

Genocide and Spectacle

An anarchist reflection on the current context in Rio de Janeiro

Flor do Asfalto squat

September 2nd, 2011

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Some words about the experiences lived in Rio de Janeiro through an anarchist perspective

This 2011 text emerged from a collective reflection between individuals that worked around the anarchist squat Flor do Asfalto (by now evicted) that was fighting the latest wave of gentrification and intensifying repression in Rio de Janeiro.

This piece is trying to contribute, from an anarchist perspective, to the clarification of the processes of criminalization of poverty and state violence declared against the movements of resistance who have rebelled against such projects.

One of the prime motivations for this initiative was its ability to add more elements to the debates that are continuing in Rio de Janeiro and other cities so that people who haven't had the opportunity to live for themselves this very particular situation can also be briefed about what is going on here. This initiative also springs from the intention to contribute to the social war, seeing as the hierarchical power structures, which have reproduced themselves for centuries, are repeated in different regions at different times.

Finally, we believe that what is being lived here could be an advanced stage of the actual symptoms of large cities as a whole, at least in what it says about the territory controlled by the Brazilian State.

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Rio de Janeiro, future host of the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympic Games in 2016, is an emblematic metropolis built around a paradisiacal and admirable ecosystem.¹ Each of its neighbourhoods and streets contain the contrasts of the merchant kingdom: spread around the various parts of the city, the screaming poverty, profound decadence, the administrative abandonment in its crudest state; while in other regions, hygienic luxury makes for the creation of the simulated and superficial backdrop to consumerist and comfortable life constantly watched by cameras and intensive policing. This land of so many stories that make up 'the history of Brazil' is the stage where certain urban character extremisms are played out which can only be lived out in this place, at least in the proportion that they are manifested.

According to the Human Development Index (HDI) – a comparative international measure to classify the economic 'development' of a territory – in the city of Rio there is a co-existence of certain HDI's of some of the richest neighbourhoods of the world, which are equivalent to those of certain parts of Europe, while various favelas have the HDI equating to that of some of the poorest countries of the African continent. At the root of this is the fact that it was always a city where extreme wealth co-existed with extreme poverty, having been one of the major ports of human beings kidnapped from Africa and sold as slaves. Despite this, during 12 years it was the capital of the Portuguese empire and after the 'independence' was the capital of Brazil until the middle of the 20th century. If previously the contrasts surrounded the palaces of the nobility and the black quarters, today this difference is seen between the opulent wealthy neighbourhoods – a true Beverly Hills – and the numerous favelas.

¹ The ecosystem in which the city of Rio de Janeiro is situated is the Mata Atlântica (Atlantic Rainforest) that was previously the second major tropical forest in South America, covering all the coastal area of Brazil and reaching Argentina and Paraguay. Today, only 10% of it remains. However, it is still one of the ecosystems of most biodiversity on the planet.

The racial question is inherently connected with the history of Rio de Janeiro. If today there exists a policy of barbarity besieging this city, surely it is because it is a direct descendant of the slave regime. This fact was pivotal in the creation of an autonomous political power and of the actual constitution of the Brazilian State. With the arrival of the Portuguese royal family in 1808, the Rio police was founded to edify a new public order that sought to confront an enslaved population in the street, terrorizing black and poor people with physical punishment in public as well as physical elimination, while at the same time fighting the resistance that was occurring in different ways, of both a political and cultural nature, organized or not. From the rebel escapades and consequent formations of quilombos – black activist communities² – to capoeira, a fighting technique developed in the streets and an inseparable tool of the organized black rebels who fought organized revolts during the length of this period. The favela is the daughter and niece of this resistance, birthplace of these wonderful afro-descendant cultural manifestations which created a people that never separated the fight from their iridescent smiles.

