

# Drug traffickers and the contestation of city space in Rio de Janeiro

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## Abstract

This article examines recent spatial practices by drug traffickers in Rio de Janeiro in the context of the violent spatial history of the city. It also considers the creation of spaces of exception in the favelas through media and government discourse, and through the militarization of public security.

### Keywords

Heterotopic spaces of contestation. Urban imaginary. Spaces of exception. Visibility in public spaces

## 1 Introduction

In April 2004, after a weekend of intense drug-related violence in two of Rio's favelas the then Deputy Governor of the state, Luiz Paulo Conde, revealed his own plan to tackle the problem. Conde proposed that work begin immediately to build a ten foot high wall that would completely ring the favelas of Rocinha and Vidigal. After objections from human rights groups that apart from penalising innocent favela dwellers, the wall was unlikely to be effective in ending the violence, Conde clarified: "The wall isn't to stop the violence, it is to mark off territory" (BBC News, 12/04/04). It so happens that the favelas of Rocinha and Vidigal tumble down the hillsides which overlook two of the smartest neighbourhoods of the middle class Zona Sul (South Zone) district. The hillsides are a constant physical reminder of the geographical proximity of the favelas to the *asfalto* – the paved streets below them – while also functioning as a "natural" marker of the socio-spatial distinction between the two spaces. This double-edged dynamic of spatiality – of being close, yet

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separate – became emblematic of social relations in the city as a whole, with particular emphasis on the relative lack of conflict between the two spaces. Rio's Zona Sul became a kind of spatial chimera – a supposedly harmonious society made up of very different groups able to live peaceably side by side. In such a scenario, social distance and social hierarchies could be imagined as a **natural** product of the city's geographical configuration. This *naturalization effect*, as Bourdieu (1999) termed it, is produced when the displacements and exclusions organised by social structures are then turned into spatial structures. The result of this process of “long-term inscription of social realities in the natural world” is that the differences produced by historical logic can seem to result from the very nature of things (p. 124-126).

This “natural” order of things overlooks the favelas' violent spatial history, as well as the symbolic violence experienced by residents of the favelas when they enter the Zona Sul. The forbidding presence of security guards and doormen, for example, inscribe the constraints of social space in places like shopping malls, as well as in those public spaces that have taken on the aura of private space, such as some of the pavements and streets of the Leblon and Ipanema districts. When favela dwellers enter the

*asfalto*, their presence in this area of the city is tolerated because of a social pact that relies on them knowing their place.

## 2 The myth of cordiality

This social pact facilitates an understanding and discursive articulation of social relations which is underpinned by the myth of cordiality. This enduring and widely accepted notion holds that Brazil is an inherently amicable and hospitable nation, made up of naturally peaceful people given to getting along together. It was consecrated in the 1930s in some of the country's canonical sociological and historical texts. The work of the sociologist Gilberto Freyre was pivotal in creating a perception of the historic amiability of Brazilian social relations. According to Freyre (1964), the Portuguese had a predisposition for creating societies that were harmonious and multi-racial, evidenced in their comparatively benevolent colonial regime and their appetite for sexual encounters with native women. Freyre's impressionistic and readable writing style glossed over the extent of the violence and coercion implied in colonial miscegenation with indigenous and slave women<sup>1</sup>.

Freyre's ideas laid the groundwork for the notion of cordiality outlined in Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's classic of Brazilian history, *Raízes*

<sup>1</sup> See Skidmore (1993) for an analysis of Freyre's ideas and their role in the creation of another long-standing myth – the notion that Brazil is a racial democracy. I do not address the question of race in this article as racial discourse has not been a particular feature of the drug traffickers' public statements. A significant proportion of the favela population is not, or does not consider itself black, as is the case with some of the most prominent traffickers and many of their gang members.

