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The Brazilian City and the Negation of the Other[1]

Historically, cities have not been equally friendly and accommodating to everybody. Indeed, they were born from the identification and consolidation of a group of "equals" who shared the aim of protecting their own interests and defending themselves from the encroachments of the "other". In the classical Greek city examples of this were strangers and prisoners of war. In the medieval European city the sick, such as lepers, and the jobless were those branded "undesirable" (Le Goff 1997). Presently, Arabs and black Africans, in Western Europe, and Latino immigrants, in the United States, are some examples of those who are frequently considered the others. Despite the extensive contributions of the English-speaking scientific community to the understanding of these classification and differentiation processes (e.g. Jenkins 2000), scholars have overlooked the reproduction of this discrimination in the so-called "global south". In this short article I will cover particular aspects of the Brazilian case and show how the negation of the other, here, is not limited to actions and discourse, but also materializes in urban forms dedicated to separating and rejecting undesirable persons.

In Brazil, those groups historically labelled as others often included indigenous people (in great part exterminated by European settlers), afro-Brazilians (enslaved for more than 300 years), nordestinos (north easterners who migrated mainly to the centre, south and southeast regions of the country), as well as disabled persons, the unemployed, homosexuals, homeless persons, prostitutes and drug users. Nonetheless, in the present period of neoliberal globalization, it is now mainly

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poverty – more than questions of race, creed, health or nationality – which defines the differentiation. The separation between "us" and "them" is more than anything a distinction between those who have and do not have the means to consume. The idea of being a citizen makes way for that of the consumer, as pointed out by Brazilian geographer Milton Santos (1987).

In his classic book Casa Grande e Senzala (1933), Gilberto Freyre, Brazilian sociologist, depicts the formation of Brazilian society through an analysis of its racial diversity and miscegenation. The title suggests how urban forms allow for differentiation: casa grande (big house) was the name used to designate the wealthy residence of sugar plantation owners (most common in the northeast of the country); senzala (slave quarters) refers to the precarious dwellings of black slaves. This image of two opposed but closely connected places illustrates how otherness can be seen as a spatial issue. Traces of such segregation can still be identified in Brazilian architecture today, as many houses and apartments still preserve extremely small maid's quarters and two separate entrances and elevators: one for the residents and another for the employees. These forms serve to delimit the "proper" spaces and circulation of personnel and to reinforce the status of the latter as others. Hence, not very different from the picture Freyre painted years before.

Architectures of exclusivity, however, are not only present in the interior of houses and buildings. In Brazil, large gated communities are being built as an answer to the desire for self-segregation (Melgaço 2002a). The main commercial appeal of these "fortified enclaves" (Caldeira 2001) stems from the sense of exclusivity they convey. Here, the ideal of happiness sold by real estate agents rests on the assumption that something is good when it can be enjoyed in an individual manner or, in the worst case, shared by a group of "equals." Many publicity campaigns, for example, emphasize the privilege of having exclusive green and leisure areas free of the uncomfortable presence of strangers. Instead of interacting with the other in a public sports centre, some people prefer having their own private football pitch, even if it remains, much of the time, underutilized because of the lack of players.

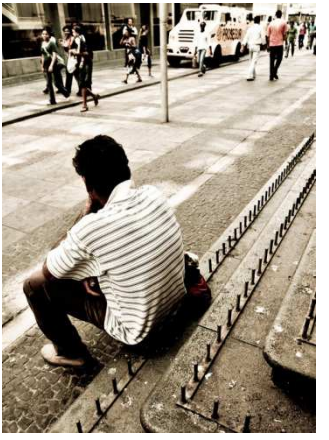
It is perhaps an exaggeration to say that Brazilian gated communities are totally intolerant of others. Some of these unwanted people can become desirable when they are useful for the performance of menial tasks, such as cleaning or gatekeeping. Without janitors, maids and porters, positions normally relegated to nordestinos, black and poor people in Brazil, the existence of gated communities in the way that they were projected would be impracticable. Nevertheless, the occurrence of a minor disturbance, such as petty theft, is often enough to return these temporarily

Picture 1. Deterrent architecture in front of a shop in downtown Campinas, 2009. Photo: Lucas Melgaço

desirable people back to the position of undesirable. When a crime is committed, the first suspects are normally those othered within the community, and rarely, for example, a young drug-addicted resident who steals from the community in order to maintain his or her habit.