The origin of the favelas in Rio de Janeiro emanates from the middle of the 19th century, when with the end of slavery one part of the liberated moved to the federal capital, settling informally in areas that came to be known as favelas. The first of these places to be named a favela was the Morro de Providência ('Providence Hill') located next to the port zone in the centre of Rio, occupied in 1897 by black soldiers of the Brazilian army, that were returning from the War of Canudos and had stopped receiving their wage; without financial means, they went on to live on the hill in temporary barracks. The term favela comes from the Canudos camp that was situated in Bahia and was constructed on a hill that had many plants of a species popularly known as Favela or Faveleiro. This plant was also found on the Morro de Providência, which had led to it being originally called Morro da Favela ('Favela Hill'). With time, the term started to be used as a way of designating areas adapted for popular residence. The favela, within the urban point of view, is a descendant of the slave quarters (senzalas), demonstrating one of the major exponents of acute segregationism, of isolation, the human waste in a regime that had substituted slave-work for salaried slavery as the times had changed and there was a need for different forms of exploitation.

On the other hand, a favela is an exponent of the black cultural resistance that continued developing around cultural manifestations like samba, capoeira and the afro-descendant religiosities (like candomblé and umbanda), apart from being the natural habitat of a genuine underground movement. Therefore the Rio police and the modern slavemaster only substituted the whip for the rifle. If before the devaluation of life was taken from the status of the enslaved black, today it is reflected in the personality of the favela-dweller.

² Quilombos are the autonomous zones that are prevalent in many parts of the Brazilian territory, comprised of descendants of those Africans enslaved centuries ago. They were founded as villages created by blacks who escaped or rebelled, normally away from the cities, but also in the urban peripheries, creating an economy of subsistence but always maintaining a constant conflict and attack of the slave regime. The first and the most expressive was the Palmares, situated in Serra da Barriga in Alagoas, which lasted more than one hundred years between the 16th and 17th centuries. Many of those that still exist have their legitimacy over their inheritance of these lands recognized in writings which attest to the battles fought by these peoples. Some of the most recent re-urbanization attempts are based on a declaration of intolerance of these historically-proven facts, and literally betray quilombo communities, throwing them off their lands without any consideration for these writings and the history of quilombo resistance.

The present reality

What is currently being lived is a civil war, at a level of armed urban conflict unknown in Latin America, camouflaged as 'war against drug-trafficking'. The favelas have always been controlled by drug-traffickers or by local militias³ and more recently by the police, who use an extensive arsenal to defend their territory. Every day, bullets are dispensed more commonly than rice and beans (the staple Brazilian diet).

Without doubt Rio's economy revolves around tourism, and of course the city is one of the world's tourist hotspots. The 'marvelous city' is comprised of wonders for all who have the economic conditions to consume them, property speculation and beautification being necessary to maintain the atmosphere of the city comfortable for these people. This situation makes for a constant and increasing criminalization of poverty that occurs on different fronts and in different spheres in the present context, disguised as urban reform and improvements in the population's quality of life. But, effectively, they are the paths towards megalomaniac economic projects carried out by a series of public-private partnerships.

The social reality of Rio de Janeiro is each time more explicitly woven around the lines of different state administrative strategies, drawn somewhere between dictatorship and democracy. In the end, torture, physical elimination and incarceration (that gained public visibility in the military dictatorship for reaching sectors of the middle class) for the black, poor and favela-dweller were always a reality. In a period of such acclaimed democracy these are facts that everyday become more and more present. From the new administrative policy of the state (in the hands of Sérgio Cabral Filho since 2006) and the prefecture of the city (in the hands of Eduardo Paes since 2009), distinct tactics have been used, initiatives that appear in different forms:

1. the war against informal street-workers, that faced with this reality take one of the main survival alternatives available to those who are without money,
2. the retaking of control of areas previously dominated by drug-trafficking,
3. the urban development programmes, like the revitalization of the environs of the port,
4. the overwhelming presence of drugs like crack, or more recently OXI, that reinforce population control.

