

Urban borders, markets in dispute: power games in the production of spaces

Fronteiras urbanas, mercados em disputa: jogos de poder na produção de espaços

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Abstract

In this article, we view the expansion fronts of urban borders as privileged spaces to understand practical agencies, the network of actors, and the power games involved in the production of urban land and housing markets in São Paulo. An unavoidable presence in those places today, the men of Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC – First Capital Command), in interaction with this intricate network of actors, act as operators of these markets and the internal management of popular territories. The fact is that the PCC's businesses expand as occupations and precarious settlements expand. In the ambivalent game of protection and extortion, between acceptance and coercion, they mobilize power resources in agreements, disputes, conflicts, and accommodations that constitute the production and management of informal land and housing markets.

Keywords: informal land and housing markets; urban occupations; space management; PCC.

Resumo

Neste artigo, tomamos as frentes de expansão das fronteiras urbanas como espaços privilegiados para apreender os agenciamentos práticos, trama de atores e jogos de poder na produção dos mercados urbanos de terra e moradia em São Paulo. Presença hoje incontornável nesses lugares, os homens do PCC, em interação com essa trama intrincada de atores, atuam como operadores desses mercados e da gestão interna de territórios populares. O fato é que os negócios do PCC se expandem conforme também se expandem ocupações e assentamentos populares. No jogo ambivalente de proteção e extorsão, entre aceitação e coerção, mobilizam recursos de poder nos acordos e disputas, conflitos e acomodações que são constitutivos da produção e gestão dos mercados informais de terra e moradia.

Palavras-chave: mercados informais de terra e moradia; ocupações urbanas; gestão de espaços; PCC.



In recent years, wide-ranging operations by armed groups in the urban markets of large Brazilian cities, especially in the real estate and urban services markets, has been addressed by scholars and denounced by residents from different parts of the country. In Rio de Janeiro, where these operations are paradigmatic, different studies show how the economic exploitation of housing and urban services has become increasingly relevant for the business model of armed groups, both militias and drug-trafficking organizations (Carvalho et al., 2023; Hirata et al., 2020; Benmergui, Gonçalves, 2019).

In São Paulo, the presence of members of São Paulo's largest criminal organization, the First Capital Command (*Primeiro Comando da Capital* – PCC), is becoming increasingly common in these markets. Amid facts, rumors, and stories that are told and spread in *quebradas* (“the hoods”) across the outskirts of the city, their presence is already part of the incontrovertible evidence in the fieldwork for urban researchers. Depending on the areas and circumstances at a particular moment, they may buy/appropriate lots for their own housing. Meanwhile, as in the situations described by Prieto and Verdi (2023), they engage in negotiations and mediations in other occupations and define criteria for the selective distribution of lots. In other areas, amid rumors and conjectures, small buildings become part of the available housing stock, so to speak, also under very selective criteria, for newcomers and many other individuals and families seeking housing in lower-class territories. The fact is that the PCC has been diversifying its businesses in many other illegal market circuits (Feltran, 2018) and there is evidence of its involvement in the informal land and housing

markets for money laundering purposes and as a strategy to expand its power and influence in urban territories.

Unlike what happens in Rio Janeiro, there is no control over territories nor monopoly or control over urban services in the places where the PCC establishes its businesses. Under another ecology of practices, negotiations, mediations, and alliances, PCC men act as operators in these markets and the internal management of lower-class territories, interacting with an obscure assemblage of other actors (and interests) that are present in these places, including land occupations on the edges of the city. The fronts of expansion of urban borders therefore seem to be especially interesting spaces today to comprehend the practical negotiations and mediations that include power plays (and battles of interests) and the multifaceted web of actors and their action and power resources in the production of urban land and housing markets, as they are shaped today. This is the matter we propose to discuss in this writing.

Instead of starting with the PCC's dynamics, pathways, and procedures and the wide-ranging markets of illicit goods (which have been, in fact, already detailed by a vast literature), we are interested here in examining the logics of production and management of urban spaces. As an empirical point of reference, we have considered recent land occupations established on the northern border of the city of São Paulo, marked by great precariousness and insecurity amid a still low-density area – a counterpoint to what we could find in other areas on the outskirts of the city, where precarious occupations and settlements are sprinkled across urbanized neighborhoods, consolidated *favelas* (slums), housing estates, and also, over time, expanding real estate markets.

It is an urban border located between the city and the forest, at the foot of the Cantareira Mountain Range, where rural and urban areas meet and blend into each other, as a result of the particular characteristics of a late urbanization process that started in the area by the end of the 20th century.¹ Amid rural and environmental restrictions, local lower-class subdivisions, most often unregulated ones, have opened paths of urban occupation, changing the local landscape in recent decades (Moreira, 2019).

This area – which is as precarious as it is wide-ranging – on the frontier of informal land and housing markets sparked interest because it was possible to observe the different intricacies, moments, and phases of its engendering and the power relations inscribed therein.² Expansion, production, management of land and housing markets: very concretely, practices, negotiations, mediations, and power relations that “make the city” as the ways of life that are constellated there gain density according to the temporalities by which materialities are built, claimed, negotiated, mediated in the production of a “livable world” – houses, roads, plumbing system, electricity networks, and everything else that makes up urban life. Materialities built through deals, negotiations, and mediations on the scrambled borders between formal-informal, legal-illegal, between temporary and improvised solutions, instrumentalization of urban regulations, and tense and conflicting relations with public agents, entrepreneurs interested in expanding their businesses in the area, neighboring property owners – most often holders of dubious titles –, and law enforcement forces – city inspectors, environmental police officers, and military police officers.

This means that market production is not an abstraction. Amid latent or overt conflicts, it involves actors, ways of life, interests, expectations, and promises of a plausible life, all this amid situated practices, negotiations, and mediations addressing the urgencies of life as it is governed by insecurity, amid threats of removal and uncertainties about the immediate future. This is part of the urban history of our cities, with parallels found in so many other cities in Latin America and in the metropolises of the so-called Global South. It constitutes the so-called urban informality that characterizes these cities’ urban planning (Roy, 2005, 2011; Yiftachel, 2009).

