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## Solidarity Chains among Marginalized People to Fight Covid-19 in Brazil

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### Abstract

Brazil is one of the most unequal countries in the world, socially and economically, and it is predictable that the impact of Covid-19 would be more negative in the country. The number of deaths and infection confirms it, where Brazil is the second-worst country in the world. This article intends to describe and reflect on civil solidarity chains observed in marginalized segments of the society, more specifically *favelas* (slums) that, despite the abandonment of a neglecting State and the indifference of a population lacking civil spirit, are opening their fronts to combat the virus and the hunger by their own means.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### Introduction

Social distancing, home office, masks, alcohol 70%, clean water, and soap... all these ingredients in the recipe to prevent Covid-19 can be felt as non-feasible for those who live in *favelas* (slums) – 11.4 million according to the 2010 Census of IBGE-Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics] (IBGE 2020a) –, in 7,103 indigenous localities and 5,972 *quilombola* (communities made up of former slaves who escaped slavery) localities as estimated by the same Institute last May (IBGE 2020b), and there are many others commonly called vulnerable groups. With the Covid-19 pandemic, several segments of them became suddenly visible: 11.5 million illiterate people in 2017 (IBGE 2020c), 30.5 million people with no or poorly served piped water and 66.6 million people without sewage system (IBGE 2020d), 12.9 (13.3%) million Brazilians unemployed in the first quarter of 2020 (IBGE 2020e) and the list goes far, even without considering the new segments that became vulnerable with the pandemic. It could be argued that these numbers are largely crisscrossed, which is true, but it is also true that they are greatly underestimated in quantity and quality, and help us to understand the numbers of Covid-19 in Brazil today, the second-worst in the world.

These numbers mix structural problems of Brazil, accumulated in two hundred years, as an independent state, as well as the recent economic crisis from 2014, resulting in negative GDP growth in 2015 and 2016, respectively -3.5% and -3.3% (World Bank 2020), and reaching the highest peak of 13.7% of unemployment in the first quarter of 2017 (IBGE 2020f). All these

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setbacks came accompanied by – or as a result of – a serious political crisis that led to the election of a far-right candidate Bolsonaro in 2018. In other words, the Covid-19 is falling down into a country already immersed in the “feeling of a devastated land” (Ribeiro 2019: 320), “broken, discrediting and destroying the credibility of its democratic institutions” (D’Avila 2017: 9), after a virtuous cycle that extends from 1994 to 2015, depending on the researcher’s point of view.

It is in this scenario that we glimpse signs of civil chains, although scattered and loosely organized, horizontal solidarity among people who fight against Covid-19 has also become a fight against hunger. This is very encouraging for people traditionally known for their poor civic or public spirit. When we remember the civil movements that aroused in 2013 throughout the country – June Journeys –, triggering the impeachment of then-president Dilma Rousseff, but which soon cooled down, one could say that the country is “condemned to chicken flights” (D’Avila 2017: 26) not only in the economy as mentioned by the author but also in civil movements. Nonetheless, there are indications that these civilian networks are now weaving a more long-lasting legacy, just as the ICU respirators and beds assembled during the pandemic will remain for the benefit of the local population after their extinction.