*do Brasil* (1936), which defined cordiality as a “defining trait of the Brazilian character” that mediated the relationship between the individual and society (HOLANDA, 1971, p. 106). According to Buarque de Holanda, echoing the writer Ribeiro Couto, cordiality was the country’s unique contribution to world civilization, born of the traditional norms of co-existence of rural and patriarchal Brazil. It was based on a national aversion to social ritualism and reverence, and a tendency instead towards familiarity and intimacy in social relations. In a 1954 critique of the notion, the revisionist scholar Dante Moreira Leite (1976) pointed out that the cordiality of Buarque de Holanda was, in fact, nothing but the paternalism of Brazil’s old elites – the patriarchal, large land-owning families. Leite noted that cordiality is “a form of social relations between *equals*, between the elites”, when applied to inferiors it is no more than a means of masking prejudice, as only those who demonstrate due respect for the dominant classes will be cordially treated (LEITE, 1976, p. 323-324).

The notion of cordiality has helped to imagine the city of Rio, the showcase city of the nation in many ways, as a utopian space. From the 1930s, powerful social and racial hierarchies as well as particular regimes of valorisation of popular culture have helped to prop up this illusion of social harmony. Despite Freyre’s startling assertions about Portuguese colonialism and the charge that Buarque de Hollanda was merely reinforcing the status quo, the seductive idea of

social harmony, which dispensed with the need to deal with social inequity, implanted itself so profoundly in Brazilian thought that it resisted challenges from revisionist social scientists in the 1950s to survive relatively unscathed in public perception and discourse into the post-dictatorship period. The myth of cordiality only really began to come under fire, literally, as it were, from the mid 1980s. The combination of a weak state, economic crisis inherited from the military which led to harsh economic restructuring, and the expansion of the drugs trade, led to an increase in violent crime. As a result, gated communities were established to protect the domestic spaces of the well-off, malls were constructed to provide them with a safe shopping environment and public byways privatized to exercise control over traffic through their neighbourhoods.

As Luciana Corrêa do Lago (2001) observes, academics and the mass media have viewed these developments as evidence of a new urban order in Brazil. However, as Lago rightly asks, are these recent phenomena signs of a new logic for producing and consuming space, or are they, more accurately, simply new mechanisms for legitimating the existing segregating and excluding logic (p. 1)? These new phenomena appear to be merely replicating and further entrenching the spatial patterns described at the outset of this article. They are mechanisms that are now replacing the discourse of cordiality for theorising socio-spatial relations. While I

would not, therefore, apply to the city of Rio the notion of a *new* pattern of urban segregation, something very novel has certainly been taking place there, that has been calling into question the established urban order.

In recent years, drug lords and their gang members from the favelas have been increasingly desirous of accessing more space within the city, thanks to the economic and military power afforded them by trafficking. In November 2002, for example, an incident at a plush Rio yacht club created a climate of fear and astonishment among its wealthy members, according to a report in the daily broadsheet, *O Globo* (05/11/02).

One of the city's most powerful drug lords at the time, Fernandinho Beira-Mar, used false identity documents to pass himself off as an industrialist and gain membership to the exclusive club. At least seventeen of his family members were enjoying the club's luxurious facilities on a daily basis before his true identity was discovered.

The next time two of his sons attempted to enter the club, they were prevented from doing so by security guards and before leaving, one of them threatened: "Do you know who you're talking to?! I am Beira-Mar's son! You haven't heard the last of this!"

"Do you know who you're talking to?!", in Portuguese, "Você sabe com quem está falando?!", is a familiar Brazilian expression frequently heard in exchanges between individuals when one party finds his or her authority challenged.

