

**‘GIVE THEM BREAD AND CIRCUSES’: MEGA-EVENTS AND URBAN EVICTIONS –
THE SUCCESSFUL CASE OF RESISTANCE OF NOVA SANTA MARTA, RS, BRAZIL**

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1. Introduction

When governments engage in strategic urban re-planning, they usually use the excuse that they are hosting mega events such as the World Cup and Olympic Games in order to conduct partial or complete restructurings of overpopulated cities and urban landscapes (so-called ‘revitalization projects’), thus helping visitors to attend these events. From this perspective, modernization can be seen as an inevitable step for a nation if it is to be considered a suitable candidate to host a worldwide event on this scale. However, the costs of modernization for local communities represent a contested factor in terms of human rights abuses, not only because of their mass displacement, but also because of the application of relevant legislation (policies of ‘cleansing’) that generally criminalizes the homeless or marginalized members of society, forced evictions being a common practice in the name of ‘development’. It is now known that approximately 720,000 people were forcibly removed from their homes in Seoul prior to the Olympic Games in 1988 and 1.5 million in Beijing before the 2008 games, while more recently (2010) over 170,000 people are finding themselves in constant threat of removal from *favelas* or shantytowns in Rio de Janeiro to allow infrastructure projects to be implemented for the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympic Games in 2016.

Forced evictions are a threat not only to the right to housing, but also to human integrity due to police violence during the removal and/or relocation of residents. Estimates suggest that internal displacement related to the World Cup in Brazil in areas outside the main centres of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo will include over 3,500 families in Curitiba, Pará (airport and train infrastructure), 15,000 families in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais (urban and environmental improvement), 1,400 families in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul (airport runway duplication), still uncounted numbers in Manaus, Amazonas (refurbishing of stadiums and the ‘Bus Rapid Transit’ [BRT] system) and so forth.

In the face of so many catastrophic incidents underlying these mega events, during my ethnographic investigations I examined the social, political and economic aspects of occupation in Nova Santa Marta (NSM), located in the western part of the city of Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. NSM is an untypical but plausible example of successful resistance involving community struggles and alliances against the Government's impositions and strategies aimed at evicting the seven *vilas* (Portuguese 'communities') that comprise NSM. NSM represents the biggest organized urban occupation in Latin America, being the very opposite of the forced evictions witnessed throughout the country as a result of the government's revitalization projects, which are aligned with private interests and involve much corruption.

During my field study in NSM, I visited families that had been pioneers in the process of occupation since 1991, which was fundamental in providing me with more vivid evidence of the difficulties experienced by these communities at that time, the strategies used in an organized occupation and the threats of removal. It was also possible to gather information about subsequent groups that joined NSM during the ongoing years of occupation, which was important in creating an agglomeration of seven *vilas* with a total population of 28,000 people as a unified block, namely NSM. The construction of an identity in the different communities, the collective thinking and planning among the *vilas*, the strong sense of leadership (each *vila* having its own community leader), participation in marches, coalitions with different social movements, the Ecclesiastical Church and protests in the Federal District of Brasilia (the capital of Brazil) all challenged the structural barriers and stigma created in the city of Santa Maria, which now recognizes 'Occupation NSM' as one of its constituent districts.

Having overcome the problem of eviction, the residents' main concern currently is the process of providing NSM residents with deeds transferring land from municipal to private ownership in order that residents can apply for the National Government Conditional Loan for Housing, called *Minha Casa Minha Vida*. In addition, the distant geographical location of NSM from the centre of Santa Maria, combined with a lack of support for it on the part of the government, still represents an obstacle to its social and economic development, despite all the achievements of the last few decades of social resistance in the area.

2. The largest territory in Latin America as the Landless Land

2.1. An overview of the historical process of land distribution in Brazil

The Brazilian Federal Constitution (1988, Law 11.124, 2005) states that the right to housing is a fundamental right of every citizen, based on guidelines that aim to promote the ‘social function of property’ (*Função Social da Propriedade*) and urban policies to cover housing issues for every city of 20,000 inhabitants or over. Similarly, according to the Federal Constitution (1988), land belonging to the Union, or state land for public use, must in its effect and priority be used for the implementation of social housing projects in cases of social interest and need (DANCPC 2012). Nevertheless, Brazil remains remarkable as one of the most unequal countries in the world in terms of land structures and land distribution, where one per cent of private landowners hold more than 45 per cent of total land. In fact, the problem of land distribution has been one of the longest standing causes of conflict in Brazil since colonial times. In this period, the optional transfer of royal (conquered) land from the king to his subjects formed the basis of unequal development in Brazil, where large areas of land were placed in the hands of a few people and groups (Silva 1981). Similarly, under the Code of *Sesmarias* (dating back to the fourteenth century), the non-inheritable reassignment of the Portuguese Crown’s patrimony in land to particular subjects was intentionally designed to promote the use of inhabited, unproductive lands for agricultural purposes and Christianization (Holston 2008). It was during this period that the country’s new ‘elite’ (private land-users and land-holders) developed a better understanding of land use and bureaucratic processes and created specific land regulations in their own interests. All this confronted the previous colonial structures of land use at the time, also increasing tensions between the country’s new elite and the Portuguese Crown, which ultimately influenced the subsequent process of independence (Lima 1988, in Holston 2008).

2.2. European immigrants: from rural to urban landless

Equally importantly, when international slavery came to an end in the 1840s, causing the Portuguese to recognize a new category of wage labourers in Brazil, the country experienced a new transition in which European immigrants replaced former African slaves as a cheaper labour force. Here, land and the labour supply accentuated interdependence and successive organization of land based on the economic usefulness of territories, so that the government offered incentives

(land grants with minimal restrictions) for immigrants to purchase land and create businesses (Holston 2008).