### **Social Inequality in Brazil**

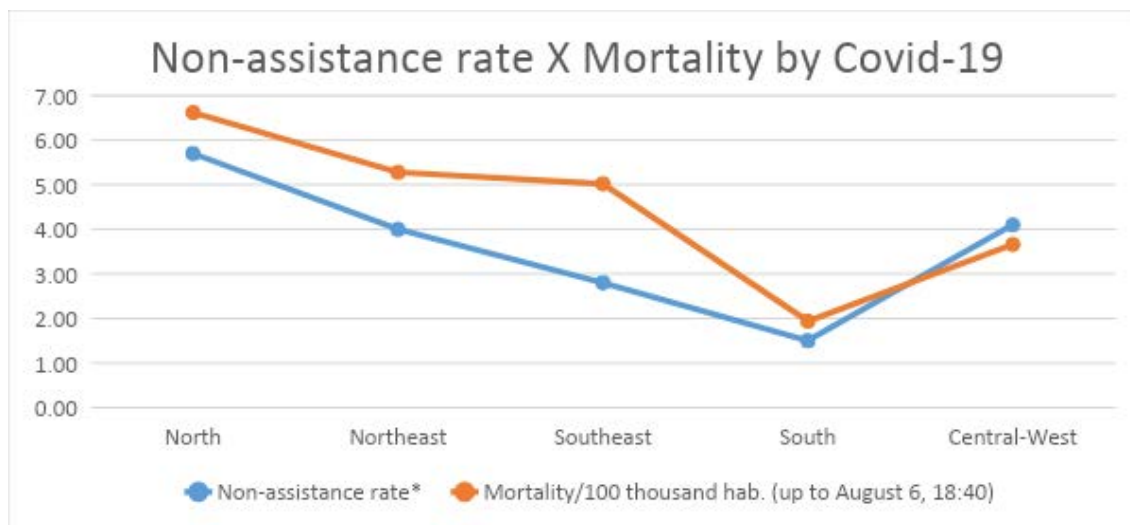
According to the 2018 Oxfam Brazil Report “País estagnado: Um retrato das desigualdades Brasileiras” [Stagnant country: a portrait of the Brazilian inequalities] (Oxfam Brasil 2020a), Brazil ranked 10th in the world ranking of income inequality in 2016 advancing another position in 2017. For the Ipea-Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada [Institute of Applied Economic Research], Brazil was one of the five most unequal countries on the planet in 2018 when it comes to income concentration/distribution. Meanwhile, the Human Development Report 2019 by UNDP-United Nations Development Programme reveals more concrete numbers: the richest 10% earned 55% of total national income in 2015. The Oxfam Report also says that the percentage of the poorest 40% of the population is only 10.6%; six richest men have the same wealth as the poorest 50% of the population (around 100 million); and, the richest 5% have the same income as the remaining 95%. The inequalities occur in all aspects, especially regional ones. The table below shows the non-assistance rate for those who sought public health services – SUS-Sistema Único de Saúde [Unified Health System], a universal public health system created 30 years ago –, in two weeks of follow-up, divided by regions in the first line, as analyzed by Lilia Moritz Schwartz on the PSN-Pesquisa Nacional de Saúde 2013 [National Health Research] of IBGE (132). The second line shows the mortality of Covid-19 per 100 thousand people until August 6, according to the Brazilian Ministry of Health (Ministério da Saúde 2020).

The table helps us to understand, for instance, the dramatic collapse of the health care service that made headlines across the world in April in Manaus, capital of Amazonas state, North region. As of the Northeast region, IBGE’s Pnad Contínua 2017 [Continuous National Household Sample Survey] reported that more than half of the illiterate Brazilians live there – 6.5 out of 11.8 million – where illiteracy reaches 14.8% among people over 60, twice as much as the national

average. Especially, of the 10% Brazilian households without daily water service, 69% were there in 2019.

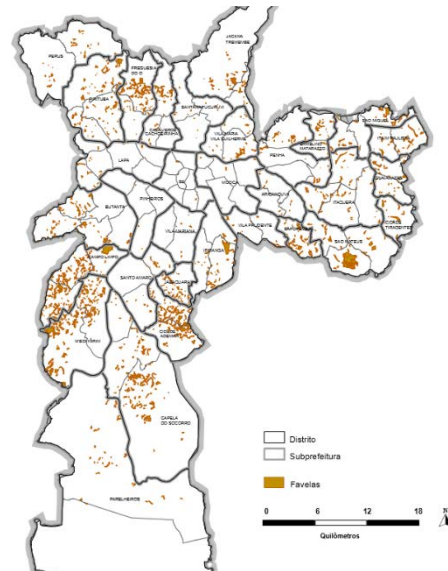
Table 1 Percentage of non-assisted people by the public health service during two weeks prior to the survey (up to August 6, 2020)

Index	North	Northeast	Southeast	South	Central-West	Brazil
Non-assistance rate	5.7	4.0	2.8	1.5	4.1	3.1
<i>Source: Schwarcz 2019: 132</i>						
Mortality/100 thousand people (August 6,18:40)	66.2	52.8	50.2	19.4	36.6	46.9
<i>Source: Brazilian Ministry of Health</i>						



The micro-regional differences are also worth mentioning: the First Serological Study of São Paulo City tested 2,864 people visiting 5,772 households of the city from June 29 to July 6, and it spotted 14 districts with the highest number of infected people: Brasilândia, Cachoeirinha, Jaçanã, Liberdade, Santa Cecília, Cidade Ademar, Jardim São Luís, Campo Limpo, Capão Redondo, Parque São Lucas, Sapopemba, Itaim Paulista, Itaquera e Lajeado (Santiago 2020). These are, precisely where big *favelas* are concentrated, with more people living per household, low schooling level/level of education, and income. According to the study, the infection rate was three times higher in class E (with monthly family income up to two minimum wage, R\$ 1,045.00, US\$ 192.79 as of August 7) compared to class A (monthly family income over 20 minimum wages).