A detailed analysis of this expression has been undertaken by the anthropologist Roberto da Matta (1991), who points out that it is a verbalisation of a social system "intensely preoccupied with authority, hierarchy and 'everyone in his proper place'" (p. 140). Da Matta observes that "Do you know who you're talking to?!" is a form of address to one's social inferior and that it reveals the discord and conflict in Brazilian society that lurk behind the perception and the myth of Brazil as a "cordial" nation. When the son of a drug lord from the Rocinha *favela* directs this expression at the yacht club and its well-heeled members, it adds an interesting twist to the illusion of cordiality. It represents a rupture to the social contract of knowing one's place and signals a crisis in a hegemonic system of social relations which has been mirrored for so long in the spatial patterns of the city. The son of the drug lord felt able to claim access to the yacht club via the drugs trade – a trade which is, of course, also intensely preoccupied with authority and hierarchy.

### 3 A violent spatial history

In the past few years, there have been other challenges to the historical consensus on the occupation of space in Rio, originating in the world of drug trafficking based in the favelas, but played out in the so-called *bairros nobres* of the city. These attempts by traffickers to forcibly appropriate public space represent another chapter in the spatial history of the

city, which has been largely characterised by an authoritarian organization and distribution of space on the part of the state and local authorities. Rio's contemporary spatial patterns are the result of a hugely ambitious modernization drive undertaken by its oligarchic Republican government between 1903 and 1906. The city's ruthlessly executed urban reform was fuelled by the desire of Brazil's elites for a "civilized" capital modelled on Paris (NEEDELL, 1987), that would impress foreigners with its modernity, and attract investment and immigrants (preferably European). The urbanization programme also aimed to put an end to a series of significant revolts against unpopular government policies, such as the Vaccine Revolt of 1904, the last popular uprising that was able to make use of the dense tangle of dark, narrow streets with their colonial proportions<sup>2</sup>.

A law of 29<sup>th</sup> December, 1902 deprived the communities to be affected by the reform of any rights to defend themselves and conferred on the engineer in charge of the project, Francisco Pereira Passos, absolute power in the implementation of the project, which soon became known popularly as the "Passos dictatorship" (SEVCENKO, 1993, p. 45-48). At least 14,000 people were left homeless by the demolition of city centre buildings – aptly described by historian José Murilo de Carvalho (1999) as "ripping open the belly of the old city"

(p. 93) – and land speculation and taxes on new services such as electricity, road paving and waste disposal pushed hundreds more families out to the hillsides and the periphery of the city. According to Sevckenko (1993), all aspects of life of the popular classes were affected by the new "spatial discipline" imposed by the reforms, "a brutal [...] and discriminatory gesture, that clearly separated the space of privilege from the space of oppression" (p. 59).

Repression and violence have been consistent features of successive public policies aimed at eliminating the favelas that grew and proliferated as a result of the Republican reform. During Getúlio Vargas's authoritarian Estado Novo (1937-1945), a 1937 public works act declared the favelas an "aberration" which should not form part of the official map of the city and proposed their elimination, relocating residents compulsorily to three so-called "proletarian parks" built between 1941 and 1943 (BURGOS, 2003, p. 27). Favela dwellers responded to the relocation programme by beginning to organize themselves politically, and in the 1950s and early 1960s successive municipal government agencies were formed in order to exercise closer control of the favela community associations. This process of organisation and activism was brought to an end after the military coup of 1964. The regime's intensely violent "removal"

<sup>2</sup> See Sevckenko (1993) and Carvalho (1999, p. 91-139) on the Vaccine Revolt.

programme for the favelas was undertaken with armed soldiers when necessary and was at its most intense between 1968 and 1975. Its special housing agency created in 1968 to coordinate policy throughout the state of Rio<sup>3</sup> proclaimed the favelas a “deformed urban space” in need of social, moral, economic and sanitary rehabilitation. For the agency, “rehabilitation” meant aiming to remove 100 families a day from their homes in order to achieve its stated goal that there would be “no more people living in the slums of Rio de Janeiro by 1976” (apud PERLMAN, 1976, p. 202. See also BURGOS, 2003, p. 36). During this period, favela community leaders were arrested, tortured and murdered, and by 1973 62 favelas were destroyed and 175,785 people removed, dumped and neglected in *conjuntos habitacionais*, the new government housing projects on the far outskirts of the city (PERLMAN, 1976, p. 202). The military’s savagely effective dismantling of the process of politicisation that had been gathering momentum in the favelas since the 1940s, made it easy in the post-dictatorship period for the drug trade to establish its power in the 52 favelas still left in middle class areas of the city and in the distant and intensely alienating *conjuntos*. The privatisation of the favelas by traffickers can be seen, therefore, as representing a certain continuity with state terror under the military (BURGOS, 2003).