One principle of that period was the nation state's demarcation of private versus public or state lands, which was necessary to establish a class of landowners and ensure the creation of land registries, legal frameworks for the acquisition of private property, federal state jurisdiction and the redistribution of 'public' land to citizens, including immigrants and investors (Caldeira 2000). Needless to say, the newly implemented land legislation favoured the 'elite' and foreign immigrants in terms of land acquisition, while small-scale rural workers and former slaves remained unable to invest in private land ownership (ibid.).

Nonetheless, as technology and industrialization increased, so did the issue of immigrant land reform, once cheap labour to replace former slaves on coffee and sugarcane plantations was no longer an essential concern of the landowners. On this basis, the Brazilian government's strategy was to subsidize private companies to deal with immigrant issues, which then became a massive market, with companies receiving free public land to subdivide and sell to immigrants. However, in reality the monopoly in land of private companies, without the government's control, left the majority of immigrants as landless labourers having to work for rural landowners in conditions that greatly resembled previous periods of slavery. Moreover, once again land became a luxury and commodity for a few other collaborators with the new private strategy of land distribution (Holston 2008).

To escape their status, the new class of landless immigrants started to migrate to urban centres in search of better work opportunities, thus influencing a vast process of urban restructuring. Significantly, early census reports suggest that in the 1920s approximately 79% of properties in São Paulo were rented as opposed to privately owned. Conversely, nearly 80% of other national lands were classed as unproductive in the same year (Bonduki 1983, in Holston 2008). That said, an understanding of the historical roots of the problem regarding land distribution in Brazil is of fundamental importance in appreciating the current status of general agrarian chaos in which Brazil is enmeshed at present. In other words, and put simply, the basic structure of a monopoly of land by an elite in Brazil has been replicated over generations since colonial times, the only varying factor in this process being the title given to the 'elite' itself, whether the Portuguese Crown or private landowners and companies.

2.3. Internal Migration and the Reconfiguration of the Urban Context

To make matters worse, during President Vargas's administration (1930-1945) internal clashes between landowners and peasants influenced the elaboration of the labour laws (*Leis Trabalhistas*), which favoured urban workers by establishing a national minimum wage, social benefits and, in some cases, housing allowances (Lacerda 2003). Nevertheless, despite all these advantages, and bearing in mind that labour laws would exclude rural workers from such rights, internal migration to urban centres by rural workers increased during this period.

In fact, land issues in Brazil became aggravated, particularly from the 1960s, during the period of military dictatorship, when the country experienced the restructuring of agricultural practices through state subsidies and technical support for large landowners' capitalist means of production (Carter 2010). This increased even more the elite's privileges and manipulations of any activity related to agrarian reform in the country, which was also influenced by the national media due to the selective control of information and mainstream press publishing.

Nonetheless, after the country's gradual opening up to democratic governance in the 1980s, Brazil was confronted with the neo-liberal assumptions of globalization and free market concepts, in which international capital became a threat to the stability of the national economy. As Harvey (2005, in Kenna 2008: 400) stresses, globalization is 'an ideological construction, a convenient myth, which, in part, helps justify and legitimize the neo-liberal global project, that is, the creation of a global free market, and the consolidation of Anglo-American capitalism within the world's major economic regions'.

Similarly, during this period Brazil invested in massive agribusiness production, the privatization of state assets and so-called structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), or cuts in social expenditure, as an attempt to expand production lines and occupy a space in the international arena (Landertinger 2009). All this put together led to the increased concentration of resources in the hands of a few (the elite), leaving small farmers (peasants) unable to compete against large, subsidized companies and thus ultimately increasing the country's historical social inequality. It was estimated that approximately four million people left the rural areas and migrated to Brazil's main cities in a more recent wave of internal migration between 1995 and 1999 (Mark 2001, in Landertinger 2009).

With respect to urban migration, Hoselitz (1957, in Gilbert 2009: 35) pointed out that urbanization might be contributing to a more 'civilized world'. In other words, observations in the last few decades seemed to suggest that, as opposed to contributing to the development of rural areas, the rapid urbanization of cities and the large number of rural migrants to big centres was, in fact, creating so-called 'cities of hope' (Gilbert 2009: 35). That is to say, unprepared, expensive, major urban centres with high concentrations of population, added to the lack of basic infrastructure, education and healthcare facilities to accommodate and maintain their incoming residents, generally produce a chaotic stage of urban pollution and despair for survival (Caldeira 2000).

Under these circumstances, entire communities-to-be of migrants usually grow rapidly in the marginal or peripheral areas of the city, where more 'affordable' living conditions may be sought in contrast with the mainstream situation. Worldwide approximately one billion people were said to be living in slum-like conditions at the time of the research, having no access to basic needs to fulfil their statuses as citizens (Davis 2006). Davis (*ibid.*: 16) has pointed out that

the cities of the future, rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay.

2.4. Regime Theory and the racial segregation of urban environments in Brazil

In line with concepts of Regime Theory (Lindblom and Elkin 1987, in Burbank et al. 2001), interactions between private markets and the state establish the basis for the power and dominance of public assets in modern societies, or as Stone calls it, 'the informal arrangements by which public bodies and private interests function together in order to be able to make and carry out governing decisions' (Stone 1989, in Burbank et al. 2001: 20). In this respect, the control of public policies for housing and land issues by the government, as well as the speculations of the private sector, became even more exacerbated in the Brazilian context of boundless but unequal democratic voices and the almost non-existent decision-making power of marginalized individuals. In other words, in a country of extreme social inequality, the distribution of land and civil society proposals for land reforms generally represent absolutely no threat to elite monopolies and state control.