Figure 1 São Paulo districts with more infected people (Source: Santiago 2020)  
 Figure 2: Distribution of *favelas* in São Paulo City (Source: São Paulo City Hall)



According to Brazilian anthropologist Lilia Moritz Schwarcz, our social inequality is rooted in some peculiar and distinguishing features: we received 5.85 out of 12.52 million Africans taken out of their continent (22)<sup>1</sup> and our independence, in 1822, was proclaimed by a Prince Regent, who established an independent monarchy, with high popular approval (Schwarcz 2019).

The philosopher Renato Janine Ribeiro, who wrote the article “Brazil voltou cinquenta anos em três” [Brazil retreated fifty years in three] for the Brazilian edition of *The Great Regression* (ed. Heinrich Geiselberger, Polity, 2017) goes further to state that the present situation had been “carefully planned” for five centuries of social exclusion and that Brazil is, in fact, a “success case” of inequality. Be it or not, it seems clear today that the “myths of racial democracy of a people happily blended hide languages of a violent authoritarianism, stemming from three centuries of slavery regime, which perpetuates the social inequality entrenched in the Brazilian society” (Schwarcz 2019: 18) and that “masks, like racial democracy and a friendly welcoming society, are being ripped off.” (Ribeiro 2019: 332) In a survey conducted by Oxfam Brazil and Datafolha, from February 12 to 18, “Nós e as desigualdades” [We and the inequalities] (Oxfam Brasil 2020b), over 80% of Brazilians don’t believe in economic progress without mitigating the social inequality. It also shows that people are more aware of inequalities and of the reasons for that – racism and gender prejudice –, compared to the first research, two years before.

### **The Pandemic Shot a Light on the Abyss of Social Vulnerabilities**

It is no wonder that today Brazil scores the shameful 3,112,393 infected people and 103,999 deaths (as of August 8) from February 25 (Ministério da Saúde Brasil 2020), when it was officially confirmed the first case of infection, a man who traveled to Italy and sought the best private hospital in São Paulo, Albert Einstein, and was eventually cured. In contrast, when the newspapers reported, on March 19, the first death by Covid-19 in Rio de Janeiro, of a housemaid who contracted the virus from her employer who had been in Italy, symbolically opened the harmful and damaging effects of the Brazilian social abyss. According to IBGE, 6.3 million Brazilians are domestic workers – gardeners, house cleaners, housemaids, swimming pool cleaners, etc. (Rede Brasil Atual 2020a), even without counting private guards, private drivers, and others, the number is being obviously underestimated.

The weakest point in urban areas is *favelas*, with 11.4 million people for IBGE and 13.6 million according to CUFA-Central Única das Favelas [Unified *Favelas* Central]<sup>3</sup>. The survey “Economia das Favelas – Renda e consumo nas Favelas Brasileiras” [*Favela*’s economy – Income and consumption in Brazilian *Favelas*] conducted by CUFA on March 20-22, interviewed 1,142 people through 262 *favela*’s communities in Rio de Janeiro and revealed that only 19% were regularly hired, and if they had to stay home, 86% could not buy food sometime in a month (Datafavela 2020). Regarding the rural areas, *quilombolas* are the biggest vulnerable population, about which we have few and very discrepant data – 5,972 with *quilombola* localities according to IBGE and 16 million people according to Conaq-Coordenação Nacional de Articulação das Comunidades Negras Rurais Quilombolas [National Coordination for the Articulation of Black *Quilombola* Rural Communities] –, but it is widely known that they live in highly agglomerate villages, amidst no friendly environments like jungles, *caatinga* (Brazilian savannas) or large farms. The same happens to MST-Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra [Landless Worker’s Movement], estimated in 350 thousand families by the same organization.