## 4 City at war?

The spate of violence seen in the Zona Sul area, which peaked in 2002 and 2003, consisted of daring, orchestrated actions carried out by elements of the drugs trade as symbolic shows of power, or to disrupt everyday life in the well-to-do neighbourhoods of the city. It was not merely an overspill of the drug dealers’ “private wars” – to borrow from the title of Kátia Lund and João Moreira Salles’s film. Nor was it the class war which the elites always feared would erupt from behind the façade of cordiality – a fear which Deputy State Governor Conde was addressing with his outrageous proposal for a dividing wall. The wall suggests a desire to capitalise on that fear, in order to create the climate and conditions that justify the perpetuation of a state of exception with regard to the favelas that continues in the democratic period<sup>4</sup>.

In his philosophical history of the state of exception, Giorgio Agamben (2005) reiterates Benjamin’s assertion that the state of exception has become the norm. He observes that the formal declaration of the state of exception has been replaced in Western and Western-style democracies today by the creation of a permanent state of emergency that necessitates exceptional measures and that has become the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics (p. 6 & 2). It is within

<sup>3</sup> CHISAM, Coordenação de Habitação de Interesse Social da Área Metropolitana do Grande Rio.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Julio Ramos for drawing my attention to the exceptional order of the favelas.

this kind of scenario that Conde feels able to invoke the spectre of an acute security threat and make a serious proposal for the construction of a perimeter wall enclosing the favela and breaching the human rights of its residents. The wall would demarcate a space of exception in which freedom of movement would be suspended for some of the inhabitants of the city, while other citizens would continue to enjoy this right elsewhere. It then becomes necessary to convey the security threat to the population in the strongest terms possible. This goes some way toward explaining why the notion of a “city at war” and the representation of drugs-related violence as acts of “terrorism” have become so prevalent in the language of the representatives of state power, which is then echoed in media discourse (LEU, 2004).

The notion of a class war also results from the belated realization by the dominant social groups that it is violence, not cordiality that underlies the city’s social relations. Class war provides a rationalizing discourse for the consequent crisis provoked in the asfalto in imagining the city’s other – the urban popular subject (LEU, 2004, p. 347-353). In the media in particular, there is a novelty assumed about this so-called war that forgets that the inhabitants of favela communities have long suffered the brunt of vicious turf wars in their neighbourhoods between drug dealers, as well as a recurring and

indiscriminate war between drug dealers and the police, and continue to be the most frequent victims of violence. When these wars began in the mid 1980s and intensified in the early 90s, there was little and belated interest from the rest of the city because its impact was felt first and foremost within the space of the favelas. The recent discursive articulation of contemporary social relations as civil war prepares the ground for exceptional measures to deal with what is represented as a critical threat to the security of the middle classes and the elites. This, despite the fact that statements made by drug dealers with regard to the incursions and attacks in the Zona Sul in 2002 and 2003, emphasized that they were a form of protest directed at the state. These acts and threats of violence did not deliberately seek to cause harm to individuals from the privileged classes, but instead targeted the most prominent symbols of an accepted imaginary of the city, constructed by its dominant groups<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, a more measured reading of the drug traffickers’ war on the city reveals that the war was being waged on the dominant *representation* and *occupation* of the city by its ruling classes (LEU, 2004, 351) – and, therefore, on the historical invisibility of favela dwellers in the city’s spaces of power.