Interestingly, whereas on the one hand Brazil faces a deficit of around 1.5 million houses according to 2008 estimates (DANCPC 2012), on the other hand Caldeira (2000: 263) has influentially drawn attention to the rise of ‘residential enclaves for the rich’, in other words, the recent accelerated development of huge closed condominiums, or the creation of an alternative world of privately paid security, comfort and services for the elite, in contrast to the surrounding parts of the city. In fact, this trend towards privileged areas of private residence highlights the dangerous extent of racial segregation in Brazil, mainly in its big cities, where recent reviews have stressed the scope of ‘dictatorship over the poor’ in Brazil (Wacquant 2003, in Quirk et al. 2010: 302). In this respect, larger centres are historically the most affected areas in terms of disproportionate growth, followed by unplanned urban infrastructure and the incompetence of governmentalities to administer and deal with increasing public needs.

On that basis, the current extent of the government’s inability to tackle increasing rates of crime in large urban centres, coupled with the lack of public transport, health, sanitation and so forth, influence the privatization of these services in Brazil, leaving poorer communities with no option than to live as perpetual aliens within their own social spheres (Williamson and Horta 2012). As Harvey (2008: 23) has pointed out, ‘the right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city’.

Also in this perspective, private industries and construction companies generally make the most of any opportunity to ‘sell their assistance’ to the elite or those who can pay for private condominium housing in order to maintain certain standards of living (health, education, etc.), all of which should be provided by the government for collective use (Telles 1995). Significantly, the evidence suggests that, while living in city centres was a major concern in the 1970s for work-related reasons (facilitating commuting to work), at present the Brazilian elite often opts to live in the closed condominiums just mentioned, apart from the main centres, due to the infrastructural problems just mentioned and the re-configuration of urban settings (Caldeira 2000). Needless to say, this separation of classes between rich and poor tends to aggravate the upper-class sense of superiority and distinction from the marginalized poor and ‘criminal’ rest of society. In fact, private industries and estate agencies all over the country have quickly realized the Brazilian elite’s interests and needs in being located away from the peripheral or marginal areas (*favelas*) in society, hence exacerbating speculation over construction sites and private housing for the rich ‘away’ from the poor (Telles 1995).

3. Agrarian reform versus private interests at the times of the World Cup and Olympic Games

The current scenario in Brazil is one in which private construction companies, aligned with the government's desperate desire to carry out urban restructuring programmes for the next World Cup and Olympic Games, have caused a large-scale trend towards forced evictions of *favela* residents and urban occupations in Brazil's main cities (Williamson and Horta 2012). Forced eviction has been described as 'the permanent or temporary removal against their will of individuals, families and/or communities from the homes and/or lands which they occupy...' (Stavropoulou 1998: 516). The process of forced eviction is of particular relevance when one considers the problems of social segregation between rich and poor in Brazil mentioned previously. That is to say, in a country where policies for social protection (housing, health, education, security, etc.) have become part of the 'private world' of certain elites, the centre-periphery distinction has opened up a space for marketed speculations of private housing and buildings in the areas of urban occupations – *favelas* – leaving the poor even more vulnerable to the impositions of the elite (Barbassa 2012).

In this case, the previous stereotype of *favelas* as violent, messy, suburban spaces for marginalized people has been replaced by a huge market of private interests, which is also targeting the millionaire investments of construction companies and real estate agents. That is, *favela* residents are being evicted and their lands are being used to build private condominiums not only for the national elite, but also for the visitors to the next mega events (World Cup and Olympic Games) to be held in the country (Granja 2012).

Furthermore, evictions of *favelas* are only possible if they are sanctioned by the national judiciary or approved by the government's Housing Authority and Court of Justice, who deploy executive forces (police, military, etc.) to carry out the evictions. Therefore, one may claim that forced evictions of *favela* residents in Brazil depend on a multi-layered nexus of government and private interests, which could be addressed in terms of 'cleansing' or cleaning the city of the 'ugly' poor *favelas*, bringing economic prosperity to the area by re-urbanizing or revitalization projects and renting private property to the rich (Kumar 2012). According to Harvey (2008: 23) 'the freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights'.

4. The successful resistance of the largest urban occupation in Latin America

During my ethnographic investigations into the occupation of Nova Santa Marta (NSM), Rio Grande do Sul (RS), Brazil, from June to August 2012, I was lucky enough to have met an influential figure in the occupation, namely Juliane S., currently a graduate social worker and political militant whose grandfather was known for leading other organized urban occupations in the city. Previous examples certainly helped the articulations of the National Movement of the Struggle for Housing (in Portuguese, *Movimento Nacional de Luta pela Moradia*, hereafter MNLM)¹ prior to the first act of occupation in the NSM area. Due to her being an occupier herself and having lived in NSM until recent years, Juliane S. provided me with a great deal of detailed information during our various 45-minute journeys by bus from the centre of the city to the beginning of the hill (*morro*) where Occupation NSM begins. She took me to the different *vilas* within the occupation space and introduced me to the directors and staff of the Marista and Adelmo Simão Genro schools, as well as to community leaders and residents in NSM. She showed me where the only centre for social assistance is located and took me to a ‘participatory assembly’ in the community. All this was of particular interest as it was an election year in Brazil, and residents of NSM were reviewing their concerns and issues for use in future political actions, which allowed me a broader view not only of the historical processes of Occupation NSM, but also of the current problems experienced by the residents of the different *vilas* in NSM. I tried to summarize the overall body of information that I collected from community members during these

