

WORLDS SET APART

By Teresa Caldeira

Teresa Caldeira defines the inequalities, fear, and transgressions which determine the social and spatial configurations of urban life in São Paulo.

One of the most iconic views of contemporary São Paulo, commonly used in international publications dealing with the city, is a picture in Morumbi showing the favela Paraisópolis on one side of a wall and a luxury building with tennis courts and one swimming pool per balcony on the other. However, the scholarly literature on the city and several of its main instruments of urban policy insist on another image: one that contrasts a rich and well-equipped centre with a poor and precarious periphery. According to this view, the city is made not only of opposed social and spatial worlds but also of clear distances between them. Since these imaginaries are contradictory – one pointing to the obscene neighbouring of poverty and wealth and another to a great distance between them – can both represent the city? If so, how well?

Undoubtedly, São Paulo has always been a city marked by sharp social inequalities. However, in the last few decades, the multiple meanings of inequality, the quality of urban space, and the distribution of social groups across the city have changed considerably. The peripheries have improved and some of the physical inequalities between spaces have been reduced as the peripheries have improved. Yet the city that no longer believes in progress – as it did during the second half of the twentieth century and where violence and fear came to occupy the central stage in citizen's lives – is now a city in which the markers setting social worlds apart are carefully and emphatically drawn. It is also a city in which the public space abandoned by most is reinvented as space of contestation inscribed on its walls.

São Paulo is a complex city that will not be captured by simplistic dual models: neither of the proximity nor of

the distance of its opposed social groups. Together, both pictures represent the city. In isolation, neither can capture the pattern of spatial and social inequality that structures the metropolis today. These images are the result of two historical processes that have now coalesced and their material expressions are superimposed in the spaces of the city. The view of the rich centre versus the poor periphery corresponds with the pattern of urbanisation consolidated around the 1940s that dominated the city up to the 1980s. During this period, São Paulo's urbanised area expanded dramatically due to the spread of auto-construction. Workers moved to the city by the millions and settled in non-urbanised areas on the outskirts. They bought cheap lots of land in areas without infrastructure and spent decades of savings and family work to build and improve their dream houses. In São Paulo, as elsewhere in Brazil and in the developing world, workers have always understood that illegality and precariousness are the conditions under which they become property owners and inhabit the modern city. The middle and upper classes remained in the centre and benefited from good infrastructure and services, and regularised and subsidised access to land. Thus, metropolitan regions have been marked by a dichotomy between the 'legal city', the centre inhabited by the upper classes, and the precarious peripheries.

However, since the 1970s this neat separation started to be transformed by processes affecting both the centre and the periphery. One of the main sources was the organisation of social movements by residents of the peripheries. These urban activists, a majority of them women, were new property owners who realised that

political organisation was the only way to force city authorities to extend urban infrastructure and services to their neighbourhoods. These social movements contributed significantly to the democratisation process and a new concept of citizenship. They also provoked a significant transformation in the urban environment of the peripheries. The state administrators responded to their demands and the city of São Paulo, among many others in Brazil, borrowed heavily to invest in urban infrastructure. As a consequence, the peripheries substantially improved road access, as well as sewage, sanitation, and electricity. These improvements sharply reduced infant mortality rates. As a result many neighbourhoods in the peripheries that began as 'bush' just a few decades ago have been completely urbanised. Although the urban social movements started to diminish in the 1990s, São Paulo remains highly organised. NGOs and associations of all forms, from religious to artistic – not to mention criminal – are everywhere. These heterogeneous associations signify the consolidation of democracy and the civic engagement of citizens.

A second process that transformed the centre-periphery pattern started in the centre. Beginning in the 1970s, wealth steadily moved away. On the one hand, a new business pole was formed in the south-western zone of the city along the Pinheiros River which today concentrates high-end office complexes, shopping malls, media headquarters, hotels, and new cultural centres. On the other, some of the middle and upper classes began to retreat from the centre and its public space. Fear of violent crime – which grew from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s – was their main justification for migration by the hundreds of thousands. They built fortified enclaves for home, leisure, and work in areas where only the poor had lived before and from where they were not entirely expelled, as in the case of Paraisópolis. Thus, the dramatic proximity of wealth and poverty is a recent phenomenon caused by the voluntary displacement of the upper classes.

