The "right to the city centre":
Political struggles of street vendors in Belo Horizonte, Brazil

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Editorial Board

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Abstracts

The paper aims to investigate the relations between work and urban space, focusing on the struggles of street vendors for the "right to the city centre" in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. We join critical debates on Brazil's internationally praised urban reform by focusing on informal workers. Beyond lacking the protection of labour laws, the "right to the city" (RttC) of such workers has been consistently denied through restrictive legislations and policies. In the context of the "crisis" of waged labour, we explore the increasing centrality of urban space for working-class political struggles. Looking at Belo Horizonte, the paper traces the relation between urban participatory democracy and the development of legal-institutional frameworks that restricted street vendors' access to urban space in the city. In the context of an urban revitalisation policy implemented in 2017, we then explore the use of legal frameworks to remove street vendors from public areas of the city and the resulting political resistance movement. The discussion focuses on the emergence of the Vicentão Occupation, a building squatted by homeless families and street vendors in conflict with the local state. Though this case, we explore the radical potential of contemporary articulations of Henri Lefebvre's framework emerging from the confluence of diverse local urban struggles for "the right to the city centre". Ultimately we argue for an understanding of the RttC as a process and a site of continual struggle whose terrain is shaped, but cannot be replaced by, legal frameworks that need to be constantly contested and evolving to reflect the shifting socio-spatial relations.

Keywords: the right to the city; popular economies; urban politics; crisis of labour

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

In May 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic, an online debate on "informal work" was organised by Intersindical, a Brazilian umbrella organisation that brings various unions together and promotes working-class political struggles. During the debate, social activists and street vendors presented and discussed the hardships experienced by informal workers whose daily survival has been seriously endangered during the pandemic. Jô Cavalcanti, who is a social activist and current state deputy in Pernambuco, pointed out that informal traders were the most harassed group of workers, disregarded by the country's constitution and persecuted by local authorities. She further added that "the majority of workers today are not in the factory" and that "the revolution of the working-class is happening on the streets today". As a street vendor herself, Cavalcanti was drawing attention to the political struggles of informal workers outside waged employment, whose livelihood depended on their economic life on the streets. This calls into question what it means to discuss "the right to the city centre" in urban Brazil that has been at the centre of international spotlight for its progress enactment of the right to the city as urban policy.

Beyond the lack of protection and recognition, street vendors – who, as self-employed people, officially constitute the informal sector in Brazil – are also denied rights to urban space through restrictive legislations and policies (Itikawa 2016). Indeed, they may belong to what Peter Marcuse (2009, 190) refers to as the "excluded" group, who remains "a part of the system, without the protections won by the working class for labour," but nevertheless existing at the margin of the system. In this paper, we look at the struggles of street vendors in the city of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, for the right to occupy urban space, interrogating how they relate to Lefebvre's right to the city concept in theory, policy and practice. We also focus on street vendors as a response to an emergent call among critical scholars for reorientation of research protocols beyond the normative telos of the "proper job" (Ferguson and Li 2018), which has increasingly become a rare commodity in the context of profound restructuring of global capitalism.

Written in late-1960s Paris, Lefebvre's "*Le droit a la ville*" denounces the usurpation of the city by (industrial) capitalism and the bureaucratic state, urging the working classes to take back the city, which is rightfully the product of their collective labour. More than fifty

years after its original publication, the "right to the city" (RttC) idea remains relevant in an urbanising world with widening disparities and exacerbating injustice. Since the early 2000s, it has gained popularity simultaneously as a theoretical framework, a policy agenda and a political claim (Purcell 2014). Those three different aspects are nonetheless entangled and both policy and political activism are influenced by theoretical developments and vice-versa. This article is positioned at this intersection. Focusing on the case of Brazil, it looks at how the RttC has travelled between academic, policy, and activist circles in the country in multiple directions.

The effectiveness of Brazil's internationally praised urban reform has been recently questioned by various scholars (Friendly 2013; Nogueira 2019b; Rolnik 2013). We join this debate by focusing on informal workers, a group that has been overlooked by theory, policy and political activism (Nogueira 2019a). We explore the connections between urban participatory democracy, the legal frameworks that curtail street vendors' access to urban space and their political struggles. By doing so, the paper aims at revealing the processual nature of the RttC and the consequential potentialities and limits to its institutionalisation. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that the institutionalisation of RttC would enhance the right of workers to urban space, we question to what extent urban participatory democracy has so far acted to constrain the RttC of those workers in the popular economy. In doing so, we attempt to explore the potential of new radical articulations of the RttC by examining how the RttC has been translated into legislation and interrogate the connection between laws and emancipatory struggles for rights (Attoh 2011). Our enquiry would help inform wider social movements of what tradeoffs are potentially involved in institutionalising rights in a society dominated by inequality and conflict (Shin, 2018).