In the section that follows, I will outline three practices that turned the streets of the Zona Sul

**5** In this piece, I refer to symbolic practices by drug traffickers and their gang members that represent a show of power in public spaces from which they are usually excluded, not to the frequent and brutal acts of violence (torture and murder) carried out within the favelas, which are generally meted out to rival traffickers and to favela dwellers considered traitors, informers, etc.

into the locus of a dispute over visibility in certain public spaces in 2002 and 2003. These spatial practices presented a serious challenge to the established functions of the Zona Sul area and for a time succeeded in dismantling its symbolic and ideological meanings<sup>6</sup>.

## 5 The end of Eden

One of the high-impact practices employed by the drugs trade was a campaign to attack prominent buildings of the city associated with government and commerce – tourism, in particular. Carefully chosen targets of this campaign included the façade of the Governor's Palace – the seat of the state government; the historic Hotel Glória – which has accommodated former presidents of the country and other leading political figures; and the Rio Sul shopping centre – which several people interviewed after the attack stated that they frequented because of fear for their safety in public places. On March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2003 the campaign was stepped up to focus on the most intensely symbolic landmarks of the city, with the shooting of the Corcovado train which transports visitors to the city's defining symbol, the statue of Christ the Redeemer. Meanwhile attacks were also threatened on the Sugar Loaf Mountain and the Tijuca National Park, in an exercise guaranteed to create a climate

of extreme vulnerability, in which the forces of law and order appeared powerless to prevent assaults on the symbols that constitute the traditional imaginary of the city.

These natural wonders of Rio have also functioned synecdochically to suggest another mythological aspect of the country as a whole – the notion that Brazil is an Edenic land, blessed by God. According to José Murilo de Carvalho (2000), the Edenic myth has given rise to a “complex of greatness” – the belief that because of its beauty and sheer size, Brazil is destined one day to become a great and powerful country. As he points out, Brazil's depressing statistics on poverty, inequality and violence reveal this myth to be an “instrument of self-delusion” (p. 77-78). Perhaps nowhere has this self-delusion been as evident as in Rio, where the city's natural wonders and monuments have marked out utopian sites, to use Foucault's description, “fundamentally unreal spaces”, that “present society itself in a perfected form” (1986, p. 24). Attacks on these symbols, therefore, constitute assaults on those illusionary spaces of the city, and like the other practices I will describe, open up “counter-sites”, or heterotopic spaces of contestation (FOUCAULT, 1986, p. 24) in which the utopian quality of the social space is exposed. These spaces were being re-signified as a platform for radical difference and a showcase for division.

<sup>6</sup> The actions I describe are not restricted to the Zona Sul, inhabitants of the hillside favelas and the favelas and deprived areas of the periphery are also subject to shut-downs and transport disruptions, but in this article I focus on the spatial politics of these practices as they are deployed in the Zona Sul.

Another high visibility strategy for disputing space in the city which has been used by elements of organized crime, is the enforced shutdown of businesses and public buildings. Shut-downs occur when a gang wants to send a message to the authorities, usually to protest the death of one of their own and invite publicity in the media. The threat to shut down or face retaliation is communicated either by telephone or through messengers – often children from the favelas. In 2003 a number of shut-downs were ordered in the Zona Sul, in areas near to the favela of the drug dealer issuing the order. Despite heavy police presence in the streets at these times, intended to neutralize the threat, fear compelled shop owners to close and drove many residents indoors<sup>7</sup>. Drug dealers were therefore able to impose their power in this area of the city without the need to actually, physically occupy it.

