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THE EMERGENCE OF SLUMS IN BRAZILIAN CITIES FROM A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This article aims to research the emergence of slums in Brazilian cities through the lens of geography, investigating the historical, social, and spatial factors that influenced their formation. This was an exploratory study, with a literature review, characterized as qualitative research, based on the writings of authors such as Valladares, Milton Santos, Raquel Rolnik, and Henri Lefebvre. The research seeks to show that the process of favelization is directly linked to exclusionary urbanization, the lack of public housing policies, and socio-spatial segregation. Although marked by poor infrastructure and social vulnerability, favelas are also spaces of resistance, cultural identity, and community organization. The geographical approach allows us to see favelas as an integral part of the urban territory, demonstrating the need for inclusive public policies. The article contributes to the debate on territorial justice and reinforces the role of geography in building more equitable cities.

Keywords: Socio-spatial segregation, urbanization, right to the city.

Introduction

According to studies by authors such as Milton Santos, since the 20th century, the creation of cities in Brazil has suffered from profound social and spatial inequalities. The emergence of favelas is one of the most visible phenomena of this exclusionary urbanization. In addition to generating precarious forms of housing, it has demonstrated clear evidence of the socio-spatial segregation present in large cities.

The study of favelas from a geographical perspective allows us to understand how

urban space is produced, appropriated, and transformed by different social groups, revealing the contradictions between economic growth and territorial justice. (VALLADARES, 2005).

This research aims to analyze the emergence of slums in Brazilian cities, highlighting the historical, social, and geographical factors that contributed to their formation.

The research will be conducted through a literature review, based on authors such as Milton Santos, Raquel Rolnik, and Henri Lefebvre, as well as statistical data from the IBGE and case studies in specific urban areas.

The importance of this topic lies in the need to understand the territorial dynamics that perpetuate social and spatial exclusion, as well as to reflect on public policies that can promote more just and inclusive urbanization.

According to Valladares (2005), the favela was historically constructed as a social and spatial category, marked by associations with poverty, informality, and urban marginality.

In this context cited by Valladares, we can see an opinion that suggests that favelas arose almost intentionally, creating a social and spatial category where the poor and marginalized by society can live, a place where people, unable to fit into the standards of society, are forced to live. Thus, because they are crowded together and often removed from the routine of urban life of the more *successful* e, they suffer all kinds of situations, ranging from difficulty in accessing public services to all kinds of prejudice. According to Santos

[...] Space is a set of systems of objects and actions, and it is in space that the contradictions of society are revealed. (SANTOS, 1996, p. 51).

Milton Santos defines space as an inseparable set of systems of objects and systems of actions

[...] Systems of objects: these are the material and technical elements that make up space, such as roads, buildings, cell phones, and electrical networks. Systems of actions: these are the social, economic, and political practices that give meaning and function to these objects, such as the use of the internet, urban transportation, consumption, and work. (SANTOS, 1996, p. 51).

Milton Santos states that social contradictions are revealed in space. This means that:

[...] Space is not neutral: it reflects inequalities, power struggles, exclusions, and privileges. In an unequal society, space will also be unevenly occupied and structured. For example, wealthy neighborhoods have quality infrastructure, while suburbs face a lack of basic services. This difference materializes social contradiction. (SANTOS, 1996, p. 51).

Milton Santos proposes a geography that not only observes, but also denounces and proposes paths toward a more just society.

Theoretical Framework

The study of favelas as an urban phenomenon requires a geographical approach that considers the production of space, socio-spatial segregation, and the power relations that shape the territory.

According to Milton Santos, geographical space is the result of human action on the environment, constantly transformed by social and economic practices. In this sense, favelas represent a form of space production marked by exclusion and resistance.

Milton Santos (1996) argues that urban space is the result of human actions on the territory, shaped by social, economic, and political relationships. For the author, the city is not just a physical set of buildings, but represents the inequalities and contradictions of the society that produces it.

The concept of urban space proposed by Milton Santos reveals a critical and deeply social approach to the city. For the author, space is not just a physical set of buildings, but rather the result of human actions on the territory, shaped by social, economic, and political relations. This perspective allows us to understand that cities are reflections of the inequalities and contradictions of the society that produces them. Thus, the urban configuration, with its well-structured central areas and deprived peripheries, highlights class conflicts, capital interests, and the systematic exclusion of segments of the population.

By recognizing space as a social product, Santos (1996) invites reflection on collective responsibility in building more just and inclusive cities.

Henri Lefebvre, in his work *The Right to the City*, argues that urban space should be appropriated by all citizens, not just by the interests of capital. Slums, although marginalized, are legitimate expressions of the struggle for housing and urban belonging.

[...] The right to the city cannot be conceived as a simple right to visit or return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a right to urban life, transformed, renewed. (LEFEBVRE, 1968, p. 100)

[...] The city is a work, a work of art, which must be appropriated by its inhabitants. (LEFEBVRE, 1968, p. 134)

[...] Urban space must be appropriated by all citizens, not just by the interests of capital. (LEFEBVRE, 1968, p. 135)

Henri Lefebvre inaugurates a profoundly transformative vision of the city: it is not just a physical place, but a social space that must be lived, recreated, and appropriated collectively. The “right to the city” is, for him, a right to active participation in the production of urban space—a right to life, creation, and transformation.

