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A PRECARIEDADE COMO REGRA: APORTES PARA UM REPOSICIONAMENTO EPISTEMOLÓGICO PRECAIOUSNESS AS A RULE: CONTRIBUTIONS TO AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL REPOSITIONING

PAULO NASCIMENTO NETO

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Paulo Nascimento Neto is an architect and holds a Doctor degree in Urban Management. He worked as a consultant of Urban Planning, with eight years of professional practice in the Municipality of Curitiba, PR. He is a co-editor of the *Urbe* journal – the Brazilian Journal of Urban Management, and an Associate Professor at the Postgraduate Program in Urban Management of the Catholic University of Paraná - PUC-PR. paulo.neto@pucpr.br

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Abstract

Urban precariousness is usually addressed as an urban planning and management externality, expressed by the absence of life support infrastructures, whether of greater or lesser materiality. Despite the diversity of methodological instruments available, its effectiveness in urban interventions remains controversial. The hegemonic narrative carries the risk of operationalizing a symbolic domination of popular territories, reinforcing their stigmatized condition. From this guiding question, and in order to revisit the epistemological structures and methodological strategies involved, this paper critically stresses the ontological dimension of urban precariousness. Based on the epistemological model of rhizomes proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, the paper seeks to debate the concept of precarious settlements in terms of its material and immaterial dimensions, proposing new bases for collective action.

Keywords: Precarious settlement, Urban precariousness, Informal settlements, Popular territories.

1 Introduction

Popular territories stem from multiple processes of informal access to land by low-income populations, consolidating themselves in the urban context in environmentally fragile areas (Marques, 2015). These areas, residual and without interest in the real estate market, start to operate the logic of survival (Kowarick, 1980). Difficulties in accessing urban services and infrastructures are superimposed on other issues, such as the illegality of land and buildings, less job offers and greater exposure to violence (Almeida and Alvim, 2016; Nobre, 2008), in such a way that a multidimensional segregation process takes shape, overflowing readings that are reduced to infrastructure indicators (Abramo, 2007; Quillian, 2012).

Far from universalizing readings, this panorama requires an understanding of the specificities of the urbanization processes that occurred in different socio-spatial contexts. It is necessary to move beyond traditional cartographic methods, which are unable to cope with the characteristics of contemporary urban processes (Schmid et al., 2018; Soja, 2000), which demand an epistemology of the socio-metabolic conditions of space (Brenner and Schmid, 2014) and their experiential relationships from the body in space (Wagner and Duarte, 2015; Bourdieu, 2018).

Thus, the strict reading of the urban form proves to be insufficient for the adequate understanding of popular territories. Multiple territorialities are articulated and overlap in these spaces, in a dynamic arrangement of subjects, actions and subjectivities that surpasses the conventional scope of understanding (of what is conventionally called) precarious settlements. Here is the starting point of this paper. Advancing on the conceptual dimension of the precariousness of urban settlements implies discussing it epistemologically, imposing, therefore, a first debate of its own ontological dimension.

In this context, we highlight the ontologically restricted view of precariousness as a derivative of physical-territorial planning as our research problem. This explanatory structure is socially validated from a tree topology (Deleuze and Guattari, 2011), in which certain concepts are hierarchically subordinated to other higher concepts. In other words, the conceptual discussion ends up conditioned by the meaning of the highest-level concepts, which establish the limits within which the questions may or may not impose themselves.

Thereby, urban precariousness is interpreted as a category linked to the externalities of urban planning and management, expressed in terms of the absence of life support infrastructures, whether of greater or lesser materiality. The privileged locus of this process is in illegally produced human settlements (Caldeira, 2017), fragments of an informal city that do not fit in the Euclidean zoning parameters designed for a city model organized in individualized property titles (Fischer et al, 2014). These territories, which have been stigmatized since their denomination (Freire, 2008), remain only the duty to patiently await the action of the State, responsible for urbanizing these areas and integrating them into the formal city. The transfer of ownership of the land and the provision of infrastructure, alone, were supposed to guarantee the requalification of these spaces. But does this understanding, conveniently instrumental, not prevent us from seeing the city more broadly?