In this paper, we adopt a case study approach, focusing on Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais state. We trace the relation between urban participatory democracy and the development of legal-institutional frameworks that restricted street vendors' access to urban space in the city. More specifically, in the context of an urban revitalisation policy implemented in 2017, we explore the use of legal frameworks to remove street vendors from public areas of the city and their political resistance movement. Focusing on the emergence of the Vicentão Occupation, a building squatted by homeless families and street vendors in conflict with the local state, we explore the potentialities of new radical articulations of the RttC

emerging from (re)insurgency. Methodologically, the paper is the result of a long-term engagement with the city of Belo Horizonte developed through various fieldwork visits between 2014 and 2019. The analysis builds on qualitative data (interviews and field notes) and archival materials gathered between 2018 and 2019 through multiple interactions with street vendors, social activists and state agents in the city.

The rest of this paper consists of five sections. In the second section, we review academic debates on the RttC, focusing on the discussion of the relationship between Lefebvre's revolutionary concept and the liberal rights framework. We also discuss the incorporation of this framework into Brazil's urban policy. Section three introduces the city of Belo Horizonte, exploring the local trajectory in urban participatory democracy. Section four presents the case of the Vicentão Occupation, exploring how the confluence of multiple urban struggles in that space contributed to the creation of a collective identity among street vendors in the city of Belo Horizonte. Finally, section five presents the concluding reflections. Building on the analysis, we advocate an understanding of the RttC as a process and a site of continual struggle whose terrain is shaped, but cannot be replaced by, legal frameworks that need to be constantly contested and evolving to reflect the shifting socio-spatial relations.

2.   The right to the city: theory, policy and practice

2.1. The right to the city and legal frameworks

In his 1968 publication, *Le Droit à la ville*, Lefebvre described the process through which an urban society presided over industrial capitalism that commodified the urban and introduced the notion of the "right to the city" (RttC) (Lefebvre 1996; Purcell 2014). The RttC is related to arguments developed in Lefebvre's 1970 publication, *La Révolution urbaine*, which explores the relationship between industrial capitalism and the production of urban space. Lefebvre (2003) argued that the creation of surplus value that enables the reproduction of capital was then increasingly associated with urban processes such as construction and real estate speculation in times of accumulation crisis. Capitalism was no longer only *organising the production in space* but rather progressively relying on *the production of space* to endure. Central to Lefebvre's thinking is the street, the stage of urban living where encounter and spontaneity foster the potential for de-alienation of urban life. In this sense, he was also

deeply critical of a certain type of rational urban planning that attempts to compartmentalise human activity through zoning instruments, seeking to organise society and imposing a bureaucratic form that despoils everyday life of its creative potential (Lefebvre 1996; Merrifield 2002). The RttC is thus presented in association with the right to difference, "as a means of challenging the controlling forces of homogenization, fragmentation and uneven development imposed by the state, the market and the bureaucracy" (Friendly 2013, 60). It is "like a cry and a demand" (Lefebvre 1996, 158) for the re-taking of urban space by the working class whose labour and social practices produce the city. It is not a right to return to a city in the past but rather a right to a radically different urban future (Merrifield, 2002).

As urbanisation continues to rapidly unfold and transform societies around the globe, his revolutionary concept gains new momentum in the 21st century (Kuymulu 2013; Rolnik 2014). The RttC is mobilised by critical urban scholars, activists and communities under existential threats to denounce profit-oriented urban governance regimes (Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2009) that engender displacement and gentrification (Lees, Shin, and López-Morales 2016), reducing adequate access to resources, infrastructure and appropriate housing (Marcuse 2008) while leading to growing episodes of urban protest and insurgency (Shin 2018). The concept is also popular in practice, as social movements increasingly learn to express political struggles for urban justice using the RttC language, popularising the idea and generating further academic debates (Mayer 2012). Moreover, international organisations such as UN-HABITAT, UNDP and UNESCO have also absorbed the RttC agenda into the human rights framework, promoting a pragmatic version of Lefebvre's idea (Kuymulu, 2013). As the concept continuously travels between theory, policy and practice and gets deployed in various geographies, the RttC acquires new meanings that stretch far beyond its original formulation.

Although articulated as a right, the RttC is not developed by Lefebvre in juridical terms (Fernandes 1995). As noted by Rolnik (2014, 294), there is "no agreement on the elements that constitute the right to the city: if it should be treated as a political horizon for emancipation or as a moral, individual, collective, social or human right that should be integrated into public policies and be implemented by governments". According to Attoh (2011, 674), Lefebvre offers no clarity as to what type of right the RttC is and the growing scholarship on the topic fails to address this problem, advocating instead for a "radical openness". For Marcuse (2009, 193), for instance, it is "the right to a totality, a complexity, in which

each of the parts is part of a single whole to which the right is demanded". Within such totality, however, one might find rights that are not compatible and the literature tends to overlook how potential conflicts between equally valued rights should be approached (Attoh, 2011).