Although the image of the favela side-by-side with luxury apartments outside of the centre captures a recent configuration of social inequality in São Paulo, it misses important factors. Favelas are not the type of housing in which the majority of São Paulo's poor live, and the heterogeneous peripheries cannot be described by the

term favela. What distinguishes them is home ownership. Although there are many conditions of illegality and irregularity, the majority have bought the land on which they built their houses and have claims to ownership. Favela residents also own their homes, but not the land, which has typically been invaded. Moreover, the increase in homeownership in the municipality of São Paulo from 19 per cent in 1920 to 69 per cent in 2000 is due to high rates in the peripheries rather than in the central wealthy districts. In many of the poorest neighbourhoods, it is more than 80 per cent. Approximately 10 per cent of São Paulo's population lives in favelas, while Rio de Janeiro and a few other Brazilian cities have an exceptionally high percentage of favela residents. Yet, if the view of the centre distant from the periphery misses the new developments that have brought people from radically different social conditions to live side by side, the picture that features this proximity misses the complexity of the peripheries and their significant improvement.

Increased violent crime and fear have also provoked dramatic changes in the space and quality of everyday life across the city since the mid-1980s. The circulation of fear and discourses about violence have created the idiom under which polarised representations proliferate and dualistic and simplistic representations of inequality and are framed.

Violent crime increased substantially from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s. With an overall annual murder rate of more than 60 per 100,000 people in the late 1990s, São Paulo became one of the most violent cities in the world. However, violence is distributed unevenly. Many of the neighbourhoods in the peripheries had a murder rate of more than 110 per 100,000 people, compared to less than fifteen in the city's central districts. The main victims of murder are young men, especially black. Moreover, most of the outrageously high number of cases of police abuse and killings happen in the peripheries. In the 2000s, violent crime rates decreased from 57.3 per 100,000 people in 2000 to 12.1 in 2007, which includes decreases in the peripheries. But it is not yet clear what this change will generate in terms of representation as the city still seems to operate under the stereotypical mode of the talk of crime.

Conversations about crime have been common since the 1980s. Amid the chaotic feelings associated with the spread of random violence people talk. Contrary to the experience of crime, which disrupts meaning and disorders the world, the talk of crime symbolically reorders it by trying to re-establish a static picture of the world which is expressed in simplistic terms and clear-cut oppositional categories, the most important of which are good and evil. Such reductions and caricatures are central mechanisms associated with the talk of crime. Like other everyday practices dealing with violence, crime stories try to recreate a stable map for a world that has been shaken. These narratives impose partitions, build up walls, establish distances, segregate, impose prohibitions, and restrict movements. In short, they simplify and enclose the world, elaborating prejudices and eliminating ambiguities.

Fear and the talk of crime also organise the urban landscape and public space, generating new forms of spatial segregation and social discrimination. Their most emblematic form is the fortified enclave. These are privatised, enclosed, and monitored spaces for residence, consumption, leisure, and work structured by the discourse of security. They can be shopping malls, office complexes, residential gated communities, and edge cities. They depend on private guards and high-tech security for protection and for enforcing exclusionary practices that guarantee their social exclusivity. They reproduce inequality both as a value and as a social fact. They treat what is enclosed and private as a form of distinction. As this logic becomes dominant, it spreads throughout the city. Walls are now everywhere, even in the most remote areas of the peripheries, not only to protect from crime, but also to distinguish neighbours from each other and express claims of social belonging.

It is in this context of simplifications and stereotypical interpretations anchored in the fear of crime that the heterogeneous peripheries of São Paulo started to be called favelas, a process that obscures their significant urban and social improvements. The tendency to homogenise the conditions and spaces of poverty and to identify them with their worst configurations is now widespread. It is found in several recent Brazilian films that make poverty and favela, blackness and violent crime coincide. The iconic example is *City of God*. It is

also the procedure Mike Davis uses in *Planet of Slums* to reduce the most diverse urban housing conditions of the poor worldwide to a single symbol of the worst: the slum.