Based on the studies of Deleuze and Guattari (2012) on the subjectivation process, it is essential to recognize that the line of hard segmentation that separates subjects from the formal city and those from the favela constitutes only one of the different stratifications that compose them. In fact, life is not limited to the great binary oppositions, but it comprises malleable and escape lines that shed light on elements different from those recurrently debated in studies related to the urbanization of informal settlements. If precariousness manifests itself in different dimensions and the dual system is unable to respond to the complexity of the subjects and the spaces they build, there is a need to critically tension the very ontological dimension of urban precariousness, which ultimately leads us to reanalyse their epistemological structures and methodological strategies.

The debate on methods of analysis and intervention in popular territories carries with it an intrinsic discussion about the role of technical-scientific knowledge in the legitimation process since its symbolic dimension. Fostering the debate in a broad sense, Bourdieu (2004) argues that methods are, in essence, an "ideological representation of the legitimate way of doing science" (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 55, our translation), something that must be respected "not to know the object, but to be seen as someone who knows how to ken the object (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2005, p. 250, our translation).

This paper focuses on this articulated set of questions, advancing on the epistemological trench of urban precariousness, in order to explore its non-apparent edges, unveil its immaterial dimension and investigate its impact on the methodological dimension. To this end, initially the (i) material dimensions of urban precariousness are investigated, then, the (ii) lineament of its conceptual repositioning are discussed and, finally, (iii) we deal with its repercussions in methodological terms, in light of the discussions undertaken in the previous sections.

2 Precarious settlement: concept and stigma

After all, how can one characterize the precariousness of a human settlement? This is a central issue in this work. Undoubtedly, the absence of basic infrastructure, shortages in the provision of public services and low standards of habitability are fundamental aspects and, as such, demand responses from the State. The importance of these themes is ratified by their evidence in the academic and technical arenas, counting on significant contributions from the scientific literature, either in their constitutive dimension (Moraes et al., 2016), or in their material dimension in the scope of public policies (Cardoso, Denaldi, 2018). These same

studies point to problems of the State's performance, in which the impacts arising from an essentially functional-sanitary vision that ultimately disfigures the sensitive action of intervening in a popular territory in a homogenized and homogenizing action of urbanization *stricto sensu*.

For any Latin American metropolis to which attention is directed, it is possible to identify a common repertoire of violent state action, highlighting the processes of systematic and forced removals, legitimized by the special public interest discourse (Magalhães, 2013; Nogueira, 2019), and relocation of families to areas far from the original place of residence (Libânio, 2016; Nascimento Neto, 2020). Individuals who live or lived there, deprived of their full autonomy, are invited to give their opinion on the fate of their lives, but they cannot decide on it. The capture of the autonomy of their decisions engenders a heteronomic process that involves not only the macro-power of the State (in evidence), but also the micro-powers inherent in social relations, shaped in the city itself. As Foucault (1998) points out, even if there is no holder of power, this power is always activated in a certain direction, so that, although it is not known who holds it, there is no doubt about who does not have it.

The rule is, therefore, the imposition of a standardized model of living, organized in condominiums (whether horizontal or vertical), which, ultimately, reflect the contempt operated by the State in relation to the intangible sphere of community life, cultural practices and the urban vitality existing in these territories (Salingaros et al., 2006). The very use of the expression "precarious settlements" by the State (Brasil, 2010) or the expression "subnormal agglomerations" by the Brazilian statistics institute (IBGE, 2010) implies a symbolic subjugation of popular territories, a heteronomic imposition that take its residents to an imminently passive role. This subordination is also reinforced by the insecurity of ownership, amplified by the dependence on political bargains guided by "tolerance agreements" to immanent informality. These elements produce a bodily-territorial distinction of rights (Barbosa, Silva, 2013), generating a hierarchical distribution of citizenship rights between social groups. This distribution is operated in a spatial dimension, but also experienced by the movement of bodies that move between the compartments of the city.