Other critical scholars have pointed out that the RttC should not be understood within the limits of the liberal capitalist tradition (Harvey 2008; Purcell 2014). Purcell (2014) notes that within liberal democracies, political actions are often imagined as struggles for securing rights that would be guaranteed by the state. Such actions are often concerned with redistributive justice. For Lefebvre, however, the RttC is not "an incremental addition to existing liberal-democratic rights," but rather a political programme aimed at securing the control of spatial production by citizens and a radical struggle "to move *beyond* both the state and capitalism" (Purcell 2014, 142; original emphasis). In such formulations, one can identify a certain dismissive engagement with the law and legal discourse, interpreted monolithically as languages of authority through which the power of the bourgeois state is enacted (Fernandes, 1995; Marston, 2004). Nevertheless, as pointed out by De Souza (2006, 339), emancipatory social movements often engage successfully with the state and the law in multiple ways: "sometimes *together with* the local state apparatus, sometimes *despite* the state, sometimes *against* the state" (original emphasis).

Different studies have demonstrated how legal discourses and strategies are also employed by those challenging the state (Holston 2008; O'Brien 1996). Holston (2008) has shown how the urban poor became proficient in the language of the state, learning how to use Brazil's "misrule of law" in their favour in order to claim for rights, expanding citizenship and transforming the state in the process. The use of the language of the state echoes the practices of Chinese villagers exercising the rightful resistance deployed as a popular strategy to capture 'rightful claims' using the language of 'authorities and established values' (O'Brien, 1996).

Apart from being the language of state power (Marston, 2004), the law can also be deployed by those resisting, challenging and seeking radial transformation (de Sousa Santos and Carlet 2009). In the context of fighting against gentrification in London, Hubbard and Lees (2018) demonstrate how legal precedents of securing a win in tenants' fight against eviction would produce positive impacts on tenants' on-going struggles by locating and ex-

ploiting 'soft spots'. As we will demonstrate, the creation of progressive legal frameworks in Brazil did not guarantee rights, but created new arenas for struggles, calling for the need of retaining continuous popular struggles to reflect 'the cry and the demand' (c.f., Lefebvre 1996, 158) of those whose rights are yet to be encompassed by the previous round of legal innovation.

2.2. The right to the city and participatory urban democracy in Brazil

Situating the RttC in urban Brazil requires a brief history of how the country's model of urban policy has evolved as a result of situated socio-political struggles. In the late 1980s, re-democratisation of the country inaugurated a period of intense experimentation with participatory urban policy in various cities. In 2001, many of those initiatives were institutionalised in the federal law known as the City Statute, a move that clearly goes against the conventional understanding of how legal innovations are often used to undermine the rights of survival among the marginalised and disadvantaged (Mitchell and Heynen 2009). As opposed to the 'annihilation of space by law' (Mitchell 1997), the City Statute (CS) is intended to re-appropriate the urban space for its democratic use. It was the result of more than 10 years of political debates involving different sectors of the civil society, including academics and social activists. Praised widely as an innovative and progressive urban law (Fernandes 2007), the CS was largely inspired by Lefebvre's political-philosophical framework (Huchzermeyer 2015) and it embraces the RttC, which is codified legally as "the combination of the principles of the social function of property and of the city and the democratic management of cities" (Friendly 2013, 158).

Since the enactment of the CS, many have explored how the entanglement of democratisation and neoliberalism have limited its success in terms of actually engendering the urban poor's RttC (Caldeira and Holston 2015; Rolnik 2013). For Klink and Denaldi (2016, 404), "the disappointing results of 'really existing' Brazilian urban reform" relate to a shift from an initial radical rights-based agenda to a professionalized practice of urban reform embedded in the state. There is evidence showing how progressive instruments of the CS have been appropriated by profit-oriented coalitions in various contexts (Rolnik and Santoro 2013), although more positive accounts are not unheard of (see Klink and Denaldi 2016).

In a number of cities, new "invited spaces" (Cornwall 2004) were created, such as urban participatory councils and city conferences, expanding opportunities for civil society engagement with the new urban policy but producing heterogenous impacts on populations. Citizen participation is often organised around class-based groups, unevenly empowered to affect final policy outcomes as shown for the case of São Palo (Caldeira and Holston 2015) and Belo Horizonte (Nogueira 2019b). These cases can be located within the wider criticisms to the RttC literature and its blindness to such categories as gender, race and class, which influence the capacity of citizens to participate equally in democratic urban governance (Beebeejaun 2017). This aspect will be further developed in this paper as we consider the relationship between the Brazilian urban reform and the RttC of street vendors.

