

The Brazilian Favela as Stage and Persona, and the Challenge of an Alternative-Narrative

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Abstract

This article discusses the present reality of the favelas of Rio de Janeiro within the context of a new world order and the effects of globalization, and suggests that the current socio-economic model does not ensure the welfare of the world's poorest populations. It looks at the capacity for struggle within poor communities as a stimulus in the search for solutions to the difficulties of everyday life. The article presents an optimistic view which envisions the emergence of 'alternative-narratives' capable of offering communities the right to a voice, and suggests that theatre practice can be a means of creating an alternative discourse. The social and artistic projects at work in Rio de Janeiro's favelas are placed within the context of today's socio-economic reality, relationships between theatre and community are interwoven, and the community stage is considered as a space for the expression of alternative-narratives capable of resisting the 'dominant idea.'

We have an obligation to invent another world because we know that another world is possible. It is up to us to construct it with our bare hands, just like going on stage to create a play.¹

Augusto Boal

Rio de Janeiro, like many large cities in developing countries, is the stage on which the flaws and contradictions of the globalized, capitalist world are displayed. The process of growth and impoverishment in the world's large cities is the focus of Mike Davis' *Planet of Slums*,² in which the author diagnoses the worldwide phenomenon of slum growth accentuated by neoliberal globalization. In large areas of the developing world, global forces have steered rural populations towards the cities. Accelerated processes of urbanization, together with a lack of growth in employment opportunities, have created a ready-made prescription for the mass production of slums.

¹ Augusto Boal died on the 2nd of May, 2009. One month before, he had been nominated World Theatre Ambassador by UNESCO. This citation is from his acceptance speech which reaffirms his belief in the transforming power of theatre.

² Read in translation as *Planeta Favela*.

‘The Challenge of Slums,’ a report published in October 2003 by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), is recognized by Davis as the ‘first truly global audit of urban poverty’ (31). Davis, who used the report as the basis for his study, states that at present more than one billion people live in slums scattered throughout the cities of the southern hemisphere.³ The study describes the history and maps the global process of slum building, from the 1970s up until the appearance of the ‘mega slums’ that mark many contemporary cities.

Although the picture is not promising, there are those who believe that possibilities for transformation exist. One such thinker is Brazilian geographer, Milton Santos, who suggests that we should perceive the world in relation to three alternative models: the first, ‘globalization as fable’; the second, ‘perverse globalization’; and the third, ‘for an alternative globalization’(18). The first, the most fanciful, presents ‘the world as they would wish us to see it’; the second, a more realistic view, presents ‘the world as it is’; and the third, more optimistically, envisions the possibility of a more humane world (18). From the viewpoint of ‘globalization as fable,’ misguided concepts lead us to believe in ideas such as ‘the global village’ and ‘global unity,’ as if the world were now within the reach of all. We are led to believe that the world market has fulfilled the dream of a united world, when we can perceive that in reality the world is now more divided than ever, especially with regard to the distribution of wealth.

For Joseph Stiglitz, the process of globalization has not benefited as many people as it should have. The economist maintains that globalizing forces could have worked better for the world’s poorer populations if affluent countries had created economic and political programmes based on values and principles designed to promote development in poorer countries. Instead, the

³ The author observes that the classic definition of ‘slum’ adopted officially at a meeting of UNO in Nairobi in October 2002 is adhered to in the UN-Habitat report. According to that definition, a slum is characterized by ‘an excess of population, poor or informal dwellings, inadequate access to drinking water and basic sanitation, and insecurity in ownership of habitation’ (33).

richer nations have created a regime ‘of global commerce in benefit of their own commercial and financial interests’ (43). Stiglitz is categorical in affirming that: ‘Globalization has the potential to bring enormous benefits to people from developed and developing nations alike. But there are overwhelming signs that it has not fulfilled its potential’ (63). Many countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia live on the margins of international society. For Oswaldo de Rivero, Bolivia, Haiti, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Peru are among those Latin American countries most affected by a lack of food security. He warns that countries whose food provision is threatened by the rapid growth of urban populations ‘will not be able to import increasing quantities of food products with the reduced income from the exportation of raw materials and low technology manufacture’ (190).⁴ This situation, he states, will lead to an increased dependence on foreign aid and national indigence. These conditions as described by Stiglitz and Rivero help us to understand the ‘perverse globalization’ viewpoint of Santos, who affirms:

From whatever angle we examine the characteristic situations of the current age; the reality can be seen as a manufactory of perversity. [...] We live in a world of exclusion exacerbated by social vulnerability, the harvest of the neoliberal model. (Santos 59)

According to Santos, among the constituent factors of a perverse globalization we find the ‘way in which information is offered to humanity and the emergence of money in its pure state as the generator of economic and social life’ (38). Santos calls these two factors of money and information a ‘double tyranny.’ He proposes that these factors represent ‘two central aggressions,

⁴ All translation from Stiglitz, Rivero and Santos by David Herman.

pillars of the ideological system [...] a basis for new totalitarianisms – that is to say, the new globalitarisms that we are witnessing’ (38). For the geographer, the pernicious combination of the tyranny of information, conditioned by the interests of a specific group of global actors – a few countries and commercial enterprises – and the omnipresence of money,⁵ constitute the basis of the ‘idea’ which he calls ‘dominant’ and regards as a threat to our daily lives.

In spite of this, Santos’ third proposed reading of the world, ‘for an alternative globalization,’ is quite optimistic. He believes that the limits of the current perverse globalization indicate the possibility of a new period, that of another kind of globalization. For him, it is the poor, live actors in this social drama where survival depends on a daily struggle, who will take on a determining role in the creation of the present and the future: ‘Poverty is a situation of need, but also of struggle, an active state in which the forming of awareness is possible’ (132). Even though the major cities are areas in which global capitalism can spread the contagion of poverty, it is here where alternatives to global capitalism can come to light. Urban social life creates an atmosphere that is favourable to the condition of struggle, which can generate a positive result in the creation of a political life that belongs to the poor. This new politics, which Santos calls ‘the politics of the underclass,’ is nothing like institutional politics founded on the ideology of growth and globalization, but is based on ‘the daily existence lived by all, poor and non-poor, and fed by the simple necessity of existing’ (133). The mixture of classes and populations characteristic of large cities motivates people to compare themselves to others and ask why there are differences. This questioning is of a political nature and even though people might not fully understand the systems that regulate their lives, a desire is created in poorer citizens to surmount their situation.

⁵ Santos believes that not only economic systems but each one of us individually is compelled to adapt to the ‘omnipresence of money.’ ‘Ideologically based, this money without restriction becomes the measure of all things, giving impetus to the vocation of accumulating wealth for its own sake’ (56).

In cities – above all in large cities – the effects of proximity seem to allow for a greater identification of the situation. [...] In this way, the identification of material and intellectual abandonment to which populations are relegated creates recognition of the condition of need together with new possibilities for awareness. (Santos 166)

Even though hegemonic socioeconomic forces operate with most intensity in the urban environment, it is here, also, that we encounter the possibility of the emergence of a new order and a new discourse.

If history unfolds today in consequence of the domination of, in Santos' words, 'vectors from above,' the hopeful geographer envisions the possibility of another history that will be the expression of 'vectors from below.' The agglomeration of people in slums can create a dynamic in which the appetite for consumerism, 'a limited and directionless situation,' does not always prevail. This appetite can be substituted by the pursuit of citizenship: 'the formation of inclusive and systematic standpoints' (166). Lack of employment and low wages can inspire inventive solutions in the sphere of work, portending a time in which popular culture will gain more influence and communications media will cease to be a mere representation of a common sense imposed by the 'dominant idea.' It is here that we can corroborate the possibility of the creation of a new discourse.

The reflections of Professor Tim Prentki are in tune with those of Santos. Prentki disagrees with the post-modern view that grand narratives were dissolved in the global conflicts of the 20th century and argues that, on the contrary, these conflicts gave way to 'the dominance of a single, totalising super-narrative of capitalism in its current form: the neoliberal model of globalization' (1). This control is not only evident in the financial markets but also in the global media, whereby a small number of actors dictate the knowledge allowed to the majority, deciding what

we should know and think, how we should behave, what we should consume, even what we should feel. According to Prentki:

While the neoliberal model of globalization operates primarily as an economic model that thrives on deregulated financial markets that enable speculators and transnational corporations to move billions of dollars in and out of national economies at the flick of a keyboard, it is also manifested in the global media operations of a few big players. The speed and sophistication with which broadcast media organizations operate today means, in effect, that a small group [...] tell the rest of us what is happening in the world. (Prentki 15)