In recent decades, here and elsewhere, spaces and territories have been affected by the wide-ranging circuits of illegal markets, especially (but not only) drugs. More recently, criminal organizations and armed powers have been present in the conflicting production, management, and government dynamics of these territories. A marker of the times, it is a situation that introduces an inflection point in recent urban history, opening up to a number of questions that pose challenges to us as to the ways of describing and considering the issue of these urban realities.

An “illicit city-making,” as proposed by Müller and Weegels (2022). In line with the field of studies on the “ethnographies of infrastructure,” the authors adopt, as an analytical lens, the urban materialities where power relations, battles over authorities, legitimacy, and sovereignty, as well as control, appropriation (or expropriation) of circulating wealth are condensed. State, private, and illicit powers rely on the construction and maintenance of these infrastructures that shape the economic and political terrain of

their (disputed) interests, which “facilitate connections, trade, networks, and mobilities that also reconfigure urban politics and contestations of power and authority” (ibid., p. 233).

This is the key through which the authors propose a new reading of the popular theses by Charles Tilly, bringing to the urban field an analogy between the state and organized crime (Tilly, 1985), placed in the battles over sovereignty and control of territory, power resources, and appropriation of the wealth circulating between state powers and illicit actors (militias, paramilitary groups, gangs, and other armed groups). Here is the issue: the presence of armed powers, the authors argue, turns cities into arenas of disputed sovereignty precisely in the nexuses that articulate regimes of accumulation (production and circulation of urban wealth) and forms of coercion (offer of protection, collection of taxes). In this formulation, the authors offer a new reading of the famous theses formulated by Tilly in his historical sociology about the formation of Western states (Tilly, 1985, 1992) to focus on the forms of (disputed) sovereignty and (disputed) urban government anchored in the material production of urban spaces. As the authors argue,

by locating illicit practices and actors in the material processes that make cities livable and urban territories and populations governable, the term “city-making” seeks to highlight the intrinsic relation between urbanization and the illicit and addresses the influential role of the extra-legal in urban planning and organization. (Müller and Weegels, 2022, p. 234)

The authors’ proposal opens a path to raise our own questions in the conversation with an already vast literature addressing

armed groups. It is an issue on the agenda of recent discussions on a global scale. Different configurations of “organized operators of violence” (militias, paramilitary groups, gangs, criminal organizations, self-defense groups) occupying the scene of cities ravaged by civil wars (Grassian, Bem-Ari, 2011; Bazenguissa-Ganga, Makki, 2012); by neocolonial interventions – including in Iraq, Afghanistan, Mali, or Burkina Faso (Quesnay, 2022) –; by the war on drugs and guerrilla insurgency (Duncan, 2015); and by vigilante groups driven by penal populism typical of current times and vigilante practices on the borders of countries haunted by migratory diasporas (Favarel-Garrigues, Gayer, 2021; Lamote, 2013).

Amid controversies and different propositions, the notion of “fragmented sovereignties” (Gazit, 2009) has been circulating around these discussions, strongly influencing a conversation that calls into question the also controversial thesis of the state monopoly of organized violence (Stepputat, 2012; Wilson, 2012). For a long time, the “monopoly of legitimate violence,” an axiom that is not reflected in research and political discussion, has been challenged by the emergence of other “violence operators” in battle-scarred countries. This is also the case in areas pervaded by circuits of illegal markets that expand and take over business opportunities (and power resources) grounded in neoliberal reforms, privatization of corporations and public services, and today’s extensive extractive economies (Aranda, 2014, 2019; Mendonza, 2018; Mantovani, 2015).

While this is a vast discussion that cannot be fully addressed within the limits of this article, it is important to put these questions on the horizon of our own inquiries. After all,

the presence of armed groups in our cities is far from trivial, and it is pervaded by a timeline yet to be well understood. As an issue beyond what is proposed in this article, for now, it is worth saying that it introduces a certain analytical prism and raises a question to us as to how to describe and address the issue of the urban complications of our time, the production of the city, its spaces, and its territories. This is an issue, if we are not mistaken, that is still rarely addressed in the field of discussions mentioned above in very general lines. Hence the interest and importance of the analytical lens proposed by Müller and Weegels (2022). Their new reading and updating of Tilly's theses are more than timely, alerting us to the importance of ascertaining and conferring status to the political negotiations and mediations and forms of government observed in territories that have been set in the nexus – to be unraveled – between power, violence, and market production (Telles, 2022). It is a core issue specifically regarding the “illicit making of cities,” as the authors propose.³

Urban borders, disputed markets

In the city of São Paulo (as in so many others around the country), precarious settlements and occupations have been multiplying and spreading across central and peripheral areas, where the “urban disinherited” find shelter – men and women, and their families, coming from other occupations or other forms of precarious housing, not rarely forced out of their previous home, displaced, or affected by violent evictions sponsored by government authorities.

Local arrangements vary according to different areas of the city and the time and space circumstances in which the occupations take place. The common trait among all of them: while they are practical negotiations and mediations governed by a logic of the management of precariousness, the urgencies of life, and insecurity (as they can be forcibly removed at any moment), the expectations of permanence and the construction of a “livable world” (DAS, 2020, p. 67) mobilize different means and resources, including negotiations and possible deals between residents and government inspectors and agents, companies interested in local markets, and mostly outsourced technicians providing installation services for urban electric power networks, road infrastructure, and plumbing systems. All this is largely done in a nebula of interactions that blur the borders between the legal and the illegal, the formal and the informal, through deals, exchanges, and negotiations around possible arrangements, including informal agreements, the payment of political commodities (Misse, 2006) that are part of the regulations of what today is a wide-ranging universe of lower-class illegalisms, and urban client politics mobilizing political machines, power plays, and influence among the bureaucratic intricacies of government agencies.