David Harvey, revisiting this concept, states that:

[...] The right to the city is much more than the individual freedom to access urban resources: it is the right to change ourselves by changing the city. (HARVEY, 2012, p. 23).

Harvey radicalizes the proposal by placing the debate in the context of capitalist accumulation. For him, modern urbanization is a mechanism for absorbing surplus capital, shaping cities to serve the interests of the market, not the people. Thus, the struggle for the right to the city becomes a struggle against the neoliberal logic that privatizes urban space and excludes the poorest.

Raquel Rolnik, a Brazilian urban planner and researcher, points out that the absence of public housing policies and the speculative logic of the real estate market contribute directly to the growth of informal occupations.

[...] The growth of slums is directly related to the absence of public housing policies and to an urbanization model that favors the interests of the real estate market. [...] Urban informality emerges as a response by the excluded population to the lack of access to formal urban space. (ROLNIK, 1997, p. 45).

This quote from Raquel Rolnik is a criticism of the exclusionary logic that drives urbanization in large Brazilian cities. It reveals that the growth of favelas is not the result of spontaneous “disorder.” It is a direct consequence of the state’s failure to guarantee the right to decent housing and

its prioritization of the interests of the real estate market.

Urban Geography, therefore, offers tools for understanding how favelas fit into the dynamics of cities, revealing the contradictions between formal urban planning and the reality experienced by millions of Brazilians. The analysis of the territory, landscape, and urban networks allows us to identify the factors that perpetuate inequality and point to paths for more inclusive urbanization.

History of the Emergence of Favelas

Favelas in Brazil emerged due to the absence of public policies to promote and finance affordable housing and the concentration of income among certain social classes. These factors, combined with the overvaluation of real estate in the city, caused by the law of supply and demand and real estate speculation, contributed to a significant percentage of the population being pushed to peripheral and difficult-to-access areas, because in these areas housing was cheaper, if not free. In other words, people who were unable to buy regulated real estate in the city invaded land and areas that were unsuitable for housing and built precarious houses so that they could have somewhere to live.

As geographer Milton Santos states, “the city is the place where citizenship is realized, but also where citizenship is denied.” This contradiction reveals how Brazilian urban space, while it should guarantee rights, ends up reproducing inequalities and marginalizing those who cannot access the formal housing market.

The period after the abolition of slavery in 1888 was very important. With the end of slavery, millions of black people were freed without any kind of support from the state, such as housing, employment, or social inclusion. Without access to land or the formal city, many began to occupy vacant lots or hillsides, giving rise to precarious forms of housing, which grew in number and formed large agglomerations that were henceforth called favelas.

According to Valladares (2005), the term “favela” was historically constructed as a social and spatial category associated with poverty and marginality, reinforcing stigmas that still persist in Brazilian society.

The term “favela” emerged in the late 19th century, after the War of Canudos (1896–1897). Soldiers who participated in the conflict were housed in Morro da Providência, in Rio de Janeiro, and began to call the place “Morro da Favela,” in reference to a plant common in the Canudos region. Over time, the name came to designate the informal settlements that were multiplying in the hills of Rio de Janeiro.

“The name of the hill,” explains the author, “was due to a plant common in the area, the favelas, ‘still anonymous to science—ignored by scholars, but well known to the tabaréus...’” (EUCLIDES CUNHA, 2002).

According to Rolnik (1997), the favela emerged as an alternative form of housing for those excluded from formal urban spaces, a direct consequence of the absence of public housing policies and social exclusion.

During the 20th century, rural exodus intensified with industrialization and the promise of better living conditions in cities. However, urban growth was disorderly and not accompanied by investments

in infrastructure and housing. The migrant population, without the resources to access the formal market, began to build their own homes in unplanned areas, often in environmentally hazardous locations.

Milton Santos (1996) argues that urban space is a product of social and economic relations, and that slums represent a form of territorial appropriation by populations excluded from official city planning.

Rapid urbanization, combined with real estate speculation and the absence of inclusive planning, consolidated the process of favelization as a structural characteristic of large Brazilian cities. Favelas became spaces of resistance, identity, and struggle for rights, but also of vulnerability and exclusion.

The Process of Favelization

The process of favelization is a direct result of the exclusionary urbanization that characterizes many Brazilian cities. It involves the informal occupation of urban areas by populations that have historically been marginalized by the state and the real estate market.

As Rolnik (1997) points out, this informality is not random, but a legitimate response to the absence of public housing policies, socioeconomic inequality, and the speculative logic that dominates urban planning.

With the rapid growth of cities, especially since the 1950s, millions of people have migrated from the countryside to urban centers in search of better living conditions. However, urban infrastructure has not kept pace with this population growth. Without access to formal housing, these po-

pulations began to occupy vacant lots, hillsides, and environmentally hazardous areas, giving rise to favelas.