For no other reason, nannies, maids and cleaners, hired in precarious work regimes to care for children from high-income families, must leave their own children in daycare centers from the first months of life (Rodrigues, 2020), returning to their homes for mere physiological rest only in the last hours of the night, sometimes only on weekends (Martíns, 2016). Not by chance, the right to home inviolability is repeatedly disrespected in police operations (Schreiber, 2018; DPU-RJ, 2018), a common practice in the slums of any metropolis, but not seen in other areas of the so-called formal city. Not without consequences, a physical and symbolic frontier in society is established, from which those who "live there" are seen as precarious, those whose lives, in the end, are less valued.

This symbolic devaluation legitimizes the material destruction of bodies and social groups (Beato, 2010; Ramão, Wadi, 2010), supported by a necropolitics operated by the State (Mbembe, 2017), evidenced by the ongoing uricide in these areas (Mendonça, 2019).

[necropolitical power] Always seeks to abolish the distinction between means and ends. [...]. This type of death is nothing tragic and, therefore, the necropolitical power can multiply it infinitely, either in small doses (the cellular and molecular world), or by spasmodic outbreaks - the strategy of small day-to-day massacres, according to an implacable logic of separation, strangulation, vivisection, [...] (Mbembe, 2017, p. 65, our translation).

Under a narrative in which the relocation of families become a synonymous of urban upgrading and reduction of crime justifies violations of fundamental rights, little by little an inseparable relationship is built between popular territories and precariousness. This reading, laden with traces of stigmatization and imprecision, which is widely disseminated in certain social sectors, must be dismantled. The popular territory is, in fact, a true practical-symbolic collection (Barbosa, 2014), comprising a set of memories, symbols and values crystallized in space. These elements invite us to transpose the simplistic reading of form and appearance, despite their apparent precariousness, towards a better understanding of the collectively shared experiences (Barbosa, Silva, 2013) and their spatial reverberations.

Reflecting on the contributions brought so far in this article, the restriction of the precariousness debate to popular territories raises questions about its real purpose. Is this not a strategy of power, from which certain social groups impose themselves and impose their agenda of values, practices and instruments of coercion? We must overcome the reductionist view of the formal-informal dichotomy, given that popular territories are not the opposite pole to what is conventionally called the formal city. Essentially, we have two distinct spatial manifestations of a common phenomenon, in which ambiguous relations prevail (Telles, Cabanes, 2006), moving in unclear limits between formal-informal, legal-illegal, lawful-lawless. So, is it possible (and even ethical) to generalize the concept in order to apply it homogeneously in popular territories, in such a way that,

in many cases, precarious settlements and popular territories appear as synonyms? After all, what are the constitutive dimensions of precariousness?

Seeking for the synthesis of the debates and in order to highlight the urban socio-metabolic conditions that would allow counterpoints to the traditional link of precariousness, we propose the ordering of the field contributions in three central streams: (i) the first, with a greater degree of materiality, is related to the most tangible dimension of the city – buildings, infrastructure, services and equipment; (ii) the second, in a lesser materiality way (although visually identifiable), is linked to the appropriation of space, fostered by the sum of individual and collective perceptions, which define places and non-places; and, finally, (iii) the third stream, related to the psychosocial sphere of sociability and its impact in terms of urban vitality.

We are interested in advancing on the third stream, highlighting the potential energy of horizontal solidarity networks established among residents of popular territories, expressed by their organizational density, by community self-management, by self-urbanization actions, by acts of resistance in the face of removal pressures and violence, and by community movements in defense of their knowledge and culture against the imposition of hegemonic values and practices.

[...] The uncertainty of being part of the city, together with the gregarious nature that accompanies all the intense emigration, is translated into a human chain of mutual aid [...] that reconstructs human ties and solidarity in the hostile urban social space. The integration process of different groups with different customs and *habitus* occurs with tensions that are often transposed by protests against eviction processes, by the community management of services or participation in collective celebrations¹. (Fernandez Cabrera, 2012, p. 54, our translation).