It is this web of relationships and interactions that requires ethnographic work. We will address this further below. For now, we are interested in introducing the question and working hypothesis that we would like to develop here. In these “gray spaces” (Yitfachel, 2009) that recently have been expanding, we find evidence of a dynamic of urban space production that takes place in the ambivalent and unstable game between the law and the

extralegal, between tolerance and repression, as local political micro-conjunctures change. As Rolnik (2015, p. 174) puts it, these spaces

have in common the fact that they constitute zones of indeterminacy between legal/illegal, planned/unplanned, formal/informal, inside/outside the market, state presence/absence. Such indeterminacies are the mechanisms through which the situation of permanent transitoriness is built, the existence of a vast reserve army of land that can be captured “at the right time.”

It is in these spaces of precariousness and indeterminacy regarding the immediate future of their residents where intricate power plays and battles of interests emerge as true operators of territory production and management, and of the lower-class land and housing markets arising from it. To ensure the safety and security of the developments and the internal order of the occupations, the presence of groups or individuals who manage these markets becomes increasingly common, as characters who build their power resources through the networks of relationships that can operate to handle the deals and transactions that are always required with city inspectors, police officers, security guards (more often than not, police officers) protecting neighboring properties (which also often have dubious legal status), criminal organizations that establish their drug trade points in the vicinity, and city councilors who have “acquaintances” and “influential people” in the bureaucratic intricacies of municipal governments.⁴

There is a whole multifaceted network of actors formed around the management of precariousness: precariousness as a business and market opportunity, as well as power

resources. Housing insecurity is a key element in the production of these territories: the need for housing starts to be economically exploited in the face of shrinking possibilities of accessing housing through formal means (real estate markets or public policies). Different obscure business operators start to work in this gap by promoting land occupation and the lot trade, through different configurations in terms of the forms and conditions of access to housing. It is a predatory market logic capturing lower-class practices and ways of living, through which the survival strategies of lower-class groups work as frontiers through which the market and its different operators advance. Local versions, we could say, of what Tsing (2022) calls “salvage accumulation,” which entangles and takes advantage of local ways of life and survival to translate local practices and means into value and commodities. That is: ways of life and survival practices turn into market frontiers through means that move across legality and plunder, law and crime, deals and the use of force.

Poverty as a market and market frontier: this is not exactly new. Nor is it something exclusive to Brazil. Since the early 2000s, perhaps earlier, the so-called lower-class entrepreneurship has established itself as a circulating repertoire in areas of lower-class businesses, on the outskirts, and in favelas – micro-scenarios of social programs not rarely promoted by business foundations, in line with policies implemented in other countries of the so-called Global South aimed at the so-called social inclusion through the market. As Roy (2011) demonstrates, these are frontiers of market expansion through the financialization of poverty (by granting credit and subsidies for lower-class businesses) by financial groups interested in the wide-ranging – and promising (for them) – lower-class

markets of large metropolises in these parts of the planet. Financial extractivism, as Gago and Mezzadra (2015, p. 44) propose, in lower-class territories through consumer credits and bank subsidies, making “the extraction of value from an increasingly indebted but never completely subdued popular vitality.” Variations of what Guerreiro, Rolnik, and Marín-Toro (2022) define as “regimes of private control over territory management,” making up gray spaces where territories are subjected to private regulations, involving business institutions, urban service providers, and lower-class housing financialization mechanisms (vouchers, monthly aid).

As Gago and Mezzadra (2015, p. 44) argue, “extractive logics intersect with the government of the poor, producing violence and creating hybrid forms with the same logics and rhetoric of inclusion as proposed by the discourse of citizenship.” And we may add: where they are anchored to a territory, especially in lower-class territories, they interact with forms of private regulation that also involve the management of specific businesses connected to the expanded circuits of illegal markets.

The situation described by Prieto and Verdi (2023) is especially illuminating: in a neighborhood on the eastern outskirts of the city of São Paulo, a company with operations in several cities around the country has a significant portfolio of “services provided” in the private regulation of lands facing a legal dispute.⁵ The services: mediation and negotiation of land disputes between residents and owners – it works as an agent mediating legal settlements (as the company’s main business) and thus avoiding repossession processes against the occupiers of disputed areas. As the authors argue, “finding disputed

lands is key to their business” (p. 65), capitalizing on the management of precariousness as a financial asset. In this case, it was an agreement made with the mediation of the Residents’ Association, with the tacit support of PCC men who had been involved for many years in these informal land and housing markets and who had been actively taking part in the occupation that was at the center of these negotiations with said company.

This is the point to be made: the circuits of illegal economies have greatly expanded in recent years, intertwining with the urban economy and the local dynamics of the territories where they set up their businesses, branching out into so many other obscure businesses anchored in the webs of urban life. In recent years, they have also branched out into the informal land and housing markets. These circuits and the power relations permeating them interact with many other territory regulation regimes, entangled in the urban circuits of what is now celebrated as lower-class entrepreneurship (and its many different “social inclusion” projects, as they are called), and also constellate the most precarious borders of the city, which are now expanding. Where they are anchored and territorialized, they make up and are made up of the “private territory management regimes” (Guerreiro, Rolnik, Marín-Toro, 2022), as in the case described by Prieto and Verdi (2023). It is from this perspective that we can understand the local negotiations and mediations happening at these frontiers of market expansion.

The fact is that PCC businesses expand as lower-class occupations and settlements expand. In the double-edged game between protection and extortion (Tilly, 1985), between

acceptance and coercion, they mobilize power resources in deals and battles, conflicts and accommodations that are constituent parts of the production and management of informal land and housing markets.