In his last publication, Augusto Boal also considers the dominance of the capitalist neoliberal regime not only in economic transactions ‘where the speculators have free rein and money prevails over the stomach’ (20), but also in the manipulation of the minds of individuals. Boal emphasises the need for art and culture in the struggle against what he calls the ‘Invasion of Minds’ (15). He believes that the dominant classes control and use the word, the image, and sound, monopolizing these channels and producing an ‘anesthetic aesthetic [...] taking over the minds of citizens in order to sterilize them and programme them for obedience, imitation, and lack of creativity’ (18). For Boal, the ruling aesthetic channels of the word, the image and the sound serve as territory for the action of oppressors and he advocates the search for societies without oppressors or oppressed (15).

Prentki turns to another Brazilian, educator Paulo Freire, and proposes that what is at stake is the possibility of our ‘naming the world,’ since others are already doing this for us. According

to Prentki, the recovery of the capability to ‘name the world’⁶ should not be conditioned by the production of ‘counter-narratives’ but by the creation of ‘alternative-narratives’ capable of unsettling the reigning super-narrative. Prentki questions the notion of counter-narrative which, he maintains, would be the direct result caused by the action of the dominant narrative, ‘as a mirror image of resistance’ (16), and whose motivation, like that of its mirror original, would be the desire for power or the gaining of ‘power over.’ He argues that ‘the presence of the counter force is a key ingredient in the process of justifying the use of violence in the maintenance of economic domination through the control of resources’ (17).

Following this line of thought, the counter-narrative of Bin Laden’s terrorists gave incentive to the discourse and practice of the ‘war against terror,’ authorising actions of equal violence, convenience and benefit to the ‘dominant discourse.’ For Prentki, narrative and counter-narrative represent notions of ‘power over.’ The author maintains that, within the context of alternative-narratives, relationships are based not on wealth but on dignity, and the notion of power gains a new meaning – the ‘power to.’ Rather than follow the logic of ‘power over,’ the alternative-narrative thrives on socially creative actions and the ‘self-determination of groupings formed by horizontal and not vertical relations’ (20). So, in spite of perverse forces at work in the world, other narratives reveal the power to provoke change.

It seems true that the transformations suffered by the world in the last decades of the 20th century and more recently have created a wave of conformism and even a kind of anaesthesia which characterises our times. According to Santos, ‘the idea that the process and current form of globalization is irreversible has been disseminated [...] leading people to believe that there is no alternative to the current state of thing’ (160). Nevertheless, he challenges the dominant idea,

⁶ Freire believes that to name the world means to change it: ‘human existence cannot be mute, silent, nor can it nourish itself with false words. It is with true words that man can transform the world.’ (Freire, *Pedagogia do Oprimido* 78)

affirming the possibility of change. One of the signs of the imminence of a new period is, in the opinion of Santos, the way in which popular culture is regenerating. Cultural life does not escape the influence that globalization exerts on our lives. If on the one hand mass culture endeavors to impose itself on popular culture, on the other hand it is worth noticing the way popular culture reacts to this imposition. This reaction, which Santos calls ‘evening the score,’ is evident, for example, in the expressive manifestations of the communities of Rio de Janeiro which reinvent music, movement and speech. These manifestations exercise their quality of local narratives and have brought into relief, as Santos observes ‘the day-to-day life of the poor, minorities and the excluded by means of the celebration of everyday life’ (144). The defects of the present world, in those places where they are most visible, allow the possibility of creating another story whose narrators are not of the super-ideology. It is in such places as the favelas of Rio, where the appearance of alternative-narratives is possible, that culture and art have increasingly aided citizen artists in cultivating a state of struggle capable of responding to the force of the dominant powers and the dominant idea.

In Rio de Janeiro, the history of samba brought to the fore composers who sang of the favela with the voice of an insider. At present, the vigour of the lyrics and political attitudes of ‘rappers,’ the action of community broadcasting, and the work of theatre groups from ‘inside’ the favela, are strategies for ‘evening the score’ developed by communities in their day-to-day life. The artistic manifestations emerging from the favela territory express a movement of daily struggle, and demonstrate that life in the condition of poverty permits reflection, definition and action concerning one’s place in the world. It is clear that, beyond the hegemonic discourse which has traditionally sought to depict the favela in negative terms, there exists the possibility of creating a new discourse based on insider points of view. Innumerable initiatives originating from popular settings in Rio de Janeiro are now bringing to light local narratives that portray the

daily life of these communities. Far from being subjected to a reading from the outside-in, it is now the favela is finding ways to present its own discourse from the inside-out.