But, beyond the historical and clearly known vulnerable sectors, as the *favela* inhabitants (peddlers, wall painters, house cleaners, maids), the suburban inhabitants (housekeepers, doorkeepers, app drivers, delivery workers, informal workers), the *quilombolas*, indigenous people, etc., a real underworld of hidden vulnerabilities that came to light or came to exist under the pandemic, like millions of people without the CPF-Cadastro de Pessoa Física [Individual Taxpayer Number], which is necessary to receive the government Emergency Aid of 600 reais [around 105 US dollars as of August 8] – in the first month, Federal Revenue Agency regularized 13.6 million CPFs (Poder360 2020) –<sup>2</sup>, garbage pickers, babassu palm breakers, *ribeirinhos* (who live near rivers in Amazon forest), etc.

### **Forgotten by Absent Government and Indifferent People**

On September 2, 2018, the Museu Nacional [National Museum], the oldest – founded in 1818 – and the single most important museum of the country, located in Rio de Janeiro, caught on fire, consuming more than 80% of its 20 million items including Egyptian mummies, meteorites, the

skull of the oldest human in the Americas, assembled dinosaur, Greek and Etruscan vases, and others. It has been the house of the imperial family and the very first Brazilian scientific institution, and its worldly importance was out of the question. Nonetheless, after one year, the Associação Amigos do Museu [Association of the Friends of Museum] informed that only 1% of the donations received until then were from the Brazilian civil society, while the biggest donator was the German government with 42.7% (Poder360 2019).

Alberto Carlos Almeida, an important political scientist and sociologist, conducted a survey named Pesquisa Social Brasileira [Brazilian Social Research] in the early 2000s, financed by the Ford Foundation, aiming to test and translate in numbers the ideas and the theories of Roberto DaMatta, an important anthropologist whom he calls the Brazilian Tocqueville. The questionnaire would have been elaborated based on DaMatta's books and the core values of social beliefs, and its results published in a book in 2007, *A Cabeça do Brasileiro* [The Mind of Brazilians]. In the chapter on the theme "little public spirit," the survey showed that 56% of Brazilians believed that "one has to collaborate with the government only when it takes care of what is public" (117), and 74% agree that "each one must take care only what is yours, and the government takes care what is public" (101).

The lack of civic spirit is justified for the medium class angered with a State to whom pays high taxes but has to pay "a second time, for services that are already financed through taxes, but that do not make use of" (Ribeiro 2019: 317), hiring private schools, health insurance, car insurance, security, pension plans. For the lower classes, it is equally justified for not only the lack of money but "the perception of a diminished life, in which the school, health, transportation and the security are all bad" (Ribeiro 2019: 318). Certainly, this is worsened by the "perverse facet of urbanization, withdrawing the rural belonging from men, resulting, in the medium term, in loss of the relative importance of familiar and community bonds" (Almeida 2007: 18). While it is true that the vulnerable population historically felt themselves neglected by a desirably a protective State, the animosity has been sharpened with the recent political-social radicalization observed, especially after 2016, and the conservative far-right policy of a "Minimal State" as stressed by the new President.

### **Civil Protests in 2013**

The 2013 Protests in Brazil, also known as June Journeys, were public demonstrations in several cities, occurred between April and July, leading millions to the streets initially triggered by the Movimento Passe Livre [Free Fare Movement], a civil group that advocates for free public transportation, against 20 cents increase in São Paulo. That made the public opinion and the media look at them with a negative stance at first, but, rapidly, spontaneous protesters started to gain the squares, streets, and even highways, claiming for better transportation, health, education, and other services. In a few days, the Movimento Passe Livre announced that they had no control over those protests, as they were not party or union-led, did not proclaim an ideology, did not have any organization or leader to negotiate with, or even specific demands. People from all segments of the society, and who have never been engaged in politics before, came down to the streets attending

SNS calls to claim betterments to give a better country to the next generation. On its peak of June 20, newspapers reported that 1.25~1.55 million protesters were in the streets of 438 Brazilian cities.

As the days passed, smaller groups with diverse agendas began to pop up everywhere: police violence, budget waste in the World Cup, anti-FIFA, corruption, pro-anarchism, anti-fascism, besides all kinds of reforms. But when the violence began to step up on both sides, from the police and especially the radical black blocs, the protests began to lose focus, inhibiting ordinary people who wanted to manifest peacefully for legitimate causes. In a survey by CNT-Confederação Nacional do Transporte [National Confederation of Transport] in November that year, 81.7% of the population supported the protests but 93.4% did not agree with the vandal groups (Uol Notícias 2013).