In addition to all these elements the actual extermination of civilians at the hands of the police, justified as collateral damage in a supposed war against drug-trafficking, many times using the so-called Autos de Resistência – where police assassinations are regarded as the victims' fault⁴ – to camouflage summary executions. What exists in practice is a silent genocide that far from reaching the supposed groups it is targeting – that in this case would be the druglords – affects above all every layer of the social strata caught up in the warzone. The number of deaths at the hands of police forces in Rio de Janeiro is extremely high, taking recent years as a sample. In 2008 there were 611 deaths, in 2009 there were 495, in 2010 there were 545 – figures that more

³ These militias are groups of paramilitaries, formed by police officers, ex-cops, firefighters, among others, who took clandestine control of various favelas.

⁴ Judicially, the 'Records of Resistance' would be the justification for the taking of violent action on the part of the police. Any execution would become a consequence of offensive resistance on the part of 'the criminal'.

or less equate to those killed by the rains that hit the Região Serrana, the mountainous region above the city of Rio de Janeiro, in January 2011, considered to be the 'biggest natural disaster' in Brazilian history.

With sinister songs that glorify war being part of their training, the BOPE ('Special Police Operations Battalion') does not shed any doubt as to its mission from the songs they sing: "Man in black/ what is your mission?/ It's to invade the favela/ leave bodies on the floor", or even: "I will infiltrate a favela/ with a rifle in my hand/ I will fight the enemy/ provoke destruction." The BOPE was conceived and trained to be a war-machine and exterminate favela-dwellers. The fact that they have a skull as their symbol is not purely symbolism.

One of the pilot projects of the current state government, part of the logic of restructuring and beautification of the city, are the Machiavellian-named UPPs ('Police Pacification Units'). These are police units that through permanent invasion are taking back the control of the communities that previously were under control of druglords.

Coincidentally or not, all these communities are favelas in areas of elevated economic interest like the southern zone and the affable areas of the northern zone as well as other areas of touristic/ economic interests.⁵ The UPPs arise as the top of the 'war' on drugs, and mark a moment in which the State is finally giving a more effective and energetic answer to the trafficking. The permanent presence of the police in the community means it can act with total impunity (a type of undeclared state of exception), acting unashamedly through unconstitutionality, constantly invading homes and terrorizing dwellers. The irony is that in no community where UPP agents currently operate was drug-trafficking ended; much to the contrary, they continue their trade unabated, where the only change is that the traffickers boast less weapons and increase their bribes to the police, carrying on their business as always.

The UPP is deeply connected with the process of socio-economically cleaning up neighbourhoods that is being carried out in every part of Rio de Janeiro, acting as precursors to an innovative process of gentrification⁶ of favelized areas. As part of their intervention, clandestine connections to electric and water supply have been cut, causing a drastic increase in the cost of everyday life which most affects the poorest people, and thus enforcing a sort of gradual eviction process.

In the south, shanties are already being sold and hired out at incredibly high prices, at the same time that basic sanitation processes start being introduced for the first time. But for whom exactly are these 'improvements'? Logically, they are destined for the new luxurious lodgings

⁵ Specific projects have arisen to build cable cars in communities like that of the Alemão complex, among other favelas, so that tourists can take the opportunity to have a panoramic view of the region.

⁶ Gentrification or 'nobilization' (from the English word gentry, roughly explained in Portuguese as term close to 'nobleness'): urbanistic intervention that acts through the forceful re-occupation of city areas based on 'urban ennoblement' plans, which displace the poorest so that wealthier middle-class people can move in. Another term often used in Portuguese, especially by resistance movements in relation to such operations, is 'hygienization' for sanitization/cleansing, which brings to light the classist aspect of the social 'cleanup' involved in these measures. These urban planning policies come accompanied by various other social measures that assure their efficiency, often turning into a declared war against the poor people who previously inhabited those areas, a veritably proclaimed massacre. Some city planners have used the ambiguous and hazardous term 'regeneration', which, apart from its classist connotations, in some cities assumes an evidently racist character. Gentrification programmes are the same as those which the country's governments and their private partnerships call 'revitalization' and within Rio de Janeiro are most identified with the truculent 'Shock of Order' process.

(and other variations of private business) and the new visitors to the area: tourists and middle class individuals.