This tendency is also reproduced by residents of the periphery themselves. In important ways, São Paulo's rap music elaborates a dichotomy between there and here and the denunciation of the inequality that exists between them. Rap articulates the experience of young men in contemporary peripheries growing up in a context of high violence and few chances for inclusion in the formal markets. Hip-hop wants to save their lives and contain violence. By portraying the conditions of the poor in the peripheries, and critically incorporating the prejudices usually voiced against their young and black residents, rappers articulate a powerful social critique. They denounce racism, express an explicit class antagonism, and create a style of confrontation that leaves very little space for tolerance and negotiation. Their raps establish a non-bridgeable and non-negotiable distance between rich and poor, white and black, the centre and the periphery, and articulate a position of enclosure. They think of the periphery as a world apart, something similar to the American ghetto, an imaginary that has never been used before in Brazil in relation to the peripheries, whose residents have always considered themselves unprivileged but nevertheless an integral part of the whole city. As one of the most famous rap groups, the Racionais MC's, put it in the rap 'Da Ponte pra cá' ('On this side of the bridge'):

in the party with us you don't go
We here, you there; each one in his place
Did you get it?
If life is like this, am I to blame?
The world is different on this side of the bridge.

As hip-hop followers reflect on the conditions of life on the outskirts of the city, they transform the quite diverse peripheries into a symbol: a periferia. As this new symbol, the periphery is homogenised to represent the worst social inequalities and violence. This transformed space of despair contrasts sharply with the image of improvement and mobility that dominated its representation from the 1940s to the 1990s. It is also sometimes called favela, not to describe the peripheries

but to refer to its poor conditions which are re-signified to represent and denounce poverty in general.

The construction of clear and non-negotiable social separations, the circulation of imaginaries despair, the construction of left-over spaces, and the use of stereotypical symbols to represent opposed social worlds is nowadays found on both sides of Brazilian society. Rappers' construction of self-enclosure is paralleled by upper-class practices of enclosure. Dichotomisation, simplification, and intolerance structure the imaginaries on both sides.

Fear, the talk of crime, and the adoption of walls and separations all transform the character of public space. Privatisation, enclosures, policing of boundaries and distancing devices create a fragmented public space in which inequality is an organising value. Even so, this left-over public space has not remained empty or unmarked. In São Paulo, in addition to walls and fences, graffiti and pixações proliferate on almost every street. These public inscriptions are usurpations that recreate a public domain in a city privatised by walls. Graffiti and pixação reclaim the streets, the façades, and the walls as spaces of communication and contestation instead of separation. Most graffiti artists and pixadores are young men from the peripheries. Through their inscriptions, they transgress, ignore boundaries, and appropriate spaces to mark their discrimination. Obviously, many interpret these appropriations as vandalism, crime, and proof of the deterioration of the public space.

Although both graffiti and pixação have similar roots, they constitute different types of intervention in public space. Graffiti is represented frequently on large public surfaces such as viaducts and tunnels. It is accepted as a type of public art authorised by the city, and occasionally sponsored by private institutions. Several graffiti artists from São Paulo are known internationally, and a few sell their art in private galleries for high prices.

But if graffiti can be assimilated into the imaginary of art and beauty, pixação has remained much more

transgressive. Pixação is equivalent to the American tagging, the writing of words, especially names, in public spaces. It is conceived by its practitioners as an anarchic intervention and as a radical urban sport, an urban alpinism. Pixadores inscribe the most impossible of spaces and are never sponsored by City Hall. Instead, they are targets of police harassment and the general population's disdain, who think that they deteriorate and deface, not improve, public space. For pixadores, though, their intervention signals the character of a public with few other forms of belonging. With pixação and graffiti, those who have been kept outside of the dominant cultural systems master writing and painting in the same way that rappers master rhyming. They invent new styles, spreading signs of their transgressions and powerfully transforming the character of public space.

Together, walls, fences, fortified enclaves, raps, graffiti, and pixações configure public space with unmistakable signs of social inequality and social tension. When the city was growing and violence was not an issue, the imagination that dominated the city was one of social mobility, improvement, expansion, and incorporation. Distances embodied spatially and socially were relatively unmarked symbolically. They had to remain fluid to anchor the strong belief in social mobility. Nowadays, inequalities and differences are prominently produced and are rarely left unmarked. Exaggerated and simplified, they mask processes of transformation and of improvement, and inevitably amplify the tension among social groups. Inequality has become naturalised, the taken-for-granted part of everyday life, the matter of social communication, even while it is denounced by unexpected interventions. Therefore, it is the tense and multi-layered production and contestation of inequality that we should look at to capture both the city's predicament and its vitality.

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