¹ The MNLM was founded in July 1990 during the first national meeting of social movements for housing issues, which received representative members from thirteen states in Brazil. Among the main tasks of the MNLM are to organize debates with various communities aiming to find solutions to collective problems of housing rights, coordinate their activities with civil society movements (the Landless People’s Movement [MST], for instance) and articulate debates about the lack of health facilities, education, security, sanitation and internal mobility in peripheral areas of the city. The MNLM aims to support social struggles and resistance leading to an increased political voice for organized social movements and actions in Brazil. The movement currently exists in fifteen states in Brazil, namely Pará (PR), Acre (AC), Mato Grosso do Sul (MS), Brasília - Distrito Federal (DF), São Paulo (SP), Minas Gerais (MG), Espírito Santo (ES), Pernambuco (PE), Sergipe (SE), Bahia (BA), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Tocantins (TO), Paraná (PR), Paraíba (PA) and Rio Grande do Sul (RS) (Nunes and Rubio 2007).

months, as well as conducting a prior literature review of local publications in the city. This literature will be divided into the most significant categories in the following sections.

5. *Fazenda Santa Marta: the ‘birth’ of Occupation Nova Santa Marta (NSM)*

5.1. *History*

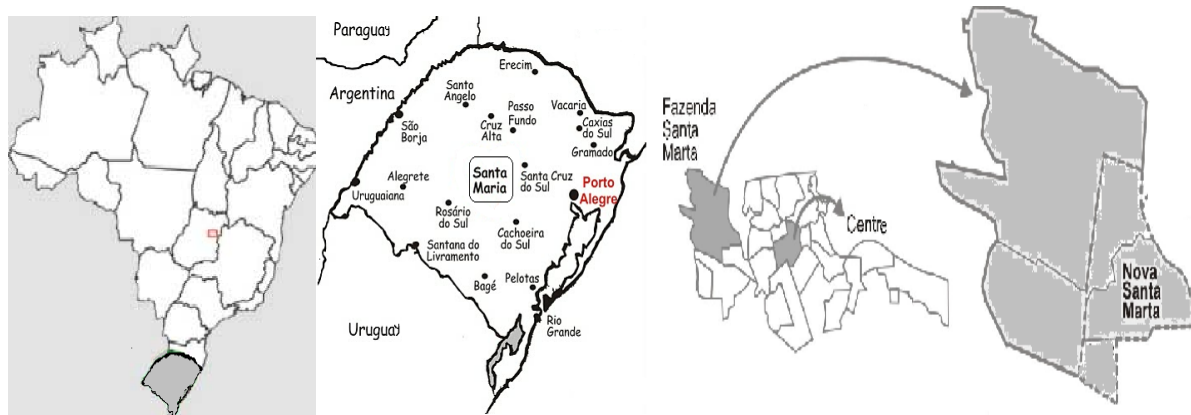


Figure 1. Brazil. Figure 2. State of Rio Grande do Sul (RS). Figure 3. Nova Santa Marta (district in the city of Santa Maria).

Back in the 1970s, in the western parts of the city of Santa Maria there were 1,200 hectares of privately owned farmland, called Fazenda Santa Marta. This extensive plot of land was mainly unused and unproductive at the time, and its only two previous owners would occasionally travel from another city to check the cattle left in the fields. However, in 1978 the state government of Rio Grande do Sul repossessed the farmland, citing the municipal need to build public housing units (*conjunto habitacional*) in the area of Santa Marta and subsequently transfer the land to low-income families in the city. Interestingly enough, only 343 hectares out of the 1,200 available in Santa Marta were in fact donated by the state government to the municipal Housing Council Association (*Companhia Estadual de Habitação do Estado do Rio Grande do Sul*, hereafter COHAB/RS) for the actual construction of public housing (Scherer 2005). The agreement of 1985 transferring the land from the state government to COHAB/RS highlighted the need for urgent action, that is, for houses to be immediately built and donated to poor families within the next five years, but giving the state of Rio Grande do Sul total power to repossess the land should COHAB/RS fail to deliver the houses to individuals within the stipulated deadline.

5.2. Reasons for the occupation

Given the delay in COHAB/RS building the houses for low-income families, in 1991 the MNLM arranged numerous strategic meetings with representatives of City Hall, the State Council Association (COHAB/RS) itself and the Brazilian Federal Bank (*Caixa Econômica Federal*) due to the negotiating power and political influence of these institutions, as an attempt to find a solution to the never-ending housing shortages in the city. However, difficulties were not only evident in building and subsequently transferring public housing to poor families, but also in mobilizing the representatives of competent institutions to attend the organized meetings and design plans and interventions in the first place. Data from that time suggest that the first general meeting to discuss housing issues organized by the MNLM (1990; see Botega 2004) happened with approximately four hundred residents of various communities in Santa Maria being present, but without the participation of any member of the public sector or executive power. Furthermore, social actions were repeatedly carried out during 1991, but again with no intervention from key decision-makers.

In face of this neglect on the part of the government, the MNLM started to coordinate with members of vulnerable families from all over the city to collect data on the exact number of families that had no housing or accommodation or were at greatest risk due to the rough living conditions in the city of Santa Maria. The MNLM then designed ways of its own to claim a political voice and mobilize the government to act and build the promised houses, a process that had stagnated since 1985.

After an estimate of the extent of homelessness and/or need for housing had been drawn up for the whole city of Santa Maria, the MNLM then demarcated and targeted urban areas where an organized occupation of public land could take place. That is, there was to be an organized occupation for a political voice, as opposed to the action coming across as a criminal act or a land ‘invasion’, usually a controversial matter regarding urban occupations. Therefore, planning and concrete geographical information about the city of Santa Maria, its private and public landscapes, etc., was crucial for the occupation to be sustained in the long run (Silveira 2010).