These operations of mass slaughter, organized by the State and its private partnerships, are only entirely possible after the insertion within communities of the left arm of these interventions: the NGOs. As part of the process of containing damages, the non-governmental institutions are put in charge of infiltrating favelas in the guise of social development funding projects. The presence of these organizations in the communities is, in turn, marked by ambiguity. While these institutions 'provide' for socio-cultural development locally, their interference is relied upon its placative character from the outset; they make profits possible through tax exemptions and transnational investments, that often make themselves sustainable, in addition to their activities in the mapping and registering of residents, inducing them to assume also the role of informers in the community. There are similar cases involving the most recent social programmes of the federal government next to urban areas classified as 'areas of risk' (that are affected by the pilot programme called Fica Vivo, 'Staying Alive').

It is in this general scenery of retaliations and a markedly military invasion that the Choque de Ordem ('Shock of Order' or 'Order Blitz') fits, an initiative created from the beginning of 2009 by the current prefect Eduardo Paes, organized by the Secretariat of Public Security, bringing together different bodies such as the municipal guard, both the civil and the military police, the waste collection agency Comlurb and the Secretariat of Housing to unleash coordinated actions intended for the 'reinstatement of order in the city'. The operation focuses especially on tackling street vendors (camelôs), forcibly removing the homeless – either crack addicts, or nonusers – and carrying out the innumerable evictions of homes considered illegal or lacking the correct paperwork, as is the case of urban squats or of favelas or parts of favelas that are being removed for being in the way of these reforms.

The Porto Maravilha ('Marvelous Port') project

The main re-urbanization project in the city of Rio de Janeiro, without doubt, is the revitalization of the port district, officially called Porto Maravilha, the major public-private initiative of Brazil, in a partnership between municipal, state and federal governments as well as private initiatives. All the surroundings of the port were privatized, passing under the administrative responsibility of three private companies for the next 15 years. In the words of the prefect himself:

"What is the dream of every private company? To register large profits, constantly during the length of time and without risk. The Prefecture of Rio is making this dream a reality for three of them: OAS, Odebrecht and Carioca Engenharia, who jointly form the consortium tasked to run the Marvelous Port. The ingenious private-public partnership (PPP) cannot be seen in any other way: a passing of public money to three large private contractors, with no apparent benefit for the State."

The project covers an area of 5 million square metres, having as its limits the Presidente Vargas, Rodrigues Alves, Rio Branco and Francisco Bicalho avenues. It crosses four neighbourhoods: Centro, Santo Cristo, Saúde and Gamboa. The investments include the establishment and implantation of museums, the construction of luxurious moorings for cruise-liners, of middle-class dwellings and of the largest aquarium in Latin America, in addition to new headquarters of banks, including the Central Bank of Brazil (Banco Central do Brasil). The first phase of construction

works was started in 2009 and is ongoing, with basic implementations like the installation of new water/wastewater networks and the re-urbanization of the Morro da Conceição, while the second phase was to be initiated in 2011, with a host of more ambitious forays, such as the demolition of the Perimetral viaduct located over the Rodrigues Alves avenue. The aim is to conclude all these projects by the year 2015.

In the background of the said project a series of repressive undertakings and violations of the dignity of people is being committed from one day to the next. For many years the port district was one of the most neglected and gray zones of Rio de Janeiro, scene to nearly four centuries of stories of bloodshed and of political and cultural resistance, often a refuge and alternative for those who found in squatting idle buildings a practical way of obtaining a home. Countless urban squats have now been evicted, along with houses on Providência, to make way for the construction of a cable car.

The favela of Providência has its own UPP squad since April 2010, which guarantees the ‘security’ for the continuation of such projects. Other than all this, mysterious fires have hit squats, entire communities – like that of Rato Molhado (‘Wet Rat’) in the north – and casual businesses (on April 26th, 2010, one of probably the biggest of these fires consumed the street-vending bazaar at Central do Brasil, Rio’s main railway station). It is notable that this popular market was located very close to the headquarters of the Rio de Janeiro State Military Fire Brigade; despite this, rescue took more than an hour to arrive. It isn’t a magical coincidence that the Prefecture already had planned to ‘revitalize’ the place.