2.3. Labour and urban space: the missing link

In Brazil, progressive juridical frameworks did not guarantee the right to housing but social movements are often able to successfully challenge evictions - or, at least, negotiate legally entitled compensations - by tactically using the judiciary as an arena for confrontation (Zhang 2020). In contrast, informal street vendors face not only the lack of institutional support but also restrictive legislations that criminalise their work and constrain their access to urban space (Nogueira 2019a). Although urban livelihoods often presuppose access to urban space, this aspect has been mostly ignored by urban policies in Brazil and elsewhere (Schindler 2014; Brown 2015).

Recently, revitalisation and renewal policies have sought to reshape urban spaces around the world in order to attract global capital (Lees, Shin, and López-Morales 2016). From Mumbai and Durban to Mexico City, São Paulo and Quito, these policies often result in the removal of street vendors from targeted areas (Crossa 2009; Itikawa 2016; Swanson 2007). Such unwanted populations are criminalised by the urban authorities who use the language of informality as strategic discourses to legitimise restrictive policies (Crossa, 2016). Analysing the brutal eviction of traders from the inner streets of Johannesburg, Bénit-Gbaffou (2016, 1102) observes that the majority of displaced workers were not politically organised. Traders were not accustomed to making collective claims employing the language of "rights" and were rather "used to adopting a politics of invisibility, of everyday arrangements and constant mobility". Such tactics allow for situated ephemeral arrangements that are

aimed at guaranteeing immediate impromptu access to space rather than securing rights to space. Relegated by traditional unions, the political action of informal workers, such as street vendors, has just recently started to gain more scholarly attention in the context of the global crisis of waged labour (Breman and van der Linden 2014).

In Western countries where the welfare state has been more fully institutionalised, access to full citizenship has been traditionally mediated by the state-sponsored capital-labour relationship. However, the recent restructuring of global capitalist production and a series of economic crisis have continuously dismantled existing capital-labour relationships (Harvey 2004), imposing serious risks to the sustainability of extant welfare systems (Goul Andersen and Jensen 2002). As flexibility and precariousness become widespread features, dualistic theorisations of formal/informal are increasingly unhelpful to understand the dynamics of the labour market (Telles, 2015). Similarly, classical understandings of the working class and of worker's collective action centred on "formal" employment and trade unionism are being questioned. Facing insecurity and precarious conditions, people increasingly negotiate with flexible arrangement between formal and informal jobs. Some scholars have thus suggested the need to move beyond "informality" as an analytical lenses, reviving the concept of "popular economies" (Coraggio, 1989) to refer to "the variegated, promiscuous forms of organising the production of things, their repair, distribution, use, as well as the provision of social reproduction services that simultaneous fall inside and outside the ambit of formal capitalist production" (Simone 2019, 618).

Particularly in Southern contexts where formalisation was never the norm, it is necessary to avoid dystopian views of precariousness and re-orient research towards examining the potentialities and limits of the political organisation of "unstable" work (Lago 2011). This paper is, therefore, concerned with the collective action in the popular economy for the right to work on the street as vendors. Contrary to "traditional" working class politics, their collective actions manifest a desire for inclusion that do not fit modern accounts of "formality". Such claims also foreground the street, emphasising the role of urban space not only as a site of capital accumulation but also the stage where a redefined working-class politics are structured and the means through which the right to work is realised. In paying attention to the political struggles of street vendors to guarantee the "right to the city centre", this paper inter-

rogates how their efforts stand in relation to Lefebvre's radical agenda and also disrupt the institutionalisation of the RttC.

3. Participatory urban democracy and the popular economy in Belo Horizonte, Brazil

On 25 February 1999, Belo Horizonte's 1st Municipal Conference on Urban Policy was inaugurated. The Conference was mandated by the municipal law No.7.165 that instituted and regulated the city's *Plano Diretor* (Master Plan). This regulatory framework marked a rupture with the functionalist zoning model hitherto in place, instituting and regulating several instruments that would later become federalised in the CS. An early draft of the bill stated that the master plan should guarantee "everyone's right to the city and the full exercise of citizenship" (Lage 2008, 33). Although the RttC was not included in the final version, this demonstrates the influence of Lefebvre's conceptualisation on its formulation.

The conference was a pioneering experience in the country, gathering more than 700 participants and 125 representatives of various sectors of the civil society (COMPUR 2000). The final report, which compiles resolutions and recommendations to the local government, explicitly mentioned the "popular economy" on several occasions. The analysis of the document reveals that formalisation policies and the creation of formal jobs were the solutions envisaged to "demarginalise" the informal economy, which had grown considerably in the 1980s and 1990s. Such growth was visible in the central area of Belo Horizonte, where an increasing number of street vendors were often in conflict with shop keepers and everyday users of urban space (Zambelli 2006). In the early 1990s, the municipal government attempted to regulate the informal commerce, promoting the registration of vendors and capping their numbers. This measure created a new conflict between licensed *camelôs* working in tents, selling authorised products and operating in specifically designated areas, and the non-licensed vendors, known as *toreros*. By the early 2000s, there was increasing pressure for a more vigorous approach coming from the local chamber of commerce, local media outlets and parts of the local population (Carrieri and Murta 2011).