For Ribeiro, “the bad quality of public services – education, health, public transportation and security – awakened the anger of the Brazilian people, who occupied the streets claiming for betterments. It was the discovery of politics: a sudden and fulminating discovery (...) a little politicized people, especially when compared to our Argentinian and Chilean neighbors, learning that the solution was in politics” (316-317). About those movements that never aroused again after that, he says: “in 2013, the society took the politics to himself, wanted and believed to take on it; in 2018 (but already since 2016), people repudiated it, repelled it, as a thing of bad people, the politicians” (320). He wonders: “Are we living, today, a retreat analogous to the ones occurred in history?” (335).

## Literature Review

Ever since the Covid-19 first landed in the country, worried voices were heard among politicians, social leaders, and the medical community about its consequences on the paramount Brazilian inequalities. Naturally, the literature produced on the pandemic in Brazil tends to give a quantitative account of the correlation between the country’s many inequalities and the risk of the disease. While these seek to produce data for eventual policy response, the federal government seems to be practicing a deliberate necropolitics over the matter.

Actually, the reality of the vulnerable groups has been reported mainly out of their initiatives through surveys and interviews, aiming to draw the attention of NGOs, companies, and eventually regional governmental authorities, informing, at the same time, their own people.

The most commonly studied correlation between the inequities and the relative risk of COVID-19 is the regional/geographical variation, which commonly concludes that the north and the northeast regions are the most vulnerable clusters in terms of the supply and demand for hospitalization service (Castro, M.C. et al. 2020; Martines, M.R. et al. 2020). The same can be observed on a smaller scale, namely in Salvador, northeast of Brazil (de Oliveira, L.A., de Aguiar Arantes, R. 2020), one of the most unequal cities of the country. Besides concluding that the urban location (*favelas*) does determine health and socioeconomic risks, the same study also considers the race structure (83% of black and brown population in Salvador).



Along with the ethnic inequities, gender inequities, socioeconomic factors and genetic issues (admixed population) also came to light (Baqui, P. et. al. 2020) crossing these variables with the mortality of hospitalized patients, but, again, by state and by two socio-economically grouped regions (north and central-south). This regional effect also is a result of an increased comorbidity burden due to lower levels of regional socioeconomic development and it is highly interlinked with the ethnicity effect, making the latter the second most important risk factor for death after age.

An attempt to identify “the victims who will going to pay the price” of the Covid-19 in Brazil (Ribeiro, F. and Leist, A. 2020) listed, on the top, blacks and browns (72.7% of them are low-income people), people over 60 years old but still supporting their family with their meager pensions, and those who are unable to interpret information related to COVID-19 (6.9% of the illiterate, 30% of the functionally illiterate between the age of 15 to 64 and low schooling rate).

A study correlating income and relative risk/mortality rate by Covid-19 (Martines, M.R. et al. 2020) crossed the Brazilian Social Vulnerability Index and GINI Index, but, once again, it considers the geographic clusters and/or regions at the same time, concluding, naturally, that north and northeast regions show the highest Relative Risk. Even in the above-mentioned case of Salvador, the approach was geographical, bringing “territory” as a central variable to analyze the production and reproduction of inequalities. At the same time, this study also envisions several local self-organizing actions that have emerged throughout the peripheries of Salvador, to mitigate the impacts of Covid-19 on the unassisted population, with actions that include money, food, and sanitary materials donation, crowdfunding, the construction of databases to facilitate the assistance of risk groups, cleaning efforts and disseminating information about the disease (de Oliveira, L.A., and de Aguiar Arantes, R. 2020). In this sense, one study fully recognized and described details of the efforts for self-organization in *favelas* and Indigenous communities highlighting the new forms of solidarity and mutual aid that have emerged in *favelas* (Ortega, F. and Orsini, M. 2020). However, it sustains that they are an informal node of power that has surfaced as a form of (non)governance facing a context of a “strategic ignorance” of the government. It goes even further to state that in contexts of socioeconomic distress, drug dealers and militia in different regions of the country have stepped in to provide law and order, enforcing social distance measures, including strict curfews to control the spread of coronavirus, as an example of “para-state” in contexts where state presence is limited.

Yet, it also says that some of these actions are being carried out through pre-existing NGO structures and others by building relationships and social networks from the ground up. And this is exactly the focus of this article, as it stresses the civil and spontaneous aspect of the *favela* population outperforming those illegal organizations. As proof, we can refer to another concept brought by the same study, the “health in adversity.” It says that the mutual aid groups and community activism in Brazil are expressions of a context of pandemic response marked by a culture of survival, that refers to the resilience of professionals and institutions in the region to respond and react despite funding challenges, lack of trained personnel, and shifting policy/political priorities to reduce health inequalities. Our idea is that the culture of survival in

*favelas* in the context of the “health in adversity” is shaping a wave of community mobilizations that, over time, can result in an important and long-lasting cultural infrastructure.