In contrast to this pulsating vitality of popular territories, debates and analyzes involving the low quality of public spaces in the formal city are notorious, focusing on their incipient appropriation by the residents of the surroundings and the undoing of ties of friendship and neighborhood, which has in condominium – closed, securitized and supervised - one of its greatest expressions of concreteness. In several surveys with extensive fieldwork - see, for example, Rosa et al. (2012) and Eckert (2002) -, among residents of what was called "formal city", there was a wide tendency of disinterest in neighborhood associations. A feeling of linked generalized insecurity² and incapacity of the State, which is combined with a certain collective inertia, delegating to the other (State) the exclusive need for action. After all, what do these results show if not a high degree of precariousness, since the third stream previously proposed?

With that, it is not intended to advocate that popular territories are islands of tranquility or even that everyone has urban vitality equally. But we also cannot deny that a broader understanding of precariousness imposes the need for conceptual restructuring based on its ontological dimension, avoiding the risk of automatic correlation between the ideas of popular territories and precarious settlements.

3 (Dis)articulation of precariousness: contributions to an ontological repositioning

In order to support the imposed challenge of conceptual rediscussion, it is essential to debate its very epistemological model. As previously described, we problematize the concept of precarious settlement since a hierarchical tree structure, as approached by Deleuze and Guattari (2011). This structure inflicts intrinsic limitations to the ontological repositioning, the result of the model itself and, therefore, a consequence of the subordination to higher level concepts.

Thus, at the outset, we propose to reposition the concept within a rhizomatic model (Deleuze, Guattari, 2011), from which there are no lines of hierarchical subordination and perennial grouping organizations. Regardless of the relative position of each concept, all elements are subject to mutual influence. In this context, the metaphorical figure that is placed is a knot in a network of concepts, in which there is no single centrality, nor limits imposed by fields of knowledge. In this way, we dismantle the hierarchical model, which results, ultimately, from the distribution of power and authority in the social body, responsible for defining which concepts are superior to which, in clear correspondence to the notion of field developed by Bourdieu (2004).

Within this epistemological structure, it is also important to define the term "concept" more precisely. According to Deleuze and Guattari (2011), the idea of concept necessarily leads to a problem, in which the complex art of articulating components will make it possible to gather the latter around a name. This activity is related to the context in which it was forged, and it is not possible to conceive concepts in universal terms. They are unique, linked to an application and a particular problem. This singularity is responsible for constituting them properly as concepts. Contributing to the debate, Bourdieu (2004, p. 57) states that

In line with these points, and in view of the limitation of the length of the article, the answer to the challenge

Concepts can –and, to a certain extent, must– remain open, provisional, which does not mean vague, approximate or confused [...]. The contribution of a researcher can consist, on several occasions, in attracting attention to a problem, to something that was not seen because it was too evident, too clear, because, as we say in French, "it pops out". (our translation).

imposed in this work will seek to advance on the trenches of the consolidated concept, proposing new founding milestones, notably by identifying the dimensions of urban precariousness and how they are articulated . In other words, if it is not possible to define, at this moment, with the required precision, what urban precariousness is, at least we can assert what it is not: it is not merely a matter of the absence of infrastructures and public services in areas not regularized by the State.

In this article we advocate that the concept of precarious settlement can be related to both popular territories and formal sectors of the city, and should not be reduced to an instrumental dimension. As a result of this repositioning, which is also a review of the epistemological model in which the concept is positioned, we propose the delimitation of three central dimensions:

- + Predominant materiality dimension, linked to the concreteness of the city (buildings, infrastructure, services and equipment);

- + Relative materiality dimension, linked to the appropriation of space and the construction of images (individual and collective) of the city, defining places and non-places;

- + Immaterial dimension, linked to the psychosocial sphere of sociability and urban vitality.

These three dimensions are mutually articulated and produce, through their interaction, a greater or lesser degree of precariousness. With that, we reiterate: any urban area could hold the title of precarious settlement, depending on which dimension is considered for that. The direct implication of this ontological renegotiation is the establishment of a trench in the symbolic field in order to legitimize popular territories from their own morpho-landscape characteristics and socio-cultural values, according to which different aspects of precariousness can be problematized.