Stakeholders in the land and housing business, the PCC men are also an unavoidable presence in the mediation and arbitration of continuous (dis)agreements, conflicts, disputes, and litigations in these settlements. The mediation of PCC men in litigation, conflicts, and disagreements that permeate everyday life in these areas is already a known, accepted, and legitimized quasi-routine in lower-class territories. The management of local order and violence largely includes mediation by *irmãos* (brothers),⁶ whether in the protocols and the scenery of the debates or in the more informal variations of the *troca de ideias* (exchange of ideas).⁷ In the 2000s, this was documented and discussed by ethnographies and urban studies that followed the evolution of illegal markets and the expansion of the PCC on the outskirts of São Paulo (Feltran, 2018; Hirata, 2018; Hirata, Telles, 2010). And it is almost commonplace in news that circulates and that sometimes hits the pages of newspapers. Now, these power resources, known and acknowledged between fear and acceptance or, to put it from a different perspective, between protection and coercion (Tilly, 1985), are used to arbitrate and mediate conflicts and disagreements in land and housing businesses, involving residents, land developers, property owners in the vicinity, and the operators of urban services aimed at local land improvement.

This is the point to be made here: the PCC men act as operators of these markets and are, therefore, operators of the production of urban spaces and their fronts of expansion.

This is what happens when they arbitrate disagreements regarding the borders between lots, between occupations, or regarding a residents' association's use of resources or the distribution of lots.

The presence and operation of PCC men are so entangled in the daily lives of these areas, always shrouded in rumors and fables, that it is not always easy to know what they are about when we are told about cases and stories. In the ethnographic scenes below,⁸ therefore, we made strategic choices to shed light on how connections are built between different actors involved in the production and management of land occupations on the fringes of the north zone of São Paulo, to put the issues addressed so far into perspective. They provide some evidence of how markets are made in the expansion of urban borders and, in the process, make the city.

The question we are interested in addressing is, "how are illicit city-making practices produced and negotiated?" (Müller & Weegels, 2022, p. 232).

Expanding urban borders

The urban border this article is discussing came to be arranged through a late and gradual process of urbanization. A process largely conducted by local land developers, in association or competition with alleged landowners, lessees/leaseholders, and state agents, in a convoluted mesh of land grabbing, fraudulent land appropriation, dubious land titles, and so many other land conflicts around land tenure and ownership. Over the course of the 1990s, state agents and developers took advantage of loopholes in

the norms that regulate land occupation and land titling to establish new settlements.⁹ All this resulted in an urban fabric characterized by dense patches that make up the landscape next to small rural properties, green areas, and the huge green wall that is the Cantareira Mountain Range.

In 2013, this heterogeneous territory was hit by the beginning of the construction work to implement the Northern Section of the Mário Covas Ring Road, a public construction work of metropolitan scale that affected local urban and social configurations, marking the intensification of land conflicts in the area as new actors started to battle over this front of urban expansion introduced by the state.

On the one hand, land expropriations led to administrative and legal battles over the high compensation paid by the state. Property titles are at the center of these battles (Lacerda, Moreira, Ungaretti, 2021). In their intricacies, these procedures bring to light practices of land grabbing, fraudulent purchases, and all sorts of irregularities that expose the dynamics of urban border expansion, which, over the course of history, have happened along the blurry lines between the legal and the illegal, the formal and the informal.

On the other hand, through the gaps opened up by expropriated areas and ongoing construction works, land occupations have multiplied amid these land battles, introducing another vector of an expanded conflict, this time happening around land ownership and appropriation.¹⁰ Most of them were small, extremely precarious occupations that were unable to resist the police forces mobilized to displace them. Among those that remained and are in the process of potential

consolidation, a scenario emerges, made up of a mesh of different actors in often tense relations, alliances, battles, or convenience agreements between community leaders, local businessmen, police officers, and other state representatives, as well as men identified as *PCC brothers* or allies.

Local arrangements vary between more or less precarious occupations, with greater or lesser chances of remaining. What they have in common is the political and legal insecurity that requires constant negotiations, adjustments, agreements, and disagreements with public and private actors that make up the power plays and battles of interests around the production of these territories. Amid all this, hundreds of families search for a new housing arrangement as they experience constant displacements and are also pulled into and implicated in these power plays and battles of interests.

Occupations on the edges of the city

While these occupations have not been organized by politically organized housing movements, there is nothing spontaneous about them. They are effectively organized – and well-organized –, but through other networks of actors, mediations, and horizons of expectations. In this article, we will focus on just one of them, which here we will call Jardim Milão, an occupation established in August 2016 through networks mobilized by an important local leader – we will call him Fábio, who was then (2016) a 31-year-old young Black man, a hairdresser, and father of a boy.

In his urban movements around lower-class neighborhoods of the north zone and other occupations in different areas of the city, Fábio was in contact with and learned from territories permeated by social projects and others demarcated by housing movements, while, across all of them, criminal networks also make up his sociability network, formed by friends and acquaintances of the so-called “criminal world.” This is what explains the presence of Zinho, a *brother* identified as an important leader of the occupation, alongside Fábio. In the words of one resident, Zinho has ties with the PCC, while Fábio is “more of the social” – the two would make up a kind of complementary opposites working together. While the two men are not members of the Jardim Milão Residents' Association, both are always pinpointed in this leadership role in the occupation, as people to consult when making certain decisions and to resort to when resolving certain conflicts.

These transversal aspects of the urban experience made Fábio an important network operator in the territory. Fábio knew how to mobilize repertoires and networks of acquaintances and allies to organize and then handle the management of the Jardim Milão occupation. First, by identifying a possible tract of land to establish the occupation. By promptly joining efforts to bring together a coordination group including community leaders and the so-called *apoiaidores* (supporters) – actors who, as local leaders see it, were decisive in making sure the occupation was feasible. In Jardim Milão, these *supporters* were: an architect, local business owners, a lawyer, a military police officer, and alleged PCC members.

