid attention to urban transportation needs. The precarious situation of public transport in Brazilian cities is associated with record car sales, driven by rising incomes and tax exemptions for cars, and this has led to record traffic jams. In the last five years (2007–2012), the number of cars has almost doubled, causing congestion that has social, economic and environmental consequences. Only recently has scientific research revealed the numbers of health problems caused by cars and air pollution. In the City of São Paulo, in 2011, 1,365 people died in traffic crashes; the figure for Brazil was approximately 40,000.

The average travel time by public transport is two hours and 42 minutes. For one third of users it is more than three hours. Yet almost 40 percent of all trips in Brazilian cities of more than 60,000 inhabitants are made on foot. Due to a the lack of money or a lack of transportation, young poor people live in exile on the outskirts of large cities under pressure from violent police and drug trafficking.

No official document on urban mobility policy states that the automobile is the preferred mode of transportation, but in fact it receives more subsidies when compared with public transportation or other non-motorized options. Most urban infrastructure projects are for roads. Lobbies for big construction contractors dominate municipal budget considerations and this is directly related with the logic of electoral campaigns.

### **Urban Problems of Peripheral Capitalism**

To solve our urban problems in Brazil we have laws that are celebrated around the world. We have plans, at least in all cities with over 20,000 inhabitants. We have the technical knowledge, experience in urban management and we have sophisticated proposals for urban policies. But we don't have enough power to implement them. This is one of the many problems we face at the periphery of capitalism.

Cities are, by definition, places of workforce reproduction. Urban space is also used for the reproduction of capital. There is a deep conflict between these roles. The appropriation of profits, rents and interests in the production or use of urban space competes for public funds with social policies for transportation, housing, sanitation and health. This competition also leads to the social exclusion of those who are forced to make the greatest sacrifices due to poor living conditions and the risks they must live with in the urban environment.

Mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup or the Olympics, both planned for Brazil in coming years, only make things worse. They bring with them a tsunami of capital and force cities and their governments to make absurd expenditures. Afterward, the events leave their host cities with white elephants, as happened in South Africa, China and Greece after their international games.

People living in the cities at the periphery of capitalism continue to experience high risks and vulnerability to disasters. This historically and socially constructed condition worsened with the neoliberal policies that led to the containment of public spending (during the 80s and 90s), and also increased when urban policy was ignored in favor of economic growth. The vulnerability of the poor increased due to the speculative housing boom, the exponential increase in the number of automobiles, and the neglect of public transportation.

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