5.3. Strategies for an organized occupation

On 7 December 1991, organized by the MNLM, the first occupation took place in the former territory of *Fazenda Santa Marta*, which was to become the largest organized space of such occupation in Latin America, or Occupation Nova Santa Marta (NSM). During the first night of occupation, 34 pioneer families got together in front of the Church of São João Evangelista in Bairro Caramelo (currently a neighbouring district to NSM) to start occupying the land, followed by many other families that were registered in the MNLM records to occupy within the next few days, totalling 357 registered families by 12 December 1991 (Scherer 2005). Interestingly, the great majority of the families involved in the occupation process were originally migrants from different cities and/or former rural workers who happened to be living in the urban areas of Santa Maria. Hence, there was a predominance of ‘urban’ families from the poor districts in the city. In fact, according to Eder P., now a community leader and a resident of NSM since 1991, people’s main reasons for deciding to occupy the land were to ‘have their own houses and not pay rent in the city’.

In the face of the problem of a fast-growing ‘illegal’ urban occupation in the city, the government forbade further occupations by families in *Fazenda Santa Marta*. This included strong police repression to prevent anyone wishing to occupy *Fazenda Santa Marta* from doing so, as well as preventing those who had left from returning to the occupation area (Antonello 2009). Needless to say, this forced imprisonment of occupiers within the occupation space also hampered mobility and access to food, water and medical supplies. Juliane S. reported that collective management of the occupation space was crucial: ‘women and children would never leave the tents because if the police saw that there was no one in the tent, they would come in and take down the “houses”, suspecting that people had left the occupation. People had to take it in turns to go for food and water because the tents could never be left unwatched’.

To make matters worse, as time progressed, police repression added to the lack of sanitation, given that the occupied land had been used as a field for cattle prior to the occupation and was thus affected by a proliferation of various bugs, mosquitoes and pests within the occupation area. This led to numerous epidemic diseases, particularly in children and the elderly, whose families ended up having to leave the occupation later on due to the lack of health provision. Terezinha, one of the ‘next door neighbours’ of *Fazenda Santa Marta*, who would courageously provide water to occupiers despite all the police coercion at the time, revealed that ‘I was the only one to give water to these poor people. By the time they got back to the occupation

the water was already dirty'. However, newcomers would still risk the consequences and join the occupation from the back of the field, where police patrols were less intense.

Interestingly, the increasing number of families who joined the occupation despite the government's countermeasures influenced the MNLM's anticipation of possible future actions against the occupiers (the government's suits for repossession). Thus, at that point, the MNLM started discussions with the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM) and the Regional Development Council, subsequently receiving support from the Catholic Church, the Pastoral Movement for Land and the Civil Society Movement of Metallurgy Workers, all of which opposed the forcible removal of families from Fazenda Santa Marta (Silveira 2010). It is worth noting that this strategic coalition with different civic supporting bodies helped to strength the internal bonds for resistance within the occupation itself, even in the face of the many health and safety risks and limitations experienced by the occupiers, thus positively influencing the numbers of additional families that would join the occupation in subsequent years. Furthermore, the Catholic Church in particular played a fundamental role in pressuring the government to allow maintenance supplies into the occupation area at the time.

5.4. The creation of seven vilas

As families appeared from the various sides of the city to join in the occupation, an organized internal distribution of land had to be conducted to achieve a reasonably fair distribution of the land amongst the families, depending on the numbers of children and/or family members. Families would take whatever belongings they had with them for the occupation, and the land was subdivided into square-metre plots according to geographical location. In addition, a characteristic 'title' was used to distinguish the various areas newly formed in the field, all of which became the seven *vilas* or communities within NSM, namely 10 de Outubro, 7 de Dezembro, Alto da Boa Vista, Núcleo Central, Pôr-do-Sol, Marista I e II, and 18 de Abril. The title of each *vila* was chosen according to the date that particular groups occupied the site and/or their relevance to the whole occupation.²

² *Marista I and Marista II* received these titles due to their being located in the neighbourhood areas of *Marista* School in the northeastern parts of the occupation (Silveira 2010).

Each family had its own tent, usually made of black canvas at the time, and a central area was left open in the field for sporadic *Plenárias* or *Assembléias Social* (Social Assemblies).³ As time progressed, the field started to take on a different shape and look more like a small ‘city’ than an actual occupation lot *per se*. Occupiers organized different teams amongst themselves for the preparation of food, cleaning of the area, security and health. According to Eder P., during the first years of occupation everything that ‘happened’ in the field had to be for the ‘collective’ good. In other words, this internal control for the sake of the collective management of the occupied space became a significant symbol of NSM.

In fact, the MNLM had had its own ways of delimiting members of the occupation since 1991 (formerly people would join the occupation from various different parts of the city, sometimes not under the MNLM’s coordination at all). The MNLM would oil-paint the initials ‘MNLM’ on any and every house in the occupation area as means to identify and ‘register’ new families within it (MNLM 2012).



Figures 4, 5 and 6. Oil painted house with the symbol of ‘MNLM’ (2012) as means to identify occupiers of Vila 7 de Dezembro, NSM, SM, RS, Brazil.

5.5. Social stigma and prejudice

As the occupation gained more stability in course of time and became an obvious new ‘sphere’ in the city, its residents not only had to overcome the political struggle against the government’s constant threats of removal and eviction, but also prejudice from other communities in the city.

³ *Plenárias*, or social assemblies, became a powerful mechanism used within the occupation to formulate direct actions, marches, protests etc., when representatives from all the *vilas* would attend the meetings and cooperate to develop ideas for future actions.