The relevance of these *supporters* in the occupation is something that very concretely became apparent amid the challenges and mishaps its residents faced, as each of them had the ability to mobilize economic and power resources in the many negotiations necessary for the permanence and consolidation of the occupation. We will look into how some of them operated. For now, it is important to highlight their role as mediators between the many different levels of the formal world and the occupation – mediation efforts on the blurry lines between the formal-informal, the legal-illegal. While the category of *supporters*, as coined by our interlocutors, included an extremely diverse range of social actors, it allows us to observe the extensive and diverse network of connections and mediations from which the territory is constituted and managed: the architect responds to the goal of planning the occupation of the land in order to mimic what they assume to be the norms that define a formal urban pattern, as a strategy for pleading for land regularization; the business owners, who in this case are partners in a bus company, provide political capital to negotiations with different state operators who try to demobilize the occupation; the lawyer is the one who builds the case to bargain over the permanence and legitimacy of the occupation with government authorities; the incorporation of the military police officer brings into the endeavor an actor who tries to neutralize or circumvent the action of the repressive state apparatus against the occupation. Finally, the PCC men appear as the guarantors of many of the negotiations established by this network of actors, also mediating quarrels and operating

the regulation of the land and housing market on these fronts of urban border expansion. For the services provided, each supporter received two lots in Jardim Milão.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that among the many occupations that emerged in the same period, Jardim Milão appears as a successful story. It became a point of reference in the area. Early on, they established a formal Residents' Association, which became the crucial point of connection for this network of *supporters*. Its members are responsible for spearheading the territory consolidation project, strategically calling in different *supporters* and other actors that can contribute to it. But the paths to this are tortuous and uncertain, requiring many and continuous negotiations, conducted time and again to avoid the risk of having the occupation violently removed and ensure its permanence and consolidation.

Defining borders

The occupation settled on a portion of land remaining from the expropriations carried out for the implementation of the ring road. In its immediate vicinity: the ring road's ongoing construction works; a tract of land subdivided in the 1990s; another area with houses remaining from an expropriation process carried out for the construction of the Mário Covas Ring Road, and, on the other side, a large empty area in which a new tract of land began to be subdivided. Aside from the public construction works, the other areas were all negotiated and mediated by the same "developer," known for his obscure projects implemented in the area since the mid-1980s. In the 1990s, this combination of land-grabber/developer had his name mentioned in

an intricate administrative process involving São Paulo city employees, parliamentary advisors, police officers, and city inspectors in collusion to circumvent inspections and enable unregulated subdivisions to be established in the area. A heavy game of pressure, exchange of favors, and bribery. He remains active in the area.

Each of these neighborhood configurations imposed negotiations and agreements on Jardim Milão for the establishment and delimitation of the borders of the occupation. Starting with the technicians responsible for the ring road construction works – the line that could not be crossed was defined after conversations and deals between public officials and brokers. Here, and in other surrounding occupations, part of the borders defined for these territories as they are being establishing were defined in circumstantial negotiations conducted at the construction site of the public work – through them, some occupations got their space, but we do not know what they had to offer in exchange for it. What we do know is that not everything was easy, nor were things always friendly. A violent outcome was on the horizon of one of these difficult negotiations around the establishment of the borders of Jardim Milão, a case involving leaders of the occupation, the alleged owner of one of the neighboring properties, the developer, and the PCC *brothers*.

The alleged property owner was in the process of closing a deal with the aforementioned developer. In the first weeks of the occupation, she went to Jardim Milão to try and set the borders between her property and the occupied area to make sure the occupation was not taking over her land. According to accounts, to close the deal, the owner offered the occupation five meters of land around the

stream of water between the two areas. An overly generous action that makes us wonder about whether she effectively owned the land, especially considering the area's land history. But these are just assumptions. In any case, the proposal seemed advantageous and local leaders promised not to expand the occupation beyond the agreed-upon limits.

Shortly after that, the neighboring area started to be subdivided into lots. At first, the developer and occupiers seemed to act in agreement. They joined efforts to channelize the stream that served as a border between the two areas and to enable land reclamation, where the waste collected from both sides would be disposed of. But things then started to get complicated. Amid rumors and fragmented stories, the accounts shared with us give us a glimpse of a conflict for the land that ultimately led to a *debate* mediated by the PCC.

This is how things unfolded, from what we were told: four leaders of the occupation—including Fábio and Zinho — took over those five meters offered by the neighbor in the deal with the occupation, which were added to the land reclamation area where there was the channelized stream on the border between the two settlements. They wanted to make a deal for this piece of land and offered to sell it to the developer's partner. As soon as the latter, in turn, became aware of said donation, he declared he did not recognize this deal because, as he put it, those five meters were his property and, therefore, he started to accuse the occupation of taking over an area that would be "rightfully" his. Meanwhile, the residents of Jardim Milão also expressed their discontent with these leaders for trying to privately take the possible earnings from the sale of a portion of the occupation, overriding the collective interest.

That was when the PCC *brothers* intervened. The four leaders and the developer were summoned to the debate. Residents were called to attend. The event is always remembered in Jardim Milão, both by those whose actions were being judged and by others who were called to participate. Most of them remember the size of the event: the number of *brothers* present, as well as the length of the discussions, which went on for a few days. At first, there was a space for occupiers to express their discontent with their leaders. Then they moved on to the main conflict. Fábio recounts it: he escaped death thanks to Zinho's *caminhada* (background and connections) and the intervention of a brother in favor of the leaders, considering aspects regarded as positives in their previous history. The then president of the Association, one of those involved in the case, was removed. And the outcome of the *debate* was favorable to the occupation: the disputed piece of land was incorporated into Jardim Milão. Soon after, a wall was built between the two settlements, definitively establishing the boundaries between occupation and subdivision.

The battle for permanence

A lawyer has been providing legal advice to Jardim Milão since its early days. He is a partner of a bus company licensed by the city government to operate routes in the area. With other business partners, they make up the group of *supporters* of the occupation.

The company is licensed by the SPTrans system and has operated, since 2015, more than 80 routes in northern areas of São Paulo.

