No one could have predicted the events that took place in Brazil in June and July 2013, after a violent police crackdown against the protests of the MPL (Free Pass Movement) in São Paulo. The increase in the rate paid by the users of public transport of 20 centavos of a Real, was the trigger for protests to occupy the streets. The violent response of the military police forces, rather than stifle the movement, caused it to spread like wildfire throughout the country, the focus of the protests no longer restricted to the question of fare increases on public transport.

The demonstrations that shook the establishment and created an inflection point in Brazilian democratic history had an urban crisis as their backdrop. This urban crisis has been highlighted in recent decades by the deepening of socio-spatial segregation in Brazilian cities, which have increasingly become hostage to the logic of business management for the benefit of private real estate capital.

The advent of mega sporting events in Brazil, namely the 2013 FIFA Confederations Cup, the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, has aggravated the crisis in large cities. The construction works associated with these events have increased the hegemony of private cars at the expense of public transport, with the construction of flyovers, the widening of roads, and tunneling.

Thousands of poor families have been removed from their homes to make way for these major infrastructure works, with no guarantee of proper resettlement. Such removals occur in total disregard to the international human rights treaties to which Brazil has been one of the signatories. Social movements estimate that more than 150,000 families will be removed due to these sporting events in Brazil.

The mega sporting events are, in short, a clear expression of the so-called notion of the ‘city of exceptions’, where the city is designed for profit and in which any sort of urban standard for the use of space can be relaxed in favour of the interests of real estate capital. Not without reason, the complaints related to these events surfaced during the protests. In Belo Horizonte, the State capital of Minas Gerais, the three big marches that happened during the Confederations Cup, one of which had approximately 150,000 people, headed towards the football stadium where the games were taking place. The violent police repression, aimed at protecting the so-called ‘FIFA territory’, resulted in the deaths of two people.

The issue of housing issue is of great importance in the context of this ‘urban crisis’, especially when considering the role of housing as part of the access to goods and services offered by the city. In Brazil, the struggle for housing also has a central role in popular urban movements, which often use the occupations of idle property as a method of political pressure and popular organisation.

It is appropriate to emphasise the important victory achieved by the homeless movement in Belo Horizonte as a result of the June 2013 protests in Brazil. After occupying Belo Horizonte’s City Hall, the movement managed to establish a channel to communicate and negotiate with the local government, which had until then been closed to dialogue.

Minas Gerais is the third richest state in Brazil with the third largest GDP of all of Brazil’s other states. Belo Horizonte, the capital, has about two and a half million inhabitants. Like any big city in Brazil, the poorest people, especially those with household incomes of less than three minimum wages, cannot afford to buy a house or an apartment, even with access to public subsidy programs for housing finance.

The 1988 constitution of the Republic of Brazil guarantees everyone the right to...
'Peace without a voice is not peace, it's fear!'
20th June 2013, Belo Horizonte.

Picture: Maria Objetiva
housing and provides that all property should fulfill a societal function. Therefore, an abandoned urban property with a strictly speculative purpose, without any economic or residential purpose, violates the constitution. However, when homeless families occupy a property that stands idle without a societal function, in order to put into effect the right to live with dignity, the State acts in defence of property at any cost.

The judiciary, which is extremely conservative and steeped in the notion of property as an absolute good, has not yet incorporated the new constitutional framework that amends the right to property for the benefit of its societal function. Thus, decisions on a preliminary basis to grant a repossession order against communities that have arisen from urban occupations are frequent. The popular collectives of lawyers and public defenders who work for the legal defence of these communities manage to, at most, gain time in procedural motions to allow for the consolidation of occupations. When this happens, the issue becomes more political and less legal in the view of the authorities.

This is the case of urban occupations in Belo Horizonte where, in late July 2013, those involved in such occupations banded together to occupy the City Hall and demand negotiations with the Government to prevent the displacement of approximately 3,000 families in uncertain living situations. These occupations were not recognised by the Government, which refuses to provide such basic services as energy supply, delivery of post, sanitation, transport, health, education and urban infrastructure. The experience of the Dandara community, where 1,200 families live on land which has been occupied since April 2009, exemplifies the Government's response. The direct action taken by these communities in the seat of the municipal government in Belo Horizonte, shortly after the Pope's visit to Brazil, lasted 32 hours and gained significant media coverage. Within hours, the municipal authority had obtained a court order to evict the protesters from City Hall. This would come at a high political price. Many of the young people who had poured into the streets of Belo Horizonte in recent months camped out in front of City Hall and in

Protests against the Confederations Cup, June 2013. The violent response of the military police forces, rather than stifle the movement, caused it to spread like wildfire throughout the country.
a beautiful demonstration of solidarity blocked one of the city’s major avenues. A sea of colourful tents, painted with signs and slogans supporting the protesters, was formed. A photo of a mother breastfeeding her son, who had been denied entry by the police, through the bars of the headquarters of the City Hall was widely shared on social networks. These events were to prove crucial in progressing negotiations between the protesters and the local government. The immediate agreement reached was that the protesters would vacate the building with the promise (transcribed in minutes signed by the Mayor) that urban occupations would be included in the zoning of the city as areas for land regularisation.

This experience in Belo Horizonte can provide some helpful indicators of positions that can be taken by political groups that campaign in favour of socialism. For the social movements that had been involved locally, 2013 was just a trial run.

In Brazil, as in many other countries, the city was not always part of the analysis of revolutionary theory that traditionally prioritised workers’ and peasants’ causes. The protests in June and July 2013, in this sense, have a lot to teach the progressive forces of society. Firstly there is the conclusion that the demonstrations in recent months were exceptional urban rebellions. The protests help to provide a focus on urban issues within the context of the development of capitalism. They also help to allow for the construction of a theory of urban struggle.

We only have to listen to the voices that sounded in the streets to realise that the claims written on the signs and on the bodies of protesters are not just a direct result of the contradictions forged on the factory floor. The logic of production and appropriation of space produces its own contradictions that cannot be analysed and understood as coming from the contradiction between capital and labour, in the strictest sense.

Understanding the contradictions that are typical of the logic of space appropriation in cities, within the frameworks of neo-liberalism, is a part of understanding the ‘urban crisis’, the ultimate reason for these demonstrations. And if the ‘urban crisis’ is the ultimate reason for these demonstrations, which shocked both the right and the left, it is necessary to empower the victims of this ‘urban crisis’, those segregated from the city. Part of this lies in favouring those claims being made for urban reform, many of which are already set out in the constitution and laws of Brazil.

Progress towards recognising existing constitutional rights is sadly slow. The ‘Status of the City’, an important law which regulates the guidelines for the social functioning of cities and the urban policy instruments of strategic planning, has not yet been assimilated by the political forces that act on the urban scene some 12 years after its enactment.

A major challenge is presented to the left: to fully understand the urban phenomenon, to defy all its complexity, to unravel its peculiar contradictions, the normative and institutional limitations and the roles played by antagonistic actors and to, finally, walk the path of the valued use of the city.

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