

## AFTER THE TAKE-OVER

### *Mobilizing the Political Creativity of Brazil's Favelas*

**T**HOUGH THE ENTIRE legal machinery was mobilized to justify it, the impeachment of Brazil's first female president was an authoritarian act. On one side: the President, Dilma Rousseff, a woman seen by a significant section of the population as of the left. On the other: a man, white, understood by many as embodying the right, and an organic member of the dominant social class. In the aftermath of Dilma's overthrow, the balance of forces in Brazil has been tilted in favour of the most conservative sections of the ruling class. This implies significant social changes in the sphere of state power and the public imagination, at a time when inequalities are widening, and the withdrawal of rights, the spread of discrimination and the criminalization of dispossessed young people and women—above all poor black women—is on the rise. The democratic process that opened up from 1985, with the end of the military dictatorship, is now being suffocated, initiating a new crisis that poses deep challenges for the left.

This essay sets out to analyse the social conditions of Brazilian women in the context of this conjuncture, bearing in mind, first, the wide variation in women's positions in a city like Rio—in their cultural outlooks and worldviews, their daily lives and political activity, their socially grounded situations. Second, black women from the favelas face inequalities that distinguish them from women of other social strata—the middle class, and those who don't work for a living. In this sense, beyond analysing the position of women in general, my central concern here is to identify that of women who suffer not only from the institutional machismo of Brazilian society, but also the impact of the structural racism that is hegemonic here. Third, I want to draw attention to the women working

in the poorest and most precarious conditions. This goes for the majority of women in the favelas and other marginalized urban districts, who nevertheless remain a powerful force for creativity and inventiveness, with the capacity to overcome their circumstances through their daily struggles and forms of local organizing. It is through these multiple activities that women have taken on a central role in cities like Rio de Janeiro.

There are some conditions that are specific to the lives of women from the favelas, which should be taken into account in any consideration of the varying levels of social, economic and cultural inequality. Neighbourhoods lack government resources or infrastructure, with poor public transport, making it hard to access the areas where the major educational, work and cultural centres are concentrated, which in turn has an impact on the time that can be spent in study, leisure and family life. Second, class distinctions also operate in the favelas, even though all are workers; precarious labour conditions and contracts exert a range of different pressures. Exposure to lethal violence is a common condition, as is the experience of discrimination and stigma. Finally, it's worth noting again the creativity of these women, motivated by the need to surmount their objective circumstances and claim alternative spaces for artistic, educational and political activity, as well as varied forms of subsistence work. Developing an analysis based on this complex objective situation, while also taking into account the subjective factors entailed in the ideological arguments, narratives and institutionalized power of dominant discourses, is a crucial exercise for understanding and intervention in the current conjuncture.

After this brief outline of the category '*favelada* woman', we need to substantiate how these women live, feel and act on a daily basis, confronted with the effects of the recent right-wing 'coup'. The emergency of life has always been a vivid reality for these women. They have always lived the consequences of the state's crackdown on rights and the imposition of policies aiming at interdiction and domination. Periods of 'social well-being' in Brazilian history have been hard-won achievements, rather than concessions granted by those in power. Although institutional machismo has been one of the bases of Brazil's social formation, black *favelada* women also encounter other forms of domination. But the present political situation, characterized by the hardening of state power and the pre-eminence of an authoritarian-conservative white male, intensifies this dynamic.

While the lived experience of these inequalities, running throughout Brazilian history, has a greater impact on the peripheries and the favelas, these women are not defined by impoverished passivity—contrary to their representations in mainstream discourse and the media. They have taken on central roles in the fight for state policies that challenge inequality and expand the human dimensions of civil rights. In this way, they have succeeded in making changes at a neighbourhood level that make powerful claims as new sites for the popular imagination and for social relations. In their engagement in everything from the arts to social and political practice in the marginalized districts, the presence of these women resonates through the city. It is worth emphasising that the peripheries and the favelas are part of the city—not separate from it. What distinguishes them from the other districts is the way the residents in these communities organize themselves, beyond the low public investment in their lives.

The life trajectories of these women—particularly black and mixed-race women, who make up the majority—are driven by an instinct for survival, for themselves and their families. They build networks of solidarity focused on sustaining lives and reinforcing dignity. While they bear the brunt of Brazil's unequal social formation, they are also the ones who produce the means for transforming it, expanding mobility in every dimension. In this sense, they will be most sharply penalized in the current context, while at the same time they are centrally positioned to resist. The term 'survival' here goes beyond the maintenance of life—even in the face of the growing wave of femicides in Brazil (in 2015, two-thirds of the victims were black). Survival also involves housing conditions, food, health, clothing, schools, working lives, means of transport, access to culture; it goes beyond any purely economic definition to include the multiple dimensions of life. Today, these bodies in the peripheries are the principal site of exploitation and control imposed by the capitalist order—replacing the 'industrial body'. In this context, black women from the peripheries, especially the favelas, can be key instantiations for democratic advance, co-existence with difference and overcoming inequality.