Established in the 1990s, it used to be a cooperative of *perueiros* (van drivers) organized into a broader consortium that operated in the north and east areas of the city. Between 2010 and 2014, the cooperative was involved in allegations of conspiracy and money laundering involving PCC members, as reported by news articles and legal cases filed at the time. In 2015, according to the rules established by the city government for public bidding processes, the cooperative became a company and was divided into two: one operating in the east side and the other in the north side of São Paulo.

Behind the scenes, a rather obscure story of the so-called alternative transportation system, as it was called, which Hirata (2011) described in detail. A story that dates back to the emergence of van drivers in the 1980s who, with their vans, promoted an active informal transportation network, arguably clandestine as it was illegal, running across the city's most remote neighborhoods on routes conventional bus services did not cover. Over the course of the 1990s, as the PCC's presence emerges on the outskirts of São Paulo, an intricate web of relationships with *perueiros* starts to be woven, involving the structuring of the protection-extortion market and money laundering schemes. In the early 2000s, all this became more intricate, and also more obscure, with the establishment of van drivers' cooperatives and the transaction of illegal businesses in the gaps and opportunities arising from normative provisions through which the São Paulo city government addressed the regulation of the then extensive informal transportation network operating in different areas of the city.

By tracing back this web of relationships and how they changed over time, Hirata shows us the networks mobilized by this character

– the *perueiro*, who becomes a prosperous entrepreneur managing promising bus routes –, a character who was already known in recent urban history, and who is now involved in the processes of production and appropriation of the urban space, especially interested in the informal land market at the edges of the city. And it is this traced-back history that allows us to situate the role the partners of the current bus company played in the establishment of Jardim Milão.

After all, what interests are likely driving the partners of this bus company to a still low-density area that is so different from the extensive and busy eastern part of the city, with so many important access roads connecting it to the city center and other municipalities of the Greater São Paulo Area? Yet there they are, the partners, engaged and interested in that piece of land, a recent occupation at the edge of the city.

The lawyer-partner of the company played a key role in the establishment of the occupation. He was responsible for conducting negotiations with the police officers who first arrived on the ground on the first day they entered the land. It was also at the company's headquarters that a deal was sealed with the military police officer who became part of the group of *supporters* of Jardim Milão. After weeks conducting daily rounds to coerce and threaten the occupation, the deal was reached with the occupiers. The company's partners mediated the deal. We do not know the details of these negotiations, but from what we were told, after the deal was completed, the police officer tried to protect the occupation against possible police raids, either by shelving complaints or by coordinating with other police officers on duty when the police were at the site, so that everything could go smoothly. He was duly rewarded with two lots, just like all the other *supporters*.

While we have not been given details about these negotiations and deals, it is possible to get an idea of the bargaining power of the bus company's partners from the stories and rumors that circulate. Security is provided to the company and its partners by a police officer with a reputation for being a *matador* (killer), a word that circulates around the hoods of the city and evokes vivid memories of São Paulo's urban history, haunted by vigilantes and extermination groups (Telles, 2010). In the words of one of our interlocutors: these bus companies are made up of "businessmen, bandits, and police officers." And this is where their bargaining power and scale of action lies: through a combination of the lawyer's work and the support of his networks and connections, he and the other partners of the bus company ensured the permanence of Jardim Milão in different situations when the occupation was put at risk through the legal and extralegal action of state agents.

The business partners played a key role in containing the threats against the occupation. However, soon afterwards they too became a threat. Relying on his position providing technical and legal support and the legitimacy he then built for himself, the lawyer started to scare the residents by presenting alleged evidence of an alleged threat of forced removal. He said that, this time, they would not be able to resist. As a lawyer, he recommended: it would be better for everyone to leave the land.

Word of a possible forced removal spread quickly. Rumors about a similar story happening on another occasion began to circulate, according to which the same partners of the bus company supported the establishment of another occupation and, once possession of the

area was established, they simulated a threat of forced removal to convince people to leave the land and then take possession of the area.

Fabio tried to look into this story. This time, he reached out to other points in his extensive network of relationships and contacted a lawyer from a well-known social organization working with housing movements from the city center: from the edges of the city to the center of São Paulo. The lawyer confirmed what the occupiers suspected: there was no threat of forced removal against Jardim Milão. The threat was the company's partners. The coordination decided to expel him from the group of *supporters*.

But that was not the end of that story. And, once again, the PCC was there to act as the arbiter in the conflict around the land. According to our interlocutors, the partners tried to regain their position by appealing to the local PCC men, confirming rumors about the bus company's obscure connections with illegal businesses. The dispute between the occupation and the bus company ultimately ended with an *exchange of ideas* mediated by the Command. The *brothers* ratified the occupation's decision: the partners of the bus company were expelled from the group of *supporters*. But they kept the lots they had purchased.

The urbanization market

Once the possession of the land, albeit provisionally, was established, a number of investments and interventions started, aiming at making it livable. In Jardim Milão, tractors and excavators came along to carry

out earthworks, stream channelization, and land reclamation; create roads; and define the borders between lots. Wood utility poles were bought and installed to support the electric power distribution network. A plumbing system was implemented to ensure water access and wastewater disposal. Trucks were coming in and out of the area, carrying crushed stone to improve local roads. All this was being done through deals and arrangements with a wide range of operators of this urbanization market whose business is urban precariousness, offering all kinds of makeshift solutions with the promise of improving the quality of life for those who live in these recently-established territories, while never being enough.

Key to the constitution of this market, different state operators act as regulators in these transactions, dictating their pace and costs. After all, they are the authorities who effectively can allow or not the execution of the contracted services. Military and environmental police officers,¹¹ municipal guards, and city inspectors are implicated in this market, engaging in extortion and charging money in exchange for turning the “blind eye” on interventions carried out on the land. So, with every planned intervention, the terms and conditions of its implementation have to be reviewed with these public operators. It is through the continuous making and remaking around urban materialities that it becomes possible to observe the web of actors, power relations, and the ways how political commodities are traded (Misse, 2006) and inscribed in the urbanization of these territories emerging on the fringes of the city.