This new insurgent discourse is reinforced by the activity of organisations that came into being as a result of community mobilization, such as the theatre group Nós do Morro,⁷ the Grupo Cultural AfroReggae, the Central Union of Slums, and Observatório das Favelas. These organisations head a movement that erupted in the 1990s. Today, a complex social network made up of initiatives from both the communities themselves and external bodies has enlarged the territory for various forms of artistic expression, such as theatre, music, dance and audiovisual technology. Since the 1990s, when there occurred a veritable boom of the ‘third sector’ which reinforced the activities of non-governmental agencies (NGOs)⁸ within Rio’s poor communities, the theatrical stage gained an almost miraculous significance. In this area, the pioneer group, Nós do Morro,⁹ became an inspiration for many social projects that have discovered in the theatre an attractive and exciting activity for children and youths. It is difficult to find a poor community in Rio today that does not have at least one theatre project. In almost all of Rio’s favelas, far from the spotlights of the most sophisticated conventional theatres, community theatre is at work.

The surge of projects implemented in popular communities attests to the fact that many believe in the theatre as an alternative, capable of improving the quality of life of children and youths. The positive results achieved by some of these projects, together with increasing coverage by the communications media, confirm the idea that artistic activities exercise a

⁷ ‘Morro’ is a term synonymous with ‘favela’ or ‘poor community’ in Rio de Janeiro, since the majority of early favelas were built on the steep slopes of the morros or mountains which are a marked characteristic of the Rio landscape.

⁸ The NGOs at work in Brazil include grassroots organizations and Brazilian and international aid organizations.

⁹ Founded in 1986 within the favela of Vidigal, the group Nós do Morro is a significant example of theatre groups developed by dwellers of disadvantaged communities in Brazil. The pioneering nature of their work and its longevity as well as the repercussions within and outside of the Vidigal favela (the group has performed twice in the UK at the invitation of The Royal Shakespeare Company) awakened my interest in making them a subject of research.

powerful influence over children and youths, representing a counterpoint or a strategic element to respond to the violence all too present in the daily lives of these communities. These projects arise out of a concern to offer creative activities as an alternative to situations of danger or social risk. Even though some organisations, like *Nós do Morro*, came into existence before the 1990s when the favelas had not yet been taken over by drug trafficking factions, the omission of the state in providing basic services necessitated the intervention of popular projects. Groups such as *Nós do Morro* did more than just promote ‘the community stage’; they also furthered a tendency that can be observed in other popular artistic manifestations whereby the favela itself is designated the protagonist of the work. Whether in the central theme of a stage play, the lyrics of a rap, or in the short films produced by the cinema of the ‘periphery,’ what we observe is an explosion of voices that need, by means of multiple possibilities and expressions, to talk about the favela, to tell their own story, but this time their own version.

The favela has always produced art but never with such force and diversity. Social/artistic activities from the favela are frequently cited in the pages of the principal daily newspapers. By means of different artistic languages, these activities are altering the hegemonic view which imprisons the image of the favela within negative connotations. These are voices that speak for themselves, that seek to make the favela the author of its own story. Little by little, they are forcing a change in the discourse of the mass media which would sometimes rather construct the favela youth as a ‘needy’ individual, or a person highly susceptible to cooption by criminal factions.

The favela is a place where the tension between vectors from above and vectors from below are locked in a daily battle. It is a territory assailed by a perverse neoliberal globalization, which deprives the indigent population of the right to public goods such as education, healthcare, security and leisure, but also a territory where creative actions and responses to the condition of

deprivation are possible. The favela has been part of Rio de Janeiro's landscape for more than a century, and during most of this time it has been regarded as a territory apart. In recent years, an ample social network has formed which includes community groups and agencies from all sectors of society. As a result, there is now an attempt to confront the historical culture of exclusion and to see the city as less segmented and more unified.