4 Instrumentalizations of precariousness: reflections from the methodological field

Discussing the idea of precarious settlement at the constitutive level brings with it inherent demands for advancement over the new open epistemological frontiers, in order to instrumentalize them at the methodological level. As has been shown so far, the broad conceptual understanding of urban precariousness and the recognition of its relational nature points to the complexity of power relations involved in the social construction of reality. In this context, not without controversies, it is essential to operationalize it, connecting theoretical contributions and their practical implications in order to avoid an analytical relativism that would not contribute to the topic discussed.

Facing this challenge from a rhizomatic perspective implies recognizing that the discussion about the precariousness of an area, even though it includes minimum criteria of healthiness and urbanity, gravitates over subjective dimensions, for which there is no possible path but that produced from the juxtaposition of multiple narratives. Traditional knowledge is, therefore, articulated and locally managed with technical-scientific knowledge in broad spectrum analyzes, which bring together divergent readings in dialogical processes of collective construction of diagnoses and propositions. In the end, it is a question of seeing the different sectors of the city as a result of this process, in which relations are not given a priori (standardized model) but are manifested from the specific conditions of (re) production of daily life and the built space. Analytical variables of operationalization of each constitutive dimension are already dispersed in the literature of different fields of knowledge. The exercise of articulating them is urgent in order to instrumentalize the concept that, ultimately, will be the product of successive negotiations between the actors involved, based on agreements crossed by asymmetries of powers and diversity of undeclared interests.

Despite the "becoming" imposed in terms of operationalization, the necessary epistemological and methodological restructuring remains clear. It must be conceived from the local scale, from which it is even possible to question the design of public housing policies, whether to provide new housing or to urbanize informal settlements. Does this sectorial arrangement, which adopts homogeneous and homogenizing parameters, generate effective results in terms of urban improvement or does it only respond to the demands imposed by the State's own operationalization of the action? What are the implications of a disconnected approach to this Fordist model of mass housing production, of something that does not generate "living", only "surviving"? Assessing the housing policy by the number of completed housing units or meters of sewage, per

se, responds to something beyond the government's own need for self-promotion and regulation of bodies and territories?

5 Final considerations

The closing questions in the previous section are placed in a purposefully controversial format, in order to animate the debate in subsequent works. They are, simultaneously, products of the discussion and elements of the reflection that fosters it, deviating from explanatory models of essentially positivist cause-effect, placing the investigative focus on the system's borders, on the "porous fringes where the exchanges of ideas exchange, values, practices and objects are realized" (Barbosa, 2014, p. 132, our translation), because it is, "in the midst of the rubble that it produces that the germs and the greatest potential to overcome the situation must be sought by all lamented" (Souza, 2006, p. 329, our translation).

In this context, the invitation to reflect on the method inevitably calls us to a deeper dive through the concomitant discussion of different constitutive levels, from the ontological understanding of the theme, through its repercussions in epistemological terms, reaching the resulting impacts in the methodological field. Based on the rhizomatic principle of Deleuze and Guattari (2011), this relational structure of argument construction reinforces the urgency of approaches that deconstruct the traditional hierarchical structure of concepts that, ultimately, lead to substantial restrictions on the production of knowledge and systematization of ways of apprehending it, especially in the contemporary panorama.

New bases inevitably imply new assumptions for public action, from which the expected results would no longer be previously established (standardized housing solutions), but would derive from a dialogical process of collective construction of diagnoses and propositions. Results of this nature would recognize the plurality of popular territories, the vitality of their social dynamics and, ultimately, would enable mutual and collective learning between different sectors of society.

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1 [...] la incertidumbre de la incorporación a la ciudad, unida al carácter gregario que acompaña a toda emigración masiva, se traduce en una cadena humana de ayuda mutua [...] recomponiendo los lazos humanos y de solidaridad dentro del hostil espacio social urbano. El proceso de integración de los diferentes grupos con costumbres y hábitos diferenciales se hará con tensiones en muchas ocasiones superadas con eventos como la lucha contra el desalojo, el proceso de gestión de los servicios o la participación en celebraciones colectivas.

2 It is noteworthy that, “the population's imaginary tends to define the ‘enemy’ in the generic figure of the ‘lower-class criminality’, the ‘other’, who would threaten an irreversibility in the urban crisis”. (Eckert, 2002, p. 74, our translation).