In this context, the 2nd Municipal Conference on Urban Policy took place between 2001 and 2002. Contrary to the first conference, there was no reference to the "popular economy" in the final report but several mentions to "frequent debates and conflicts" caused by

the disorderly occupation of urban spaces by the "informal" commerce (COMPUR 2003). Rather than pure semantics, this change also symbolises a shift from framing the discussion as a matter of economic development to a matter of spatial order. The conference annals reveal how the issue was perceived at the time as a consequence of "an aggravating social scenario in which the informal economy" became an alternative for those "marginalised by increasingly exclusionary policies" (ibid., 143). It acknowledges that street vendors of various kinds had been historically part of the urban landscape, while also recognising the importance of street vending "from a social point of view" (ibid., 119) as an alternative for unemployed workers and low-income consumers. Nevertheless, it generally emphasised the "excessive growth" of street vending that caused "accidents with pedestrians, difficulties for the mobility of disabled people, degradation of the urban space with negative consequences for public security and cleanliness, as well as the losses imposed on legal commercial establishments" (ibid., 143). In light of those issues, final recommendations included the promotion of urban "revitalisation" in commercial areas and the approval of the *Código de Posturas* (Code of Placements), a legal framework aimed at regulating the uses of public space.

With the sanction of participatory democracy, the Code of Placements was approved by the City Council in 2003 and enacted in 2004. According to the new law, the use of public space for commercial purposes, with no appropriate license, was prohibited. In the same year, the local government launched a program for the "revitalisation" of the city centre (*Centro Vivo*). The previously licensed *camelôs* were then selected through a lottery process to occupy the spots at newly constructed popular malls. Not all of them were given a place and the attitude towards those that remained on the streets was a policy of "zero tolerance".

The "revitalisation" policy combined with the displacement of vendors from the streets were recommendations arising from a participatory democratic process. As noted by Carrieri and Murta (2011, 218), both initiatives intended to "discipline and control people in a way that" undermined "their rights and independence". In this case, "participatory democracy" enabled the creation of legal and policy frameworks that restricted street vendors' rights to urban space. The relationship of the popular economy with the city was approached as a problem of "spatial order" (Roy 2012) that required, from the local government, the promotion of "rational planning and control of these activities" (COMPUR 2003, 143). Informal

workers in Belo Horizonte were thus not only excluded from the gains of Brazil's urban reform but negatively affected by local frameworks arising from participatory channels. In the next section, we explore how new radical political articulations have begun to challenge such exclusion, revealing the processual nature of struggles for the RttC.

4. The Vicentão occupation and "the right to the city centre"

4.1. The unification of urban struggles in the context of (re)insurgency

In mid-2017, Belo Horizonte's municipal government implemented the "Action Plan for the Belo Horizonte Hypercenter", a policy aimed at the revitalisation of the area of the city centre known as the hyper-centre (see Figure 1). A centrepiece of the initiative was the "productive social inclusion of *camelôs* and *toreros,*" which aimed at removing street vendors from public spaces and relocating them to popular shopping malls, a measure that evokes the aforementioned 2004 Code of Placements. In his campaign, the newly appointed mayor, Alexandre Kalil (Social Democratic Party - PSD) had promised to bring a solution for the situation of the "irregular" trade in the city centre. Although prohibited by law, the activity of street vendors had been overlooked by the previous administration. The "new" response echoed the early 2000s experience when the streets were "cleaned" for the first time.
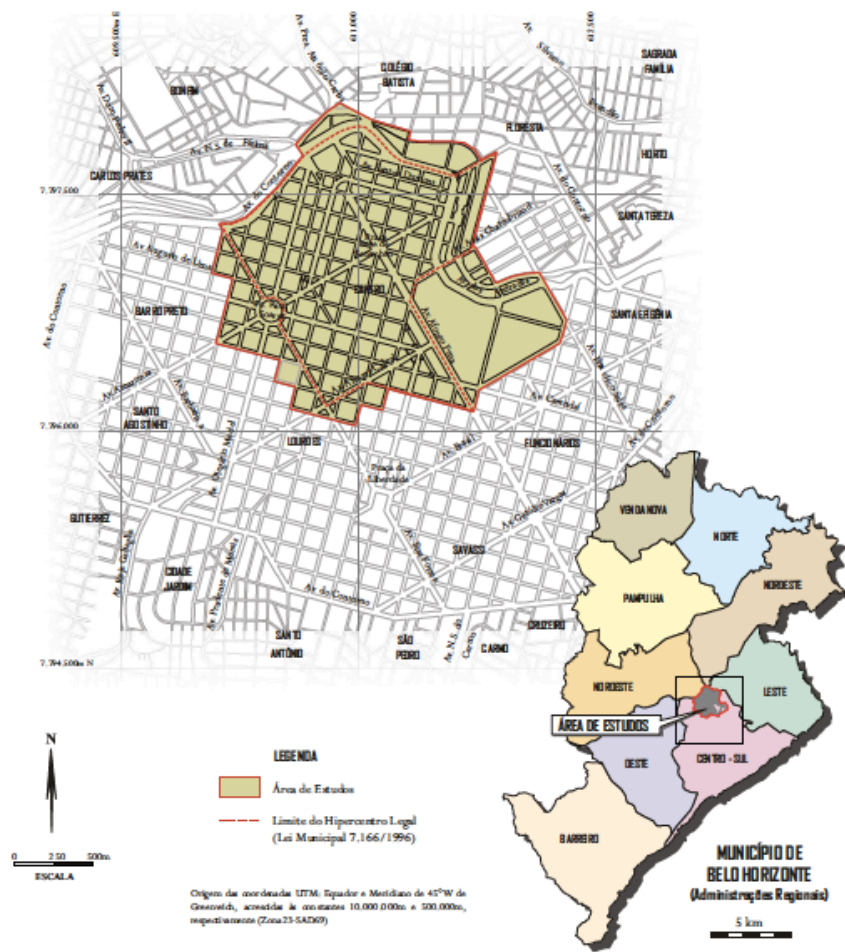
Figure 1: Belo Horizonte's Hyper-centre