On April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2003 the order for a grenade to be thrown at the Rio Sul Shopping Centre, followed by the burning of buses and the shut-down of businesses, was issued from within the walls of the maximum security prison, Bangu, in the far west of the city. A block had been imposed on mobile phone signals in the wing of the prison housing Marcinho VP, a drug lord from the Comando Vermelho gang. The block was intended to prevent the increasingly regular phenomenon

of traffickers commandeering these attacks from behind bars. However, Marcinho VP had managed to pass on a message via his lawyers to members of the gang in other wings, who then used their mobiles to communicate the order to their “soldiers” in the Santa Marta favela. Money from the drug trade enables the collusion and corruption of lawyers and prison officers in the purchase and smuggling in of mobile phones to overcome the physical limitations imposed by imprisonment. The use of mobile phones, radios and laptops in prisons in this way allows for a new way of relating to the city that bypasses the physical experience of space. This phenomenon recalls Paul Virilio’s description of how informational and communicational technologies can defy the limits of the city. For Virilio (1991), these technologies mean that people can no longer be easily separated by physical obstacles or temporal distances, with the result that “distinctions of *here* and *there* no longer mean anything” (p. 13).

These distinctions are particularly significant in the particular context of the socio-spatial pattern of Rio. The practice of causing mayhem in the Zona Sul from inside of a prison which is located so far on the outskirts of the city that its environs are almost rural, is a double defiance of the rigid spatiality of social life. Apart from making problematic the physical separation of

<sup>7</sup> According to the president of the city’s hospitality association, home deliveries of takeaway food increased by 40% after a spate of attacks in April and May 2003, suggesting that fears for their safety made residents reluctant to venture out to restaurants (ZOBEL, 2003).

criminals from law-abiding society – the obvious function and symbolism of prisons – the practice also disturbs the structure of the social space in which Bangu would be assigned a position of marginality, of being *there*. The spatial opposition of *here* and *there* was eroded by the drug dealers' ability to impact on everyday life in the Zona Sul, resulting in the prison being transferred to a position of centrality in the urban imaginary. The "heterotopia of deviation" (to borrow Foucault's term for prisons, [1986, p. 25]) that is Bangu becomes fluid, resistant to confinement. In an intensely hierarchical society, when the distances of the social space are infringed in this way, it creates a perception that a grave threat is being posed to the very order of the city<sup>8</sup>. It is important to point out that this perception of radical division belies a significant degree of actual contact and interaction between individuals from the favelas and the *asfalto*. However, the notion of an entirely rigid socio-spatial division becomes

more dominant in press and public discourse in the context of acts or threats of violence emanating from the favelas.

The third spatial practice that I would like to highlight is the invasion and occupation of the streets in the form of demonstrations and the seizure of buses to cause disruption to the transport service and force road closures. Involvement in this particular kind of activity is more ambiguous. Street protests and transport disruptions by residents of the favelas often occurred in retaliation for the killing of a drug lord in confrontation with the police, what the press referred to as "enforced mourning", ordered by the traffickers. Because of the circumstances involved and the complexity of the relationship between favela dwellers and drug dealers<sup>9</sup>, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent those participating in these protests were coerced, or whether their actions implied political and social

**8** Press accounts of another incident involving Marcinho VP in September 2002 convey this perceived threat very clearly, and how it is apprehended spatially. Corruption among prison officers allowed him to obtain keys to the cells in Bangu 1, which he used to release his fellow Comando Vermelho leader, Fernandinho Beira-Mar. Using his mobile phone, Beira-Mar then co-ordinated the execution of rival traffickers held in the prison and gave an order that he knew would be overheard by the police, who were monitoring his calls: "If they turn the screws on me, get the boys to **go down** (descer) and spread terror". Beira-Mar's order, calculated for public consumption, reveals an acute awareness of the spatiality of power. The statement appeals to middle-class fears about the favelas descending from the hills and invading the *asfalto* and was printed repeatedly in the press. This notion combined with the idea of the fluid space of Bangu in articles with titles such as, "Making fun of the law: Fernandinho Beira-Mar is proof that the Brazilian State cannot even keep a criminal isolated in prison" (Veja, 18/09/02); "A whole city taken hostage"; and "He controlled Rio for 23 hours" (*O Dia*, 13/09/02), which declared: "With a gun in his right hand and a mobile phone in his left, Fernandinho Beira-Mar didn't just take over Bangu 1. He held the entire city hostage."