In practice this project is nothing more than one of the pivots of the processes of beautification that is taking over the city, and makes part of the preparation for the large-scale events that are to come – the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics. Like all the cleansing operations, it constitutes a taking over by the wealthier classes of an area previously occupied by lower income strata.

It is not possible to know for certain what types of ailments will remain as the legacy of such atrocious and short-sighted ventures. But it is indeed possible to forecast some of the problems that could be faced, truisms when seen by any minimally observant eye. The most disturbing questions are being quelled by the ‘promising’ years dreamt of by the blind faith in the mega-events of 2014 and 2016, all cloaked in a mire of ignorance, fear and tourism-centeredness. Lightheadedness is being soothed by the nonsensical fanaticism of an increasingly publicized sportsmanship, entrusted to a wave of warmongering marketing that declares open extermination as the order of the day so as to satisfy the stock market goals embodied by civil construction and real estate speculation. In a not too distant future, after the stupefying effect of the games has passed, what will be inherited are questions badly resolved on purpose, backlogs left behind by negligence, which only a declared social war can then fulfill.

Until then and as of now, we already assume a position: our refusal is unyielding – the future is already now.

The Flor do Asfalto (‘Flower of the Asphalt’) squat

“Negligibles wander from one port to another. In front of heavy machinery, they observe with certain disgust the many eyes of a future left for later. Rumours of collapse, days of war... minutes of passions dug from the underground, from the

islands and streets. There is the pier of the port, but also hallucinated ports./ In the chaos of the port, in washed-out black cloth, a pirate flag waves, agitated by the tidal winds and the velocity of machines... and it is known that it's there where the renegades are roaming. From port to port, they 'spit out cigarette smoke' – there may be more to get done with one's own phlegm than with any civilized morality.”

(Casa Aberta collective ...*infirm pirates say nothing...*)

Originating from the initiative of different people from the libertarian milieu, Flor do Asfalto on Rodrigues Alves avenue was squatted on October 17th, 2006, having as its goal, apart from providing a collective living space, to give a creative political and countercultural ground. From then on, various initiatives and projects started to blossom in that place, like the organization of a library, art and serigraphy workshops, a herbarium, among different practices aimed at promoting a way of living more sustainable and in greater harmony with the Earth, with the maintenance of vegetable patches and an agroforestry system. In almost five years, there have been many initiatives and activities developed in Flor, from workshops and discussions, to parties and live band performances. Flor do Asfalto has publicly assumed a position of conflict against the existing reality, against its relations of Power and oppressive policies, bringing at least two perspectives to the fore: the need of those who have been mobilizing within the squat to retake life itself, and the war experienced in each and every instance of the existence.

The different ruptures and alternatives to such a world are enacted not just as alternatives in themselves but as confrontation, intervention in the reality, a radical positioning in the midst of the eye of a hurricane. Currently (early September 2011), the squat has its days numbered because it is situated exactly in the zone where the next phase of works will be carried out as part of the Porto Maravilha project. Flor is one of the next targets of assaults that precede the construction works. To maintain our resolve in the rejection of the existence of the State and its repressive apparatuses, which can be illustrated in the police, we do not consider the possibility of seeking a dialogue or agreement. Even though, on some occasions, we flirted with the idea, we always kept in mind that the game of laws is a key part of the enemy's game of which we do not want to play.

Mobilizing oneself, and not falling into inertia, has been the strategy used to counteract this present moment. It is in that sense that communiqués have emanated from inside this okupa, which make the position of its squatters explicit, seeking to create ties of solidarity that scream and echo beyond the imaginary lines that demarcate the city of Rio de Janeiro, as these same ties are undoubtedly, in moments like this, the largest arsenal that oppressed rebels can come up with.

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This 2011 text emerged from a collective reflection between individuals that worked around the anarchist squat Flor do Asfalto (by now evicted) that was fighting the latest wave of gentrification and intensifying repression in Rio de Janeiro. It also refers to the operation Shock of Order as well as the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympics in Brazil.

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