The dynamic of this new city plan allows for encounters between different social and territorial groups and authorizes the transit of artistic and cultural production from the favela to all other circuits. In this new panorama, media celebrities make affiliations with youths from the periphery, faces from the favela gain the front covers of magazines, 'socially responsible' entrepreneurs use 'good deeds' as marketing tools, and the favela is portrayed in a telenovela. Nonetheless, in the light of this complex net of social, political, and economic transactions, it is pertinent to question the extent to which the community is author (favela by favela), or merely an instrument of groups representing 'vectors from above.'

The dominant narrative creates the disease of exclusion, but at the same time prepares sweetened, palliative remedies. Sometimes hidden interests and illusory objectives create a simulacrum of transformation. As a result, the emotionally moving television charity campaigns or the favela faces in the media threaten to exonerate a flawed and unequal society from its greater responsibility: real structural change and a real democratisation of opportunity. This does not mean we should not recognize the necessity of dialogue between the varied social actors, such as government agencies, international cooperation agencies, universities and schools, companies, politicians, artists, intellectuals, community organisations and residents' associations; instead, we should evaluate the extent to which the favela/community is being treated as an autonomous entity or as an instrument to achieve the objectives of others.

Dialogue, when amplified to include diverse sectors of society, necessitates a constant negotiation between parties which maintain different positions of power. This is an inevitable negotiation, part of the tension of communication between vectors from above and from below. What is at stake in this negotiation is summed up in the following questions: for which party is the project more important? To what degree is the participation and autonomy of the favela/community assured? What are the circumstances that guarantee the favela/community the right to, in the words of Freire, 'name the world'?

Without a doubt, the coming together of diverse social actors has contributed to the creation of new social networks and stimulated the appearance of innovative initiatives inside and outside of popular communities. These initiatives exemplify the potential to promote the emergence of genuine 'alternative-narratives.' In times of uncertainty and alienation, art, especially theatre art, has the power to create opportunities in which alternative-narratives can find a voice and a representation. There we can re-encounter community spirit and the feeling of belonging. The theatrical stage erected in a favela can become an arena in which citizens become more critical, less passive spectators, and the authors of their destiny. The 'favela as stage and persona' can signify the legitimate expression of a community in search of its own development. Bertolt Brecht conferred on theatre the task of changing the world. With the same confidence the favela stage can assume the role of active agent and transformer. It is necessary, however, to assess in what circumstances theatre can assume this function.

Freire alerts us to the danger of a fatalist and immobilizing ideology which, stimulated by neoliberal discourse, permeates the world, taking on 'post-modern airs' (*Autonomia* 19). For Freire, this system of ideas 'insists on convincing us there is nothing we can do about the social reality which historically and culturally turned into something almost natural' (19). As Zigmunt Bauman affirms: 'We live in merciless times: times of competition and lack of respect for the

weakest, when the people around us are devious and not much interested in helping us' (8). Even so, the persistence of many creative and courageous actions challenges the authority of the dominant narrative. The dynamic of a new global order, that elicits feelings of insecurity, loneliness and fear of the future, is challenged when community agency is activated.

At present in Rio de Janeiro, community theatre groups are confronting 'immobilising' ideology and demonstrating that, even in these times of alienation, art, and above all the collective art of theatre, is capable of recreating the community and engaging groups in projects inspired by a culture of change. Even in those places where the action of perverse globalization takes on more violent dimensions, as in favelas dominated by armed drug-trafficking factions, it is possible to find groups mobilised by a desire to regain a community spirit, a new notion of community. The merit of these groups resides not only in their nonconformity with a reality that presents itself as 'almost natural,' but also in their pursuit of an ideal: the community stage as a place for the expression of alternative-narratives with the 'power to' resist the dominant idea. Theatre's challenge is to allow the channels of word, image and sound to speak with autonomy, free of the 'aesthetic castration' promoted by the dominant narrative which, Augusto Boal reminds us, renders citizenship vulnerable, compelling it to 'obey the dictates of the mass media, the cathedra and the political platform, the pulpit and all the sergeants' (15). It is also an indispensable task of theatre to provide a means for the revelation of hidden stories: those stories which have never had the chance to be told with the body and voice of their true authors and which can alter our way of seeing and understanding the world. The theatre, in the face of an implacable world possesses the potential to provoke change, the capability to overcome apathy and hopelessness, and the belief that the invention of another world is possible.

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