**9** See Leeds (2003) for a discussion of the dynamics of the relationship between drug dealers and the favela community. She argues that the drug lord needs to offer certain services in exchange for the space to conduct his business, services that are only valuable because the state does not offer them. Zaluar [electronic document] examines the current change to the high command of the largest drugs organization, Comando Vermelho, with older leaders, who prioritized respect for favela residents and patronage of community activities, being increasingly replaced by younger traffickers who show disregard for the traditional codes of conduct. This makes for complex and variable relations of respect and fear, which make favela dwellers evermore vulnerable to abuses of power, even as some of the younger residents, in particular, admire such power in an environment that offers them extremely limited options.

protest. There was clear social intent in some of the reactions to police abuses, whether or not there was involvement or assistance by drug dealers. See Leu (2004, p. 346-7) for an account of a protest in the Barreira do Vasco favela.

Whoever instigates the protests and whatever the motives behind them, closing roads and stopping traffic offer opportunities for favela dwellers to impose their presence in a usually “prohibited space”, to use Lefebvre’s term (1991). I witnessed one protest on one of the main streets of Copacabana in April 2003, which came in response to the death of the drug lord Caju in a shoot out with police. Caju was the trafficker who orchestrated the grenade attacks on the Rio Sul shopping centre on the order of the imprisoned Marcinho VP, as well as attacks on business places in the very affluent neighbourhood of Leblon. I was struck by the significant number of young children and adolescents – both boys and girls – participating. Whether these young people had been ordered to take to the streets or not, they were clearly enjoying the attention they were attracting, as well as the power they were able to exercise over the mobility of the neighbourhoods’ inhabitants – taking over the pavements and darting out in front of cars, forcing them to stop. These demonstrations are schooling favela youth in ways of transgressing the limits of the city, and following Lefebvre (1991), of challenging the boundaries between *representations of space* (the conceptualized space of the early Republican social engineers and subsequent urban planners)

and *representational spaces* – those dominated spaces that the imagination seeks to change and appropriate (p. 38-39).

At the time I wondered whether these practices would also challenge Lefebvre’s claim (1991) that the products of representational spaces are usually purely symbolic. The protests constituted only transient occupations of sites of power – no squatting took place, for example. However, these interventions into the Zona Sul enacted a desired access to urban space and imagined alternative experiences of space that may have had some impact on the consciousness of the individuals taking part, and may, therefore, represent an emergent form of political agency. Any potential for real social change will depend on whether the new forms of contesting space in the city seen in 2002 and 2003 will produce new social actors from outside of the drugs trade. The traffickers have made it their business to undermine the authority of legitimate community leaders in the favelas as much as possible and create new networks of clientelistic relations within them. Despite its occasional claims, Rio’s largest criminal organisation, the Comando Vermelho, has largely discarded the politicized, collective consciousness that characterized its early history in the 1960s, which was developed through contact with political prisoners during the military dictatorship – see Lima (2001) and Leeds (2003). In a great leap of faith, the writer José Eduardo Agualusa (2002) imagines a scenario in his novel *O ano em que Zumbi tomou*

o *Rio*, in which a politicized drug lord uses his wealth to finance a popular revolution. However, the fact that recent challenges to the existing organization of space which is a legacy of social authoritarianism were coming from an intensely hierarchical and violent sector of society, gave limited hope for imagining a democratizing or popularizing of urban space in the Zona Sul.