In Jardim Milão, one of the first interventions carried out was land reclamation on part of the stream that isolated the area

for the construction of a road that paved the way into to the occupation and connected it to the surrounding neighborhoods. Patrícia, a member of the residents’ association, was the one who told us about the operation: through a deal made with local leaders, a business owner from the area who works with the disposal of construction debris started to send trucks to the occupation for (unregulated) disposal, creating a temporary landfill on the site. Through this arrangement, the trucks had access to a place to dispose of construction waste while the occupation was provided with the necessary debris for land reclamation. Patrícia recalls that it took many trucks to fill the area and turn it into an access road. This made the arrangement a very profitable business for the person responsible for organizing the disposal: each truck charged 140 reais to dispose of debris — and it was a lot of trucks.

The operation was successful and the access road to Jardim Milão was built. But despite the payments made to environmental police officers from the area to provide the service (payments made by both the residents’ association and the entrepreneur whose business already required such arrangements), construction works had to be occasionally suspended due to unexpected police raids — either conducted by police officers who were not part of the scheme or as a way to negotiate higher prices. Consequently, the clandestine disposal area at the site led to one of several complaints that the lawyer had to deal with around this time.

Then earthworks began in the area to allow internal roads to be built and lots to be defined, an operation that cost the occupiers 60,000 reais. Subsequently, there was the (unregulated) establishment of access to water

and electricity, as well as the installation of sewer pipes for wastewater collection. All of this was always done quite discontinuously, according to the possible arrangements and deals made with state operators. After all, the payment of *mamadeira*¹² (baby bottle) does not always mean that the service will effectively be provided. The stories of urban interventions in Jardim Milão are permeated by accounts about actions by state agents who sometimes allowed earthworks in the area and other times interrupted them; sometimes turned a blind eye to land reclamation, while other times interdicted it, requiring new negotiations to allow it again. On certain occasions, they confiscated an occupier's work materials and then released them without filing a police report, yet another show of power that makes up the power plays around the negotiations of political commodities. These deals are always circumstantial, oscillating between tolerance, the negotiated agreement, extortion, and repression.

The operation that allowed Jardim Milão to have access to the water supply network is another example of how this urbanization market works. Water supply was made possible by (irregularly) connecting the area with the public network from two adjacent neighborhoods. Each connection supplies a part of the occupation. The service was directly contracted with the employees of the water utility Sabesp¹³ in exchange for a payment that was around 2,000 to 3,000 reais per point of connection. In addition to initially setting up these points of connection, Sabesp employees are also responsible for the continuous repairs and iterations required for the maintenance of water access. These employees sometimes respond to a call during office hours and go

to the occupation with Sabesp's truck and equipment, making a private use of the public utility. To do this, they fill out "service forms," a routine procedure at Sabesp, but report other kinds of incidents, such as a "leak," for example. This allows them to work on what, in practice, will become an unregulated water connection point in the public supply network. With each new repair or iteration, new charges are made. In these cases, it is not law enforcement agents who impose extralegal charges on occupiers to allow access to public services, but the employees of the public utility (or outsourced companies) themselves, who irregularly privatize and sell infrastructure and public technology. On certain occasions, the same employee responsible for the irregular connection is the one who, during working hours, will shut down a clandestine point of connection, only to make new charges to connect it again later.

In all these arrangements, the residents' association, which represents the occupation, appears as the buyer and manager of these services, responsible for hiring them and ensuring their effective provision. To this end, *supporters* and their resources often come into play again to negotiate the best conditions for hiring and providing services: whether it is the business owners with their political capital and obscure connections, as seen above, the military police officer who can negotiate better conditions with his colleagues or even circumvent complaints and prevent a police raid from happening while a service is being provided, or the lawyer, who both provides support during negotiations and is responsible for legally addressing complaints when extralegal deals fall apart.

Amid the intricacies of this “urbanization through *improvements*” (Lacerda, 2023), we observe a market emerging at the intersection between necessity and precariousness, which turn them into business opportunities through services that are fragmentally offered at retail and operated – and regulated – by different state and non-state actors. It is a whole urban materiality production and management process that activates a network of actors involved in a market which is structured around – and is structuring – the provision of urban infrastructure and services, engendered in these “gray spaces” where the formal-informal, the legal-illegal, the licit-illicit are blurred and connected, rendering the territories emerging on the fringes of the city material.

Ramifications

In the heterogeneous arrangements through which lower-class territories are constituted, there are encoded ways through which the extensive commodification of territories and ways of life make up urban space production and management processes, reproducing cleavages, inequalities, and exclusions, shaped by the housing insecurity experienced by local residents in these territories. A situation of insecurity a varied network of actors exploits and manages as a business opportunity and as a way to expand their power over territories and populations. The PCC men are among them, mobilizing their power resources – armed power.

In Jardim Milão – and in other surrounding occupations –, PCC men act as a kind of guarantor in the commercial relations brewed up around land possession. But that

is not all. There are situations in which agents connected to criminal circuits also take up a leading position in promoting occupations, turning land and housing into another front for the expansion of their businesses. While arguing for different gradations and modalities in terms of their presence, local leaders say it is no longer possible to organize a land occupation without having a *brother* present. Rumors circulate about the presence of PCC men spearheading some residents’ associations or appointing people they trust for the position, to influence the distribution of lots and the management of local daily life. According to other accounts, they buy lots in occupations in the area, where they start to build small apartment buildings exclusively for rent purposes. These are accounts that echo similar stories and rumors that circulate in other parts of the city, revealing a growing presence of PCC men running land and housing businesses in the different lower-class territories around the city, exerting impacts, which are yet to be better identified and understood, on the forms of urban space production and management and the living conditions created from them.