### **Solidarity Chains in Times of Covid-19**

With a far-right candidate winning the presidential elections in 2018 amidst a strong conservative tide in Brazil, “many politicians have adopted the position of demonizing the social movements, human rights, NGOs, and all others that take action in the social area. The word ‘social’ assumes an attributed connotation (...) [associated] to opposition parties” (Schwarcz 2019: 25-26). For MSTC-Movimento Sem Teto do Centro [Homeless Movement of the Center], an urban version of MST in São Paulo founded in 2001, those politicians try to criminalize movements fighting for housing and other social organizations including accusing president Bolsonaro of ordering the murder of Marielle Franco, a politician, feminist and human right activist in March 2018, when he was a presidential candidate.

Social movements in Brazil, more or less organized, began to grow especially from the 1990s, eventually boosted by the internet media. The excluded minorities began to voice their needs despite the abandonment of the public power, be it by incompetence or evil indifference. Non-confirmed statistics say that there are 300 thousand civil organizations in Brazil, raising funds from individuals, companies, and government entities in most different agendas, reaching where the State and the companies do not. Among them, it is worth highlighting those related to urban *favelas*, once they have been gaining visibility in the media through their “community leaders,” who brought another portrait to *favela* as a place where poor people live, detached from its classical image as a hostage and hiding place of criminal organizations. It is clear that these NGOs have the legitimacy, capacity, and credibility as important agents in the context of the pandemic. Nevertheless, another category of proto-organizations has been playing a decisive role, this time helping, working with or regardless of those NGOs: Inhabitants Association, Samba Schools, churches of several denominations, Popular Court, and other popular groups, that were or not already functioning, turning to be a powerful infrastructure for civil solidarity chains in those spaces. Their sense of collectivity is shaping clusters with the know-how and the capillarity to help their equals not to starve.

According to Tânia Fernandes and André Lima, researchers for Fiocruz-Fundação Oswaldo Cruz [Oswaldo Cruz Foundation]<sup>4</sup>, “despite all the history of stigmas, stereotypes and many public policies shaped in political clientelism and/or tutelage, the *favela* inhabitants in Rio de Janeiro have been showing, in the face of the scenarios of the suppression of the rights, an important organization capacity. The resilience, as proclaimed by international bodies, configures itself as a phenomenon long pre-existing in these territories, manifested in solidarity actions (...).”

In the voice of the *favela* Maré, through its own news portal Maré de Notícias Online [Maré Online News], “Before the governments – federal, state and city – think of direct actions to the *favelas* and peripheries of Rio de Janeiro, the communities themselves realized that, once more, they had to study and put into action strategies to help families that live in these territories. They

then formed local Crisis Centers to meet the food and hygiene demands of the *favelas*' population in several locations. Thus, many campaigns arose in the periphery of Brazil.” (Reis 2020)

Social movements like NGOs and institutional projects function as an intermediary between public power and many invisible edges that the public power may not see but which were not really enough in the context of the pandemic: these collective actions were necessary, for instance, to make the donations circulate and reach each person in need. The truck loaded with food may come to the entrance of the *favela*, but the distribution among the inhabitants (which may add up to hundreds of thousands of people) should be through their own administration.

The role of these self-organizations became vital also due to a specific product that came to be the main item of donations: Cesta Básica – literally Basic Basket, the basic monthly food basket –, a box containing food for a family for a month. For DIEESE (Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies), the National Basic Basket contains 13 items and weighs 13 kilos, but there are different types of Cestas Básica, with its own weight and volume<sup>5</sup>.

Besides the donations, the local Crisis Centers with its volunteers are mobilizing themselves to carry out many other campaigns designed for their own reality, like raising donations among themselves, making lunch boxes, sewing masks, making room to isolate the infected people, hiring community nurses and doctors, and alerting people with protocols. The latter is particularly interesting, as they know well the dynamics of their own group and know how to address their people with their own language.