The logic of the criminalization of the other can be also identified in the present strategies of urban monitoring through video surveillance in Brazil (Kanashiro 2008). The suspects flagged by these cameras generally conform to stereotypes of marginality; in other words, those with physical characteristics, ways of dressing or behaviours that are not adjusted to patterns considered "normal." Cameras can function, then, as instruments for "social sorting", as suggested by David Lyon (2003), and, consequently, for rejecting the undesirable. One example of many is the case of the cameras installed around São Paulo's Jockey Club with the goal of deterring prostitutes from operating in that area.

Surveillance technologies are also becoming more common in Brazilian schools, especially private schools (Melgaço 2002b). The flawed argument is sometimes made that they would help prevent bullying, which is a type of violence where students, either individually or in groups, promote humiliation and psychological violence against someone who does not fit normalized behavioural or aesthetic patterns. Bullying is predicated upon the non-acceptance of difference and upon the intolerance of the other. Yet, surveillance cameras, because they are instruments that tend to encourage the homogenization of behaviour, may thus have the unexpected effect of reinforcing intransigence toward the outcast.



Picture 2. Spikes installed at the stair of the Cathedral of Campinas, 2007. Photo: Tiago Macambira

The intolerance of the other is even more evident when we look at urban forms deliberately constructed to minimize the presence of the undesirable. Campinas, the Brazilian city I studied in detail during my PhD, shows several examples of the installation of sharp objects in order to impede people from sitting

or loitering in certain places. These deterrent architectures are very common in front of shops (picture 1), but they can also be found in more unusual spaces, such as the stairs of the Cathedral of Campinas (picture 2).

Even the city administration, which in principle should represent the public interest, has built its own examples of deterrent architecture. After reparations on a viaduct, sharp stones were installed on the ground underneath the road with the objective of repelling beggars and the homeless (picture 3). Obviously, these are policies that fight the presence of the poor instead of targeting the existence of poverty.

We see that there is a deliberate movement toward the adaptation of the city to the interest of the few. Beyond aesthetic concerns, these urban forms carry a deep symbolic meaning. When a municipality begins using its architecture to evict the poor, it reveals that its concerns are not collective but focus on a small wealthy class.

Finally, it is important to remember the clearest of spatial forms created to suppress and segregate the undesirable: the prison. Regardless of their location, prisons are normally populated by others, who, in most cases, are mainly the poor (Wacquant 2009). Historically, the intention of the Brazilian justice system has not been to rehabilitate, but to keep prisoners isolated for the longest possible duration and to perpetuate their otherness. Like the other deterrent architectures mentioned above, prisons do not solve the complex structural problems of society. They rather serve as a sort of landscape cleaner which removes the marginal from the view of the privileged.

Picture 3. Deterrent architectures installed underneath a road in Campinas, 2007. Photo: Tiago Macambira.

We may conclude that the present Brazilian city denies the other the condition of citizen. As was outlined, this intransigency is not restricted to acts but is concretized in repellent and segregating urban forms. Different from more homogeneous wealthy or more homogeneous poor cities around the world, the socioeconomic disparity of Brazilian cities leads to a particularly segregated environment: the wealthy and the poor are often separated

by nothing but a wall. With such segregating urban structures the city creates the conditions for both maintaining and reproducing intolerance. This, in the end, may lead to such a great disparity between the city of the few "equals" and the majority of the "other" that the latter could try to turn the tide.

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