## 6 Postscript

At the time, the traffickers' alternative modes of communicating socio-spatial relations struck a lethal blow to the intensely mythological, discursive construct of the cordial city. Their actions signalled a post-ideological moment in Brazilian social thought<sup>10</sup> that was intricately bound up with an emergent process of de-naturalization of the urban spatial structures discussed in this article. The threat to the city's spatial organization has led to occupations of a number of favelas by the army, with the one that took place during carnival of 2003 fuelled by concerns for the city's tourist image. A subsequent military occupation came in response to the theft of firearms from an army depot on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006, alleged to have been carried out by two traffickers, in collusion with serving and former soldiers. The military's Operation Asphyxia involved laying siege to twelve favelas across the city. Entrances to these communities were barricaded with sand bags and tyres

in order to create checkpoints for searching residents and controlling their movement. In the case of the Mangueira favela, an armoured tank was even stationed at its main access point, with its gun barrel trained on the favela.

Brazilian members of the International Association of Penal Law denounced the occupation and alleged abuse of the search warrants issued by the military courts, which soldiers used to enter tens of thousands of homes. The Federal Public Ministry (a body of autonomous magistrates, formed of public prosecutors working both at federal and at state level) attempted to put an end to the occupation, but was blocked by the Federal Council of Justice. Federal prosecutors had argued that the search warrants were issued with the aim of apprehending those responsible for the crime and recuperating the stolen firearms. It did not permit the disruption of citizens' freedom of movement, body searches of residents, entry into private residences without individual search warrants, and acts of aggression or coercion towards citizens. The army was accused of violating the constitution by appropriating the function of the police to maintain public security. Justice Minister Márcio Thomaz Bastos asserted that the operations were based on the military's penal code and justified them on the grounds that the theft constituted a military crime. Article 142 of the Brazilian constitution defines the function

of the Armed Forces as the defence of the nation, but in exceptional cases they can be used to guarantee law and order with the authorization of any one of the heads of the three constitutional powers (the Executive, the Legislative and the Judiciary). In this case, the guaranteeing of law and order as a justification for creating an exception is unconvincing. The army had reiterated very publicly that the motive of Operation Asphyxia was to restore the honour of the military, and **not** to combat drug trafficking, which as their public relations director rightly asserted in the press on a number of occasions, was the role of the police.

Since they peaked in 2002 and 2003, symbolic acts of violence in “prohibited” areas of the city have largely been abandoned. During the 2006 occupation, phone calls were reported to have been intercepted by the police in which traffickers threatened attacks on public buildings (*O Globo*, 10/03/06), but these never materialised. Significantly, however, on this occasion traffickers engaged in shootouts with soldiers for the first time ever during a military occupation, in what appears to be a clear indication that they are opting for more direct forms of confrontation. This was an ominous and disturbing development, and also an indication of the failure of the state’s policy of militarizing public security. In what appears to be an acknowledgement that this approach can never be successful in having long term effects on crime levels, in August 2007 President Lula announced a \$3.3-billion-dollar

package to begin to tackle drugs-related violence which, significantly, will be led by a social justice agenda. This announcement offers more hope than there has been for a very long time that the city’s so-called “favela problem” can be tackled, not with historic authoritarianism, but through inclusion and a coherent, concerted plan for investment and social programmes.

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## Narcotraficantes y la contestación del espacio de la ciudad en Rio de Janeiro

### Resumen

Este artículo analiza prácticas espaciales recientes de narcotraficantes en Rio de Janeiro en el contexto de la violenta historia espacial de la ciudad. Examina también la creación de espacios de excepción en las favelas a través de discursos de los medios de comunicación y del gobierno, y por la militarización de la seguridad pública.

### Palabras claves

Espacios heterotópicos contestatarios. Imaginario urbano. Espacios de excepción. Visibilidad en espacios públicos.

## Traficantes de drogas e a contestação do espaço da cidade no Rio de Janeiro

### Resumo

Este artigo analisa práticas espaciais recentes de narcotraficantes do Rio de Janeiro no contexto da violenta história espacial da cidade. Examina, também, a criação de espaços de exceção nas favelas através de discursos dos meios de comunicação e do governo, e da militarização da segurança pública.

### Palavras-chave

Espaços heterotópicos de contestação. Imaginário urbano. Espaços de exceção. Visibilidade em espaços públicos.

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