(Source: PBH and PRAXIS 2007, 1)

The policy was legally supported by the "Code of Placements" that prohibits the use of public space for unlicensed commercial activity. The choice to enforce the law, however, was made partially in response to pressure from various actors demanding the regulation of street vendors' activities. This point is illustrated in this quote by Andrea[1], the Sub-secretary of Urban Regulation, who is in charge of the day-to-day of the policy:

> From the moment you decide to take a coordinated action regarding this issue [of street vending], the pressures arise not only from the population but also from the parts of the formalised sector that considers this informality negative for their

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[1] The names of interviewees were anonymised.

business. (…) Currently we have the Code of Placements that regulates all the different uses of public areas in the city. We can discuss if it is right or wrong but it says that the pavement cannot be used for irregular trade. (Interview, 09/05/2018)

Similar to the earlier experience, this policy has disarticulated a vibrant popular economy that was providing an important source of income for the urban poor. While some workers accepted the government's relocation offer and moved to the mall, many others remained on the street, working "illegally". Both groups faced difficulties sustaining their livelihoods due to either the harassment of the public authorities on the streets or the lack of demand for their products in the mall. This point was commented by the social activist and street vendor Elena who currently works as a parliamentary advisor:

The street vendors could not afford rent. They were unable to sustain themselves…Not all of them but the majority. Those who work in the popular mall complain that they cannot get enough money even to eat properly. And when they try to go to the streets, the inspection agents confiscate their products. Do you understand? The inspection agents harass them, they lose their products, they are unable to pay rent and they get evicted. The occupation is the key. It is where you learn about politics. It's an education. It's very powerful! (Interview, 03/07/2019)

In January 2018, an empty building that belonged legally to a bankrupt bank was occupied. Located in the city centre, the "Vicentão Occupation" gathered homeless families and street vendors displaced from their homes and workspace in the aftermath of the revitalisation policy. The name "Vicentão" was chosen in the memory of Vicente Gonçalves, a *favela* resident and popular lawyer who died in 2016 and who was well-known and respected in Belo Horizonte for his involvement in housing struggles. The new occupation was innovative, marking the confluence of diverse urban struggles (Paolinelli and Canettieri 2019) and demonstrating through practice the complex interrelations amid production and reproduction, between the working and housing strategies of the urban poor (Nogueira, 2019a).

The "Vicentão Occupation" should be understood in the local context of re-insurgency in which the persistent inability of the government to produce enough houses for the poor has led to the proliferation of new urban *ocupações* (occupations). Occupation is "the term used by social movements to refer to an area of private or public land that does not fulfil its social function as property and is occupied by poor residents (mostly organised by militant housing movements)" (Nascimento 2006, 1). Recent occupations are connected to the traditional movement for housing in Brazil but present some peculiarities (Tonucci Filho 2017). That is, they normally involve a complex array of agents which include the residents, organised social movements (old and new), agents connected to organised institutions (such as the Catholic Church, government agencies, the Public Defender's office and the Public Ministry), and academics (both students and professors from universities). The support of people's lawyers, the Public Ministry and the public defenders make those occupations very resistant, as they are able to repel repossession orders by using the legislation to fight the eviction attempts from the state apparatus pressured by legal owners (Zhang 2020). The "urban occupation" movement can be thus understood as a new round of "insurgency" that differs from the 1950s-1980s social movements for housing partially because they build on the achievements of those previous struggles. They also reveal emerging socio-political dynamics that expose limitations and potentialities of legal-institutional frameworks, which are themselves a product of a particular set of socio-spatial relations.