On a morning of early April, a sound-equipped car was passing through the alleys of the *favela* complex Maré, where 140 thousand people live distributed in 16 communities: “Get on grip, fellas. The coronavirus has come to *favelas*!,” “Remember to wash hands with water and soap, let the house open (my emphasis) and clean the surfaces with disinfectant!” But there were more solidary orientations like “If your neighbor is out of water, share!,” in a direct and blunt language that has also been used by the Frente de Mobilização da Maré (Maré Mobilization Front) in banners, posters, images, and street art spread in the surroundings. The “Manual of how not to mess up in times of coronavirus,” attached in strategic points, has been making a difference. (...) In the *favela* Complexo do Alemão, the population organized themselves over the idea of a Crisis Cabinet, without waiting for government actions, headed by the pre-existing *coletivos* [thematic groups in social actions]. (...) As an extra resource, they use the funk beat (...).

Since not everyone in the *favelas* has access to the internet and some are even illiterate, they are creating their own means to communicate themselves, like sound-equipped cars, community radios, wired community radios making use of electric poles, publicity pieces in bus stations, mototaxis, etc. Creativity goes far in content, like radio soap operas, videos, raps, slogans, gifs, posts, cards, etc. Their language is direct, blunt, and deliberately informal, making use of slangs, witty puns, rap style rhymes, etc: for instance, the campaign “Maré diz NÃO ao Coronavírus” [Maré says NO to coronavirus], which is read “The tide (is) to say NO to coronavirus,” for “maré” means “tide.” Examples are many: “Se liga no Corona” [Get on grip with corona], “Taça das Favelas” [*Favela* Cup], “G10 das Favelas” [*Favelas* G10], “Vaquinha online”

[Online chip in], not to mention a cartoon showing the need to use a mask with two men urinating with and without pants.

Their actions are overflowing to outer spaces: for example, the campaign called “Maré says NO to Coronavirus,” in conjunction with their partners in and out of the *favela* complex of Manguinhos and Maré, gathered several *coletivos* to distribute lunch boxes to street people. According to their numbers, 4,600 lunch boxes were distributed to street people in the first month of the pandemic only and even donated IPEs (individual protection equipment) to local health service units. MSTC also mobilized the civil society and investors to provide meals to street people, and more than 60 thousand street people would have been benefited from their aid until June 30, according to MSTC leader Carmen Silva. In the occupations of the MSTC, with two thousand people in six occupation spots, they installed sinks in the entrance and mobilized sewers to make masks and people to deliver Cestas Básicas, creating the Hunger Combat Committee (Rede Brasil Atual 2020b).

Another important axis of these actions was benefitting mothers. On April 3rd, CUFA launched the campaign Mães da Favela [*Favela Mothers*], to give monetary aid to mothers that live with old parents or have a disabled child. According to CUFA numbers, in less than a month, the campaign gathered 4.5 million reais to what has been baptized as Voucher Mãe [Mother Voucher], an aid of 120 reais per month, and received inscriptions of more than 30 thousand mothers in only one month (as of April 20) (Peres, A.C. 2020). After the death of the housemaid in Rio de Janeiro, Yane, whose mother is also a housemaid, founded another *coletivo* called “For the lives of our mothers” to demand paid quarantine, like the one given to company workers during the pandemic.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In the context of the pandemic, *favelas* are showing a powerful potential for mobilization and collective spirit, developing articulation capacity and self-help organization, and even expanding their actions to outer spaces, as observed by Bianca Peçanha, one of the coordinators of Nica Jacarezinho, an independent community center for learning projects (Veloso 2020). The scenario of the pandemic seems to be exerting a catalytic role for popular communities to experience and socialize the difficulties, bringing to light relationships of solidarity and acknowledgment of their vulnerabilities. These community organizations have been working for some time, giving another pitch and voice to the image of the *favelas*, and their performance during the pandemic may yield more visibility to them as a socio-economic ecosystem. With their own dynamics and potential to mingle with society on an enhanced level, the *coletivos* are emerging also as a new economic model. During the quarantine, live sessions through Zoom and Google Meet have been happening intensely with and within these groups, making visible other minorities which used to be almost invisible until now, like garbage pickers, babassu palm breakers, *ribeirinhos*, *quilombolas* eco-farms, etc., voicing their own identities and needs not only as simple minorities but also as economic players.