This was mainly due to mainstream media press coverage and generally distorted information about the occupation and its residents. Suelen G., a current resident of NSM, a student of social sciences at the Federal University of Santa Maria and a political militant for the MNLM, recalled that, during the initial process of occupation and settlement, in addition to the stigma and prejudice from ‘the city’ against NSM’s ‘*sem teto*’⁴ (Portuguese for ‘roofless’), people had to find their own creative solutions for daily problems, such as carrying two pairs of shoes when going to work in the centre on rainy days due to the lack of pavements and tarmac, which made it impossible to walk along the pathways and through the mud in the occupied area: ‘when people got to work in the centre, they had to change their shoes very quickly ‘cos it was so dirty and people would give them weird looks and gossip about [them being] *sem teto*’.

5.6. Political struggles: the absurdity of an occupation tax

After the occupation reached such huge proportions (approximately 2,500 families by August 1994 according to Scherer 2005), many families started to join the occupation even without the ‘approval’ of the MNLM, thus increasing still more the site’s rapid growth. At that point, families were still living without water or electricity and had to collect water from the nearest stream, which they also shared with animals within the occupation area.

In 1994 the municipal authorities, having noted the scope of the ‘problem’ by viewing the size of the occupation, proposed for the first time to assist the site residents in regulating their statuses by registering all residents of NSM but also introducing an Occupation Tax.⁵ Once residents had contributed by paying the tax for a period of 25 years, the land would automatically be transferred into their names. However, by charging residents to live at the occupation site, the government inevitably had to ‘provide’ or guarantee some facilities to the site in return for the taxes. Thus, in 1994, for the first time since the beginning of the occupation, a bus route was introduced from the centre of Santa Maria to NSM. Nevertheless, the very limited number of buses and schedules available, as well as the precarious condition of the roads within the occupation site, made it obvious that the idea of providing collective transport in NSM was more

⁴ A pejorative term used at the time to describe residents of NSM.

⁵ The Occupation Tax was equivalent to 25% of the average family’s monthly income at the time (Scherer 2005).

symbolic than useful. In fact, residents reported that the roads on the occupation site had become so bad that the buses would not be able to go up the hill after it had rained.

In addition, despite the introduction of the Occupation Tax, there was still a lack of basic facilities such as water, electricity, sanitation (water and electricity were only connected to the occupation in 1996) and the promised collective transport system. As a result, the occupiers became apprehensive about the evident neglect of the government in attending to their demands. They therefore started to organize social movements in the city, also winning support from the Catholic Church and neighbouring districts. This helped to increase awareness in the ‘city’ about NSM’s struggles, also leading to a mutual effort to lay the first water pipe in NSM, which was only done due to other communities’ support (also by paying the cost of the pipes), not to any effort by the government to bring it to NSM at the time (Silveira 2010).

6. The establishment of social mechanisms in NSM

6.1. Escola Marista Nova Santa Marta

In 1998 the first primary school – Escola Marista NSM – was built on the occupation site as a philanthropic initiative of the Catholic Church, which contributed to bringing even more families into the areas of NSM. Families remained in the occupation area even though they did not have access to the basic facilities described previously.

The participation of the Marista school in the occupation encouraged a certain ‘hopeful’ feeling in residents, who then became even more engaged in social activities (*plenárias*), mobilizations, marches in the city and bigger protests in the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre. Cristiano Schumacker, resident of NSM and regional leader of the MNLM, reported that the size and strength of protests swelled to such proportions that the residents would join with members of the MNLM from other cities and states to build a collective political identity to arrange buses and go to Brasilia, Brazil’s capital, to protest in front of the *Palácio do Planalto*.⁶ Furthermore, in addition to the main claim for land regulation, residents also stressed the lack of health, education, social mobility and security in the NSM area.

During this period, the first collective mail boxes were made available in NSM, where occupiers could receive correspondence in their own names, but had to collect it from the

⁶ The *Palácio do Planalto* is located in the Federal District of Brasilia, which is where the highest members of the public representation work, such as the president of the republic and ministers.

communities' collective mail boxes. Equally importantly, Marista also incorporated arts, sports and cultural activities in their educational practices in NSM.⁷ Marista's initiative had fundamental repercussions not only for NSM, but also for the entire city of Santa Maria due to its more recent social project for the digital inclusion of NSM adolescents and young adults. This project provides participants with significant technological skills once it focuses on the recycling of electronic 'rubbish' or electronic waste collected and/or donated to the project. In this case, participants fix digital equipment or create it out of electronic waste or unwanted materials that are usually thrown away or discarded in the 'city'.⁸ In addition, participants receive training in the internet and computer use and more advanced technical IT courses. All the materials produced in the project are used for pedagogical purposes, such as computer classes, at Marista or are else sold in local markets, which tends to boost a sense of achievement in participants.



Figures 7 and 8. CMID Project (2012) NSM, RS, Brazil

Nevertheless, despite Marista's crucial role in the occupation, the increasing number of residents, combined with the limited number of vacancies available at the school, which was for primary-school pupils only (932 students in June 2012⁹), proved insufficient to assist all youngsters. Therefore, NSM intensified its protests and campaigned to have additional schools in the occupation area. Finally, in 2001, after countless actions, the state government inaugurated a

⁷ <http://colegiomarista.org.br/santamarta/>

⁸ <http://cmid-sm.org/>

⁹ This figure was provided by the Director of Escola Marista – NSM (Augusto Russini) in June 2012.

secondary school, Escola Estadual Assentamento Santa Marta, in the occupation area to provide secondary and adult technical education.

