

RESISTING MODERNISM: FAVELA CULTURE, HETEROGENEITY, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN BRAZIL

Simon Yang



Brazil entered the twentieth century with the ambitious goal of establishing a newly modernized national identity, often articulated through decidedly modernist architecture. The country's leaders wished to eliminate what they considered "obsolete" elements of the nation's culture, taking a particularly hostile position towards vernacular or African and



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indigenous culture, considering it reflective of poverty and thus national weakness. The modernist transition proposed by the Brazilian state subscribed to a definition of progress in which the nation advanced through whitening its phenotype, as well as whitening the aesthetics of its major cities to mimic European cities rebuilt after World War II.

A constant target of modernization was the continued existence of Brazil's many favelas, informal settlements of low-income residents situated in the peripheries of cities. Even in the hostile environment of state modernization, however, many cultural forms developed in the favelas, and the unique environment of informal settlements led to highly productive forms of heterogeneity in which different cultures came together to make a new, distinctively Brazilian one. Ranging from music, art, and religion, the favelas have paradoxically become a cultural sphere essential to Brazilian national identity. In this way, the resilience and vibrancy of favelas have exposed the limitations, false premises, and prejudice of modernist endeavors.

Since the late 19th century, Rio de Janeiro has fostered many favelas in its mountainous terrains, the first of which was built by fugitive African slaves who had established homes on the hills outside the city otherwise known as *quilombos*. (Baena) A later favela, the Morro da Providencia, was colonized by a band of soldiers returning from the Canudos campaign in 1897. (Neate & Platt 10) The soldiers, who had been promised housing from the government, grew tired of waiting, and thus built a community of their own. Rio's favelas best express the divisions at the very heart of Brazil: "historical divisions between rich and poor, black and white, slave and slave-owner, and a native and African heritage juxtaposed with a European dream of modernity" (11). Continuous migration to Rio added to the growth of these informal settlements. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, the increase in migration from the neighboring states of Minas Gerais and São Paulo led to severe overcrowding in Rio's downtown, and by the early 20th century, 20 to 25% of the city's population lived in slums. (O'Hare & Barke)



Following the Proclamation of the Republic in 1889, national elites adopted “progress” and a “utopian future” as their central motifs, with the goal of emphasizing a dramatic rupture with the past and its perceived outdatedness, especially in cities. (Winterbottom 10) Still, the most important attempt to eliminate/replace favelas through this aspirational modernist revolution began under the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas’ Estado Novo in 1937. (Rio & Seimbieda 3) Under Vargas, modernism became the official vocabulary for government building projects and social reforms, and these programs flowed from societal elites and their narrow-minded vision of improving the nation. (3) The Estado Novo gave substantial authority to implement urban planning; as a result, multiple urban plans arose, with planning departments in each major Brazilian city. Significant international architects like Lucio Costa and Le Corbusier supervised the construction of modernist buildings such as the new Ministry of Education and Health in Rio de Janeiro. (4) Similarly, modernist architect Attilio Correa Lima designed Goiania, the new capital of the state of Goias, for a population of 50,000. (Rio & Seimbieda 3)

In 1930, the first fully Brazilian architectural event was organized in São Paulo by Gregori Warchavchik, who introduced São Paulo to modernism in 1928 with his house on Rua Santa Cruz. (Cohen 265) Warchavchik also collaborated with Lucio Costa in advancing Brazil’s modernist endeavors. (Rio & Seimbieda 3) The Brazilian Pavilion at the 1939 New York World’s Fair provided a glimpse into the world Brazil’s impressive buildings, and the appeal of the Brazilian forms “was in their fluency, elegance, and technical boldness” (6). The Ministry of Education and Health building became an iconic symbol of this style, and Brazil’s endeavor to modernize its cities and buildings hit its peak internationally during the 1940s and 1950s. (Cohen 314)



Vargas's political platform additionally included the financing and construction of lower-income workers' housing. (Rio & Seimbieda 7) The provision of housing for the lower classes was meant to increase the regime's legitimacy among workers and garner support for other social reforms. In Rio de Janeiro, which industrialized rapidly during the 30s to 50s, housing became a major concern as migrants flooded the city in search of jobs. During the 1940s, the government made ambitious plans for the Cidade dos Motores, a settlement designed to house 25,000 people around an airplane engine factory and a new steel plant in Volta Redonda. (Rio & Seimbieda) The plan was never actually realized, however, and thus failed to offer lower-income housing.

Despite the national modernist effort to eradicate informal settlements, the growth of such settlements only increased. A modernization program for the city served to displace many working-class residents and increase congestion in remaining city center tenements. Poor families who couldn't afford existing housing began to build their own houses. Migration contributed to about 60% of the overall population increase from 1920-40, (O'Hare & Barke 234) during which time favelas "overtook tenements as the main form of housing for the urban poor" (O'Hare & Barke 234). By the late 1940s, Estacio de Sa, Laranjeiras, Botafogo, and Copacabana had 32 squatter settlements.¹ The rising number of illegal settlements was glaringly inconsistent with the national focus on progress, since contrary to official goals of modernizing cities and eradicating backwardness, the influx of migrants led paradoxically to the conflicting increase in favelas.