Valladares (2005) observes that the favela was constructed as a social and spatial category associated with poverty, informality, and urban marginality, reinforcing stigmas that hinder its full integration into the city.

From a geographical point of view, favelization reveals the socio-spatial segregation of cities. Favelas are usually located in peripheral areas, far from economic centers, or in places that are difficult to access and vulnerable to natural disasters. This spatial distribution reinforces social exclusion, hindering access to basic services such as health, education, transportation, and sanitation. Milton Santos (1987) points out that the city is simultaneously the place of realization and denial of citizenship, highlighting the contradictions of Brazilian urban space.

According to a study by IPEA (2002), the growth of slums in Brazilian cities between 1980 and 2000 was more intense than overall population growth. The process of slum formation was concentrated in urban peripheries, revealing that cities with greater income inequality tend to have a higher number of slums.

In addition, the process of favelization is marked by the self-construction of housing, often without any technical assistance or planning. This practice, although precarious, demonstrates the capacity for organization and resistance of communities, which create networks of solidarity and their own forms of land management.

Urban Geography allows us to understand this process as an unequal production of space, where territory is disputed be-

tween private interests, public policies, and popular needs.

Slum formation, therefore, is not just a social problem, but a concrete expression of the contradictions of the current urban development model.

Characteristics of Favelas

In terms of their location, favelas generally develop in peripheral areas that are difficult to access, such as hillsides, riverbanks, and land that is not valued by the real estate market. This territorial occupation is directly linked to the absence of public housing policies and the socio-spatial segregation that pushes low-income populations out of urban centers.

Carolina Maria de Jesus, in her work *Quarto de Despejo* (The Garbage Room), portrays the favela as a space marked by scarcity, but also by solidarity and daily struggle. The author sensitively describes the reality of the residents, revealing that, even in the face of extreme poverty, there is dignity and resistance in the social relations established in these territories (JESUS, 1960).

Most favelas lack basic services such as sanitation, water supply, garbage collection, electricity, and public transportation. The informal nature of housing construction hinders access to these services, aggravating public health and quality of life problems.

Most of the houses are built by the residents themselves, without technical assistance or urban planning. This self-construction reveals the creativity and resilience of the communities, but also results in irregular constructions that are vulnerable to natural disasters, such as landslides and floods. Economic activity in the favelas is marked by informality.

Many residents work as freelancers, street vendors, or local service providers. This parallel economy is essential for the survival of families, but it also highlights their exclusion from the formal labor market.

Despite the difficulties, favelas are spaces rich in culture, identity, and resistance. Artistic expressions such as funk, rap, samba, and graffiti are expressions of life in these territories.

In addition, social movements and community organizations work to defend rights and improve living conditions. Favelas are often stigmatized by society and the media, which associate them with violence and crime. This distorted view contributes to the marginalization of residents and hinders the implementation of effective public policies.

Methodological Procedures

This work was based on bibliographic research, with the aim of understanding how favelas emerged in Brazilian cities, considering historical, social, and spatial aspects. To this end, ideas and reflections were gathered from authors who have dedicated themselves to studying the city and its inequalities, such as Carolina de Jesus, Milton Santos, Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Raquel Rolnik, and Valladares.

Each of these thinkers contributes a unique perspective: Milton Santos helps us to see urban space as the result of social relations; Lefebvre proposes that everyone has the right to live in and transform the city; Harvey deepens this debate by criticizing market logic in urban organization; Rolnik denounces the absence of public housing

policies; and Valladares analyzes how the term “favela” carries historical stigmas.

The sources used were sought on academic platforms such as Google Scholar, Capes Journals, and digital libraries. Throughout the text, direct and indirect citations were included to support the analyses and ensure that the content is well-founded. This characterizes the qualitative methodology.

This approach allows us to understand favelas not only as spaces of deprivation, but also as living territories, full of history, culture, and resistance. Above all, it reinforces the importance of thinking about fairer cities, where everyone has a voice and a place.

Final Considerations

Throughout this work, it has been possible to understand that the emergence of favelas in Brazil is not the result of chance or urban disorder, but rather a direct consequence of an exclusionary model of urbanization, marked by the absence of public housing policies and the speculative logic of the real estate market.

The city, as authors such as Milton Santos, Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Raquel Rolnik, and Valladares show us, is a social space fraught with contradictions where both the rights and denials of citizenship are revealed.

Favelas are territories of resistance, culture, and belonging. They are spaces that express the daily struggle of millions of Brazilians for housing, dignity, and inclusion. Recognizing this is essential to breaking with historical stigmas and building a more just and humane vision of the city.

Urban Geography, by offering tools to analyze the territory, landscape, and social

networks that make up urban space, contributes to broadening this view.

Rather than understanding the favela as a problem, it is necessary to see it as a legitimate part of the urban fabric and, above all, as a starting point for thinking about public policies that promote the right to the city for all.

Public policies must be designed in all parameters in such a way as to generate social inclusion at all levels. This means implementing policies that provide access to decent housing, security, basic sanitation, education, and health care.

With the emergence of favelas, these and other basic rights were suppressed for a large portion of the population, since these people live outside urban areas, where public resources are more easily accessible.

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