6.2. Centro Social Madre Francisca Lechner, CRAS Oeste – Social Centre



Figure 9. Centre for PsychoSocial Assistance (CRAS-Oeste, 2012) Madre Francisca Lechner, NSM

Moreover, as time progressed and as protests became routine for NSM dwellers, NSM started to be ‘known’ by other districts in the city that started to empathize with NSM’s struggles. In this respect, social pressure played a crucial role during the process of consolidation of NSM as a district in the city, in which additional social mechanisms were implemented on the occupation site. According to Nun Rosane (CRAS Oeste 2012), five nuns are responsible for administering the public funding provided to the Catholic Church of Maria de Nazaré, founded in NSM in 2002, which relies on two psychologists and two social workers to help run their activities. The centre also forms alliances with the Department of Health of the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), as well as the Department of Humanities of the private Centro Universitário Franciscano SM, or UNIFRA-SM, whose students temporarily volunteer at CRAS Oeste and benefit from fieldwork experience in NSM in order to complete their degrees. Projects are administered for all age ranges, as well as group sessions and one-to-one consultations, depending on demand and availability. Activities include negotiating strategies to include individuals as more active members in the community, film sessions where people are able to watch their own behaviour within groups and interdisciplinary follow-up for the rehabilitation of drugs users and children’s groups. There are twelve workshops in total (June 2012), all of which include an incentive in the form of *sestas básicas* and *bolsas*, monthly allowances of food and/or money respectively, for those taking part in the activities on a regular basis, as means to try and ensure that they attend

repeatedly. ‘The Church [has] now bought some land and is about to open a new house on the road below just for the activities, because our centre has become too small for all the demands from the community’, said Nun Rosane.

Nevertheless, despite the significance of their work, Nun Rosane reported the difficulties they face in being the only centre for psychosocial support in NSM. They therefore often have to handle complex issues, are often understaffed and have no formal support from the government other than the monthly funding provided for the running of activities. Moreover, the funding also happens to be insufficient for the number of service users the centre receives. Equally importantly, the centre relies heavily on university students, who take part in its activities only temporarily. This in itself tends to influence the quality and delivery of results due to the inconsistent turnout rates, and thus the impossibility of making long-term arrangements for future activities.

6.3. *Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental Prof. Adelmo Simão Genro (EMASG)*



Figure 10. Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental Prof. Adelmo Simão Genro (2012), NSM.

The following years were marked by the foundation of a municipal school to satisfy the never-ending demands of a growing community. EMASG was founded in 2004 as the first school in Santa Maria to have a classroom equipped for children with cognitive and physical disabilities, this being a compulsory condition for public institutions in Brazil. Facilities include a wheelchair, braille, an induction loop and teaching materials for children with diagnosed dyslexia.

At some point during my field visits to EMASG, a teacher told me that, after constant stimulation for a prolonged period of time, a paraplegic child (L.F.¹⁰) was ultimately recovering his movements and was thus able to walk by himself. I had the opportunity to see the child

¹⁰ These are the initials of the child’s actual name, the full name itself being retained for ethical reasons.

playing with a tutor on the school campus while the other children were playing with a ball. According to the school director, many of the parents are unequipped emotionally and/or financially to recognize and support their children's needs, and this tends to limit the scope of their development at an early age. The teacher continued that, by being motivated to interact in groups, children are able to develop particular abilities that would not be possible if they were left unattended. She mentioned L.F. to illustrate not only the case itself but also the need for social work and support in NSM.

7. Government Programme for the Acceleration of Growth (*Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento – PAC*)



Figure 11. Overview of *vila* 10 de Outubro (2012), NSM, RS, Brazil

In 2003, having been included in the Government Programme for the Acceleration of Growth (*Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento – PAC*), NSM received more attention in terms of government finance and support for the social development of the area. This inclusion was indeed the ultimate result of almost two decades of social struggle and articulation with different social movements until NMS was finally considered a ‘priority’ issue for municipal concern. In this respect, significant progress was made in the NSM area by means of government funding through PAC, such as the provision of electricity, water, sewerage, lighting of NSM’s ‘main’ roads, rubbish collection (twice a week) and additional pavements in the *vilas*.

Nevertheless, residents report that difficulties in NSM remain, mainly in terms of limited access to health care and further education, given that travel costs to the ‘centre’ (in order to access to such services) are still very high and unaffordable for many members of NSM. Horácio R.M., a resident of *vila 7 de Dezembro* who lives there with his wife, offered me a shelter to ‘stay overnight’ in case I missed the last bus back to the ‘city’, which usually departs at around 10.30 pm on weekdays. On its own the impossibility of geographical mobility is not a drastic factor in terms of social inequality according to residents of NSM, that is, given the overall scope of other needs in the area (health, education, land regulation, security, space for leisure activities, etc.). Nevertheless, for the purposes of this argument, it would not be entirely correct to say that limited geographical mobility to and from the centre due to a deficient collective transport system does not influence or help to increase social inequality in the long run. In this case, the barriers become more visible when one has to commute to the centre to work, paying a high single fare by Brazilian standards (when earning the national minimum wage) and/or has to decline an offer of work due to an inability to commute overnight (later than 10.30 pm) or early in the morning (before 6 am).

This limitation on mobility is perhaps more widely acknowledged when children drop out of their studies after the completion of secondary school because their parents are unable to pay the travel costs to send them to a high school in other *bairros* (districts) in Santa Maria. Ana Patricia L.M., an arts teacher at Marista School and a political militant since the beginning of the occupation, confirmed that ‘one of the biggest problems in the *vilas* is the lack of opportunities for education. Children finish secondary school and can’t carry on their studies because they can’t afford the tickets or have to start working as *catadores*¹¹ or drug dealers, in prostitution... you know the rest’.