A recent report from the Instituto Pólís, a Brazilian NGO, concluded that the *favela* of Paraisópolis in São Paulo had better control of the COVID-19 pandemic than the city of São Paulo. While on May 18, 2020, the mortality rate in the region was 21.7 per 100,000 inhabitants, the municipal average was 56.2, making it possible for Paraisópolis to serve as a role model for other communities (Polís, 2020). These local initiatives of mutual aid and grassroots activism defy one-size-fits-all and top-down strategies and offer local alternatives of pandemic control, especially in the context of necropolitics of Brazilian federal governments.

We can observe that in their discourse manifested through their channels and the attention they are receiving from the press are convincing and deserve a reflection. Thus, it is possible to recall the demonstration of decentralized and non-organized protests of 2013 to see it resurging now in these marginalized spaces, as a response to the pandemic of course, but also in face of the conservative tide, characterized by the “attack to the minorities” as observed by Schwarcz (2019: 26). Reflecting on the reasons for the June Journeys, she believes that people who came down to the streets then were those benefited from the prior period of a virtuous cycle, when it’s said that 50 million Brazilians got out of misery or poverty, and when Brazil experienced betterments in social initiatives in health, education, housing, and transportation (Ribeiro 2019: 316). Thus, they claimed to guarantee and expand their recently acquired rights, since no one in history wants their acquired rights are withdrawn (Schwarcz 2019: 231).

In this way, we can find a meaningful reason in education and schooling in which Brazil reached 9.3 average schooling years in 2018 (IBGE 2020g), while from 1985 to 2000 it went from 3.48 to mere 4.88, lower than Colombia (5.27), Bolivia (5.58) or Ecuador (6.41) then (Maduro Jr. 2007). As made evident in the aforementioned *The Mind of Brazilians*, the quality of democracy is enhanced with the schooling years of the population, “one of the most important findings of the survey.” (Almeida 2007: 18) Almeida cites Robert Dahl’s polyarchy, which shots a light on the plural and diverse nature of the Brazilian society, and, even not being possible to replace formal schooling, the experience of this horizontal solidarity can be regarded as another form of learning, performing as a cultural infrastructure for attaining more democracy: “... a democracy works better, and survives longer, when its constitution is reinforced by democratic norms written and non-written: shared” (Schwarcz 2019: 235).

These authors agree that Brazilian civil society came out of the June Journeys of 2013 more aware of the limitations of the State and averse of structural hierarchies, “opening space to playing within networks of peoples and organizations,” and refusing “the undesirable intermediation of the State, parties, Unions and other institutions that seek to monopolize the rules and mediate the private relations between individuals” (D’avila 2017: 19). They also agree that “the democracy doesn’t depend on the poll majorities anymore” (Schwarcz 2019: 18) and that “there isn’t any democracy that is not social” (Ribeiro 2019: 333).

Referring to the Brazilian political regression, Ribeiro reminds us that all advancements in history had been a sequence of forth and back movements, with the balance resulting in favor of the former. Thus, this present retreat must be hopefully brief so that Brazil retakes its path of

progress, despite all the skepticism that we must nurture against the idea of progress or direction in history, because “without a promise of progress, modern politics cannot exist” (337). Analogously, as adventurous as it can seem, the extinguishment of protests in 2013 can be considered another retreat of this kind, now returning in another context, paving the way to reduce social inequality in Brazil from the bottom up.

## Notes

1. She also points that, according to *Slave Voyages*, the number of those who landed in the Americas alive were, respectively, 4.8 million in Brazil, out of 10.7 million total (23).

2. A Brazilian NGO founded in 1999, in Rio de Janeiro, by the social activist Celso Athayde and the rapper MV Bill, both favela inhabitants, for empowerment of the impoverished through helping themselves, as opposed to simply being assisted by government and nonprofit programs. Today CUFA is present in all twenty-seven states of Brazil and develops projects in education, environment, culture and sports and networks more than 500 favelas (<http://www.cufa.org.br/>).

3. Within a month, from March 17 to April 17, the Brazilian Federal Revenue Service received 19 million requests to regularize the CPF, which can be cancelled automatically in the absence of a personal income tax return for two years, or be without the right to vote if it has not been justified in two successive elections.

4. Scientific institution for research and development in biology located in Rio de Janeiro, the most important research institute for public health in Brazil.

5. For DIEESE (Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies), the National Basic Basket contains 13 items: Meat, milk, beans, rice, flour, potatoes, tomatoes, bread, instant coffee, bananas, sugar, oil, butter. The items, as well as the quantities can vary by localities, companies and many other variables. But the DIEESE one serves to monitor the price inflation as well.

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