State involvement in these processes appears through different public operators who are actively engaged in the territories: police officers, municipal guards, inspectors, and administrative and public service employees who are continuously negotiating the conditions of permanence and consolidation of certain territories, as well as the destruction of others. In the local negotiations and mediations in which spaces and markets are produced and managed, we can trace the production of the margins of the state (Das and Poole, 2004), a vague zone where the differences between the law and the extralegal are blurred, if not

cease to exist. They also offer, however, clues to understand — and trace — the way in which urban order and legal system are engendered in this play of light and shadow specific to the ways in which state agents operate in situated contexts (Das and Poole, 2004). This uncertain terrain, therefore, feeds renewed forms of urban client politics: the frontiers of market expansion are also territories where battles are waged over political clientele.

Amid power plays and battles of interests, Jardim Milão seems to have been successful in its negotiations and deals, as well as in the choices of allies, or *supporters*. In the 2020 municipal elections, the occupation's leaders started a race in search of a candidate for whom they could offer the votes from the occupation in exchange for institutional support, from the potential future member of city council, during the Jardim Milão land tenure regularization process. Different members of the residents' association appointed different names. Around the same time, a well-known São Paulo city councilor, with a long-standing history of work in the southern area of the city, became increasingly close to neighborhoods in the northern area, territorializing his networks in the subprefectures and networks from territories including land occupations.

Patrícia, a member of the Residents' Association whose family members resided in a neighborhood where the councilman had a history with, was familiar with his work. She was responsible for introducing him to the occupation and, especially, for convincing the other members of the association to endorse the political deal with him. This was assisted by a former advisor to the councilman, then allocated to the subprefecture of the Jardim

Milão area. To show his good intentions, the advisor started to mobilize the state apparatus to benefit the occupation even before the election: he started conversations with Sabesp to regularize water supply in the area and started to work in favor of the occupation in administrative proceedings against it that were being reviewed by the local subprefecture. That the councilman quickly became the candidate officially appointed by the Residents' Association is no coincidence.

He emerged victorious from the 2020 elections and started to serve a new term in office. Since then, he has been praised in Jardim Milão for having enabled water supply regularization, for the paving works currently in progress in the area, and for the installation of the wastewater network, which is also in progress this year, 2023. Concurrently, the path to the long-awaited land tenure regularization has been paved. In 2022, Jardim Milão received a visit from the head of the local subprefecture and the then municipal secretary of housing, who pledged to deliver the much hoped-for land title to the occupiers before the end of the current municipal term. In 2023, the mayor of São Paulo went to the edges of the city to visit the occupation, which has just over 200 lots, reaffirming his commitment to recognize Jardim Milão — and all arrangements, agreements, and disagreements between the wide variety of actors that made it possible — as a formal territory of the country's largest metropolis.

This is yet another chapter of paths that open up many other issues to be addressed at another time, but which provide clues to understand the power relations inscribed in the modes of production of markets and urban planning.

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Notes

- (1) To avoid identifying any locations, we will refer to the extensive and heterogeneous north zone of São Paulo in general terms. The same goes for the name of the occupation we will address and the names of our interlocutors, which have all been changed.
- (2) The ethnographic data presented in this article are the result of the Lacerda's doctoral research, conducted in 2018–2022 at the Department of Sociology of the University of São Paulo, advised by Vera Telles. See Lacerda, 2023. This article is a continuation of the conversations and reflections established by the authors over the course of this investigation.
- (3) This is a research agenda that has been worked on in our research collectives. The formulations presented in this article have been largely a result of discussions conducted in the research seminars developed in the City and Work Group and LabCidade group, at USP. We thank our colleagues and partners.
- (4) Here we resume issues discussed in a different context in Telles, 2022.
- (5) For a detailed and comprehensive analysis of this company, its scale of operations, and the way it operates, see Milano, Petrella, Pulhez, 2021.
- (6) The italicized words are terms used by our interlocutors. They often repeat common-sense notions which circulate and give meaning to practices and relations in territories on the outskirts of the city. The *brothers* are individuals who are known for their connections with the PCC.

- (7) The *debates* and *exchange of ideas* – or simply the *ideas* – make up the procedures and protocols established by the PCC to manage the order and the meanings of justice formulated within the scope of the so-called criminal world, but which have expanded far beyond it. They are spaces for deliberation and mediation of conflicts held in an agonistic and always situational way. In our field, the difference between them seemed to be related to the seriousness of each situation: the *debate* involves more *brothers*, and evidence and testimonies are requested before the final decision is announced. Meanwhile, in the *exchange of ideas*, issues considered less serious are addressed in a conversation in which the *brother* in charge – probably the local *disciplina* (responsible for the discipline) – has the autonomy to rule on the case. Certainly, these distinctions are much more analytical than practical, as the activation and configuration of one or the other in everyday reality can take different forms.
- (8) Our ethnographic research on the occupations was conducted in 2018–2022, with regular visits to the territories and conduction of interviews. Jardim Milão’s WhatsApp group chat was also monitored since the author joined it in August 2018.
- (9) A process that is being thoroughly investigated in the ongoing doctoral research conducted by Débora Ungaretti (FAUUSP). We thank her for her being a continuous and generous interlocutor.
- (10) To give an idea of the size of this process, within a 2.5-km radius drawn from a given point of the Ring Road, 28 new occupations were identified between April 2015 and September 2021.
- (11) Due to the area’s specific environmental settings, at the foot of the Cantareira State Park, amid environmental protection areas sprinkled across this zone of urban expansion, the environmental dimension is a key issue in local land conflicts. Environmental police officers and inspectors are constantly in the occupations, either to conduct inspection and repression actions or to hold (extra-legal) negotiations regarding the conditions for their permanence. It was not always possible to specify this presence in the accounts by our interlocutors, in which state operators are usually mentioned in a more general way.
- (12) A term used by one of our interlocutors to indicate the payment of bribes to state agents to carry out *melhorias* (improvements) in the occupation.
- (13) Companhia de Saneamento Básico do Estado de São Paulo (Sabesp) is a government-controlled private company. Its primary shareholder is the São Paulo state government, which grants concession for basic sanitation service provisioning in the state.

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