4.2. Occupying the "city centre"

On 29 June 2018, an event entitled the "Right to the City Caravan" took place at the Vicentão occupation. Beyond the clear reference in the event title, Lefebvre's framework was also visible in a sign fixed at the entrance of the building (see Figure 2). The gathering conjoined local politicians, social activists, residents of urban occupations, and representatives of diverse urban struggles in the city. The main topic discussed was the relationship between multiple aspects of the lives of the urban poor and the city centre, including mobility to work, access to health and cultural services. Maria, who was the resident from another urban occupation, talked about her own experience of "living in the centre" and gaining "access to things I didn't even know existed, such as the theatre." An indigenous woman, Aline, compared the struggles of her people with the oppression suffered by street vendors: "the centre does not

want to accept us, it wants us to come here, sell our labour force for nothing and go back home." She added that "the struggles are all the same: a fight for territory, for the good life, for the right to the city, for being who we are."

Figure 2: "Vicentão Occupation: Occupation, Right to the City, Housing, Communion" (Photographed by the First Author, 2018)

Those different quotes demonstrate how the central location of the occupation was perceived symbolically as a re-taking of the urban centre by those who were unwanted and often relegated to the peripheries of the city. In the context of Belo Horizonte, living in the centre meant having access to better infrastructure, but also to the cultural and political life of

the city. Such features were particularly relevant for the emerging struggles of marginalised street vendors who began to organise weekly meetings in the Vicentão Occupation.

Apart from the fact that key leaders of the movement were living there, its location made it easier for vendors working in the city centre to take part in those activities. Those gatherings were important moments for vendors to exchange experiences and discuss political strategies. According to Lucas, a social activist of the Brigadas Populares[2] involved in the day-to-day organisation of the occupation, the space became a meeting point for street vendors and a spatial reference in the centre where vendors would normally plan political actions but also gather around before joining marches and protests:

> In fact, to have this occupation here [in the city centre] created a territorial reference for the street vendors…This reference had an *agglomerative effect* that resulted, for instance, in well-attended meetings…Another thing is that to have this place of support made their work on the streets easier…That is why we've been thinking about creating a *reference point for street vendors here,* a centre where they can save their belongings and their products, for instance…A third point relates to *political activities*. When there is a public hearing, a demonstration, a meeting in the City Hall, you are in the city centre already…So, the work, the housing, the services, the political action and so on and so forth… this concentration of all of these things here enhances the creation of a *collective identity for the street vendors*. (Interview, 23/08/2018; emphasis added)

Beyond functioning as shelter, the Vicentão Occupation was an important space in which the coming together of vendors fostered important alliances and a sense of collective struggle for the political organisation of otherwise spatially dispersed street vendors. As pointed out by Chun and Agarwala (2016, 635), the struggles of non-waged workers often involve the cultivation of "'alternative cultures' of organizing", which entail different spaces and scales of collective organisation beyond the shop floor. In Brazil, street vendors have

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[2] The *Brigadas Populares* is a social movement and a political organisation founded in 2005, originally as a Marxist study group.

been historically neglected by both the state and the traditional unions. However, as noted by Jô Cavalcanti, quoted at the outset of this paper, the bulk of urban struggles is now happening on the streets.

4.3. "Working-class struggle on urban space"

New social movements emerging in the 2000s in Belo Horizonte and other Brazilian cities have been mostly organising around struggles for housing. They have been able to build important alliances with the cultural sector, academia and public institutions while making use of existing legal frameworks to fight evictions and generate social awareness (Nascimento, 2016; Zhang, 2020). While such networks exist for the housing struggle, they were yet to be created for the street vendors' movement. Only recently have social activists and academics started to pay attention to the relationship between the popular economy and the urban beyond the framing of informality.[3] This process was discussed by Bella Gonçalves, a militant of the Brigadas Populares and councilwoman (Socialism and Liberty Party, PSOL), during an interview:

> It was a conversation that we had [in the Brigadas Populares] that led us to prioritise this struggle for a symbolic change of the perception of street vendors in Belo Horizonte. Our priority then became to give them dignity and visibility as workers…Because the work of street vendors is an urban question, it is a question of the struggles for rights on urban space, working-class struggles on urban space. This is not an automatic perception, not even in academia…It is necessary to create alliances and a social network. Alliances with the potential to transform the symbolic perception about work. (Interview, 25/06/2019)

Her view above demonstrates how social activists in Belo Horizonte are aware of the processual nature of political struggles for rights. They are also sensitive to the political environment and switch between resistance *to the state* and negotiation *with the state* when needed (De Souza 2006). In June 2018, the occupation successfully resisted a repossession law-

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[3] Exceptions exist, such as the work of Coraggio (1989).