Although the cultural activism and political militancy of these women is initially related to local issues, and intimately linked to the objective and subjective conditions of their lives, the local advances they have won have an impact throughout the city. In this sense, there are

numerous outstanding *favelada* women, whose actions and representations transcend the environment that predominates over their lives. This is not a matter of individuals being particularly enlightened or special, but a question of trajectories, encounters, perceptions of self and other, opportunities, and engagement with social issues. In a positive sense, this phenomenon, already on the rise before the right-wing takeover, poses the challenge to the left of how to sustain its momentum as a way of overcoming the conservative wave now sweeping across Brazil.

However, a considerable number of *favelada* women view political participation with some distrust. They are unlikely to be in touch with those who can access state institutions—seen by the majority as belonging to the undifferentiated ranks of the political elite. This segment has been growing, as the dominant classes succeed in spreading the idea that the most serious problem facing Brazil is not inequality, but corruption. The more this perspective takes hold of the collective imagination, the more people will reject political participation and identify ‘the politicians’ as the main cause of corruption. Measures benefiting the poor have rarely been a priority in Brazil. This in turn reinforces the prevailing mode of fear, of non-involvement with political decisions, which only serves to thicken the authoritarian atmosphere and lower the level of participation, including the vote (just look at the growth of blank votes and abstentions). Distrust of the ruling class has always existed—a sense that no change ever lasts, that everything is temporary and short-dated. With the right-wing takeover this feeling has strengthened its grip on the popular imagination, become an impediment to democratic advance that we must overcome.

Unemployment and precarious work have always predominated in the favelas, though solidarity has helped create the conditions for resistance. As well as the certainty that we can never stop, that life is a permanent struggle, this environment produces its own resources for going beyond these immediate surroundings and succeeding on a larger scale. Although the advances of recent years are now under severe threat, it would be wrong to say that nothing had changed, that everything remains as it has always been. Despite the realities of inadequate day-care centres and schools, poor job prospects, little access to the arts, language studies or the resources of human history, these urban peripheries recognizably produce multiple forms of intelligence—and women occupy a strategic place in this process. The task of the left in the twenty-first century is to

expand this potential, creating narratives that foreground the freedom, participation and emancipatory activism of black *favelada* women.

The uncertainty hanging over the Bolsa Família welfare programme already foreshadows a return of the needy to the doorsteps of the church. Intensified by the right-wing takeover, the feeling of a lack of horizons, an absence of perspective, feeds the sense of pessimism, the refusal to think beyond tomorrow. In these conditions, it's all the more important for the left to register the achievements of black and *favelada* women and their transformative potential. Contesting ways of seeing, feeling and thinking in a world of constant change, situating black women's deeds—as they fight to overcome the impacts of institutional racism—in these contested spaces: this is the challenge.

Running counter to the apathy and cynicism, other elements are pulsating through Rio de Janeiro, distinct from those that predominate at the national level. The historic election, with 46,000 votes, of a black *favelada* feminist councillor, on the political left, stands in contradiction to the logic of Temer's takeover. This suggests the importance of occupying the spaces of state power, especially the institutions, by way of participating in elections and contesting authoritarian meritocracy to break up, as much as possible, the white male contingent that dominates these environments. The stereotypes associated with being a woman, and the expectations for how we should behave, are facets of a hegemonic institutional discourse that remains deeply conservative. This reactionary movement is only gaining momentum, as the outcomes in the US and UK suggest. At the international level, wars and persecution manifest themselves as forms of control, each one worse than the last, imposed upon the excluded body of 'the other'. The misleading narrative of the 'economic crisis' is used as a cover for the roll-back of rights, leaving those in the favelas, especially poor black women, even more vulnerable to the violence and institutional racism that are deep in the social pores of Brazil.

Temer's illegitimate, authoritarian and conservative government expands the stranglehold of the political and economic elites who dominate Brazil. That is why police repression has intensified in the face of popular protests, along with the war-on-drugs discourse that strikes at the heart of the peripheral zones. The counter-reforms on labour and social security are further examples of the attack on rights, affecting women

in particular, especially those who live by their labour or rely on the work of their families for survival. This marks the experience for black *favelada* women on a national scale. In this conjuncture, which favours Bonapartism or the growth of conservative authoritarianism, the first response must be to move ahead with immediate, hard-hitting actions, building support for campaigns that emerge out of the moment, such as ‘Direct Elections Now’—recalling the *Diretas Já* movement of the early 1980s—or ‘Not One Right Less’. Second, defending lives against lethal violence and fighting for human dignity. Third, developing policies that undermine capital’s strategies in Brazil. Fourth, strengthening the narrative of full coexistence in cities like Rio, to sway the public imagination towards the crucial challenge of overcoming inequalities. Finally, to centre as social actors those from the margins and the favelas throughout Brazil. Building structures that help empower poor, black women to take on the role of active citizenship, aimed at winning a city of rights, is fundamental for the revolution the contemporary world requires.

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