Unfortunately, for many migrants coming to Rio de Janeiro, the Brazilian government also abruptly changed its capital from Rio to Brasília in 1960. Rio "suffered an identity crisis" during this transition, and the sensation of outdatedness became acute. (O'Hare & Barke 234)



By the mid-1970's, relative investment available in Rio tailed off, and the city couldn't keep pace with increasing population and demand for jobs. (225) In 1950, the favela population was 169,305 out of the 2.3 million total population of Rio. By the 1980s, the favela population reached 722,424 out of 5.1 million total population of Rio. (Gay 8)

Brazil's typical response to the growth of "shanty towns" was to eradicate them, destroying housing and lives for many without offering any meaningful alternatives. Rio established the Squatter Settlement Extinction Commission in 1947, while in the 1950's, institutions like the Popular Housing Department of the Federal District of Rio practiced favela eradication with efforts to displace favela residents from their homes and move them into poorly planned government communities. (O'Hare & Barke 234) With the help of funds from the U.S., 80 squatter settlements were compulsorily removed. (234) Over 26,000 shacks were destroyed, and 139,000 dwellers were displaced to poorly constructed units. (O'Hare & Barke 234) In addition to Vargas's failed Cidade dos Motores, Carlos Lacerda's administration moved 140,000 residents from their homes to public housing projects like the notorious Cidade de Deus. (Baena 34) Unfortunately, poor public planning and insufficient government investment meant that these public projects became "new favelas." In 1981, only 6% of 364 favelas drew their water from an officially installed system, and 32% relied almost exclusively on water from an officially installed system. (Gay 12) Only 14% of Rio's favelas reported that their communities were served by an extensive sewage system, and only 1% reported that they had access to an officially installed system. About 62% claimed there was no sewage collection in the favelas, and 48% responded that raw sewage flowed through the streets in open ditches. (Gay) During the 1980's, "changing routes of production and consumption also meant that Rio found itself as a transit point for cocaine destined for Europe" (Baena 35). The influx of drugs brought in money but also small arms traders in the favelas, initiating competition and violence



among gangs. By 1991, 2 million people, about 39% of Rio's inhabitants, lived in substandard housing. (O'Hare & Barke 225)

Nonetheless, even as favelas fostered drug trafficking and inequality, they simultaneously produced cultural excellence. Although funk is popular throughout Brazil, the favelas have created their own genre known as the *baile funk de briga*, and *funk proibido*. (Neate & Platt 50) These types of funk reflect social realities in favela, its lyrical content discussing the hardships and violence within the community. (50) The favela's unique interpretation of the genre demonstrates the singular form of social life and intimacy possible in the favela. For example, the establishment of AfroReggae, a non-profit organization that focuses on working in the favelas, offers a glimpse into the development of artistic culture within the favelas. AfroReggae, a group composed mostly of former *traficantes* from favelas, produces music and performs in the favelas. The group aims to recruit young residents in the favelas and give them a chance to work in a field other than the drug trade, using music as a primary alternative. (Neate & Platt 8)

The favelas have also greatly contributed in the development of samba, the nationally renowned Brazilian dance. Every favela has a samba school in which the residents practice the music and even perform in the famous carnivals. In 2012, when Rio's landscape was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site, Raquel Rolnik, the UN special rapporteur on adequate housing, declared Rio's favelas an integral part of that special designation. (Zimbalist 58) Ironically, though the growth of this vibrant culture and community has largely been the result of official state neglect and marginalization, favelas have become the cultural core of the Brazilian nation both at home and abroad.

As Caetano Veloso sings in his song *Fora da Ordem*, "It is as though Rio de Janeiro is continually and perpetually under construction and yet already somehow a ruin" (Winterbottom 5). Many of the public projects-turned-favelas are visible proof of the tragedy behind Brazilian



modernist ambitions. The malicious cycle of ambitious public planning projects and their subsequent demise continue to illustrate Brazil's failure in completely installing modernism—and particularly the government's tendency to abandon projects mid-way through completion. Approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of Rio's currently employed workforce resides in the favelas. (O'Hare & Barke 226) About 1 million squatters crowd into 600 separate favelas, and about 200,000 people are located in 85 irregular subdivisions without services. (226) In some favelas, the homicide rate reaches 100 per 1000 inhabitants, and dangerous trafficking remains the best option to earn a livelihood. (Baena 36) For example, according to Tota, a resident in the favela Vigarão Geral who spent three years in prison for trafficking, "although the money's 'okay' for factory work and it's not too hard to get a job, people have to wait every month to get a cheque, whereas in the drug industry, people can get their money on the spot, and earn five times as much as the factory revenue" (Neate & Platt 11). Similarly, Leida, a resident in the Rocinha favela, claims "you can't have a child because you're scared they'll get involved [in drug trafficking.]" (7) The substandard service extends to education and the care of children, and in Cidade de Deus, one housing project that was supposed to eradicate favelas, 50,000 residents have no secondary school. (21) According to Denise Doura, from the Brazilian office of the Ford Foundation, the main problem of Brazil is no education, since this lack of education means that children have a difficult time obtaining the skills for upward mobility.

Although the nation succeeded in developing its architecture and infrastructure for global events like the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics, other efforts to forget its past and destroy favelas in the name of becoming a modernist cultural hub have exposed the limitations, false premises, and prejudice of modernist endeavors. The deeply interconnected ideals of progress and modernism have led to the nation's failure to consider the personal implications for residents in its informal settlements, and the unrealistically strong desire for



modernization has caused the government only regard the informal settlers as numbers to be solved instead of the rich cultural heart of the nation.

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