8. Nova Santa Marta at Present

8. 1. Government Conditional Loan Programme: Minha Casa Minha Vida (MCMV)

¹¹ Portuguese term used for collectors of materials for recycling in public bins in the cities. Although the category is not recognised as a profession in Brazil, materials are individually separated by *catadores* (glass, metal, paper, plastic, etc.) and sold to recycling companies.



Figures 12, 13 and 14. Participatory Assembly (*Plenária*) at Marista School in NSM (June 2012)

At present, in partnership with a local cooperative, namely Bom Fim (São Leopoldo city, Rio Grande do Sul), NSM has managed to achieve an initial step towards the registration of land in the names of its residents. Members of the MNLM came together with the Bom Fim cooperative to pressure the state government and therefore the National Federal Bank (*Caixa Econômica Federal*) to approve applications for the government's conditional loan programme for housing (*Minha Casa Minha Vida* [MCMV]) to residents of NSM. Under this national programme, beneficiaries are able to obtain a conditional loan from the government to build their own private houses. This cooperation between the MNLM and the Bom Fim Cooperative has led to the ultimate approval of 150 applications for the MCMV programme for the NSM area, which is expected to enhance the recognition of NSM residents as full members of Santa Maria with housing rights just like any other citizen of the city.

Nevertheless, now only 150 applications for MCMV have been granted to the NSM area, which has approximately 28,000 residents at the moment, the following step for the MNLM and the *vilas* is to collect more recent socioeconomic information about all the families living in NSM. This is necessary in order to check which families are most at risk and in need of housing, and consequently selecting which families will be the first to be considered beneficiaries entitled to apply to the government's programme. Additionally, according to the MNLM, the information considered for eligibility and priority to apply for MCMV will include families' monthly wages, the number of children and other dependents, age and education, as well as documents to confirm personal details. In the case of missing documents (birth certificate, ID card, etc.), community leaders, together with voluntary members of the *vilas*, will be in charge of visiting houses and families to help arrange the necessary documents for the first 150 applications (selected in Participatory Assemblies or *Plenárias*).

Needless to say, the process of collecting documents and information may be time-consuming, hence the first *Plenária* to discuss issues regarding MCMV took place in June 2012 at Marista School. Moreover, perhaps the most critical issue experienced by NSM residents, despite all the achievements of the last two decades of occupation, relates to the fact that the government has not provided them with any certificate or document (such as a deed) to guarantee their full possession of the occupied land. Therefore, occupiers have the ‘right’ to remain in the NSM area, but the actual land has never been transferred into their names.

As a matter of fact, even more intriguing is the fact that one of the preconditions for anyone wanting to apply for the government’s conditional MCMV programme is either to have a deed as a landowner, or to be able to buy land and then build a own private house through the MCMV conditional loan programme. In this respect, given the critical economic statuses of NSM residents, it is unrealistic to expect occupiers to be able to afford to buy land by themselves and subsequently build their houses in NSM through a government loan (MCMV). Therefore, NSM residents are faced with another direct confrontation in a vicious circle, in which they depend on the government’s registration of land in residents’ names (deeds) so that occupiers will be able to qualify for the first 150 applications for the government loan for housing made available to the NSM area.

This entanglement in the process of land regulation sounds very much like another strategy used by the government to prevent residents from obtaining deeds, thus automatically disqualifying them from the MCMV programme. Such strategies have been repeatedly used against NSM residents for the last two decades, pushing the boundaries of community struggles and collective effort to survive as residents of the city.

9. Conclusions

In summary, the astonishing case of NSM as a successfully organized space of urban occupation in Brazil may be considered an example of the various struggles that poorer classes generally face in terms of land disputes and the political power (or lack of it) to change their situations in a country of ‘privately built’ laws. In other words, the coercion used against poorer members of communities in Brazil has extended the fine line of police repression in *favelas* – namely evictions – to turn into an elaborate ping-pong game involving private companies and the government’s interests.

In this case, *favelas* that were previously considered peripheral areas of illegal urban occupations of the poor are now becoming the target of marketed investments susceptible to the impositions of the government and private companies, who are constantly reformulating their own approaches to dealing with social problems. In other words, the replication of the elite's impositions on the poor are now disguised as 'revitalization projects', such as those aiming to meet the demands for the next World Cup and Olympic Games, all with the excuse of promoting the social development of the poorer areas in the cities.

With respect to NSM, the recurrence of historical processes of police repression and the government's strategies to evict and stop urban occupations from 'surviving' and becoming emancipated as part of a city clearly indicate the extent of manipulation that residents still encounter while fighting for the registration of the occupied land in their names. Although progress has been made in the area of NSM, such as the acquisition of social mechanisms (water, electricity, schools, etc.), this was all due to residents' collective efforts and coordination with other civil society movements and communities, as opposed to any actual intention on the part of the government to promote NSM as part of the city. Similarly, the road to the integral emancipation of NSM, in terms of becoming independent of charity work and assistance from churches, might last but will depend on the willingness and courage of those involved to continue the struggle for a political voice, even when confronted in an uneven dispute with powerful private institutions and governmentalities.

Finally, the significant repercussions and ongoing outcomes of the process of resistance in NSM could potentially be an example to other occupations (*favelas*), all of which face the very problems that NSM has courageously been dealing with in recent decades. One problem, namely eviction, has intensified rapidly in recent times due to private-sector speculations and the government's interest in holding mega events. The encouraging outcome of NSM's struggles and victories throughout the years of occupation indeed represents the ultimate power of an organized civil society acting in favour of social resistance and change. Furthermore, the case of NSM might also facilitate further formulations of ideas and social movements, as well as bringing some hopeful features to other communities in relation to their tough times ahead. To conclude, 'where dwelling is a privilege, occupying is a right...' (MNLN, Brazil).

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