suit, suspending the process through legal means with the help of popular lawyers. In December 2018, however, the residents of Vicentão Occupation decided in general assembly to dissolve the occupation and accept an offer made by the regional government of Minas Gerais. In exchange for ending the occupation, the government offered the payment of rental support for two years and the permanent relocation of the fifty families living in the building after this period. Although there was some desire to reject the offer, residents and activists considered the agreement wise in light of the uncertain political landscape delineated by Bolsonaro's victory and the election of a right-wing governor.[4]

Despite the end of the occupation, the legacy of the political struggles that emerged in that space led to fundamental steps towards the creation of a collective identity among street vendors. In 2018, the 5th Municipal Conference on Urban Policy took place and representatives of workers in the popular economy were involved in the debates. The analysis of the final conference report demonstrates a substantial change in relation to previous years both in the language and the approach to street vending. It recommends the "promotion of popular economy in public spaces" (COMPUR 2018, 49) and the "expansion of public policies associated to workers in the popular economy" (ibid., 52). It also explicitly advocates that the local government should "recognise the actions and informal uses of urban space, such as housing occupations, markets, gardens and informal work" (ibid., 51). Finally, it advises the "flexibilisation of municipal legislation to facilitate the regulated use of public space for informal work" (ibid., 52). Although the conference is only a consultation, past experiences have demonstrated that the results can influence public policy. Currently, there are ongoing debates in the City Council regarding changes to the Code of Placements. Although numerous interests will definitely play a role, street vendors are better organised politically to influence the process than they were seventeen years ago when the law was enacted.

5. Conclusion

This paper has investigated the relations between work and urban space by focusing on the popular economy in the central area of Belo Horizonte, Brazil. We started by tracing the influence of Lefebvre's RttC framework in the formulation of participatory urban policy prac-

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[4] In the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, the regional government has stopped paying the rent support, leading to the fear of eviction and protests against the current governor Romeu Zema (New Party) (Intersindical 2020).

tices in Brazil. The discussion has revealed how the theoretical understanding of the RttC with limited policy utility translated into legal-instructional frameworks that simultaneously created new opportunities for capital accumulation (Rolnik 2013) and new "invited spaces" (Cornwall 2004) where unevenly empowered citizens negotiated conflictive claims (Caldeira and Holston 2015; Nogueira 2019b). We further demonstrated how the institutionalisation of the RttC in Brazil neglected informal workers' access to urban space but also how participatory democracy channels created further constrains. By doing so, we foregrounded the relationship between work and space, an aspect overlooked by the contemporary RttC agenda in policy, theory and practice.

Lefebvre emphasised the role of the working class for the realisation of the RttC through "radical metamorphosis" (1996, 156). He states that "[o]nly the working class can become the agent, the social carrier or support of this realization" (1996, 158), while at the same time refers frequently to urban *inhabitants*. Purcell (2002, 106) sees Lefebvre's conflation "of 'inhabitant' with the category 'working class'" as "the key weakness," and advocates that the RttC conceptualisation gains its strength when the social force that fights for the RttC is "not limited to a single social category,' a viewpoint that also speaks to Marcuse's (2009) emphasis on producing a Gramscian 'social bloc' for the RttC struggle. Building on this, we further argue that the persistence of unwaged work in multiple shapes prompts us to think "beyond the proper job" (Ferguson and Li 2018) and formality as a framework of analysis, particularly in the Global South, where access to citizenship has been historically restricted (Chun and Agarwala 2016). In the context of the crisis of waged labour, classical notions of the worker and of working-class politics have been reshaped (Breman and van der Linden 2014). While the Western Europe in which Lefebvre situated his RttC was transforming from an industrial to a post-industrial society that saw threats to the organised labour movements, we argue for the need to examine more carefully the political struggles of non-waged workers.

Only then can we also address the RttC in racialised Brazil (Marcus, 2013), which disadvantages non-White workers in the informal sector.[5] Informal workers currently encompass more than 40% of the labour force (IBGE 2020). In 2018, 47.3% of black workers in the

[5] In Brazil, the informal sector is composed of employees with no contracts (*sem carteira assinada*) and self-employed workers.

labour force were informal whereas 34.6% of white workers were in the same situation (IBGE, 2019). Even in periods of economic growth, informality has been persistently more prevalent among the non-white population, demonstrating the racial dimensions of labour precarity in the country (Araújo and Lombardi 2013). Unprotected by labour laws, such workers have been historically excluded from citizenship rights mediated by formalised labour and ignored by the working-class unions (Chun and Agarwala 2016). Building a 'social bloc' calls for inclusive approaches to diverse identities along the lines of gender, race, ethnicity, class and so on, and our paper class for more critical attention to the intersection between these attributes, e.g., class, race and informality in our case study.

Despite the centrality of accessing workspace for urban livelihoods, social movements in Brazil have only recently started to notice the importance of the popular economy and its vital relationship with urban space, mediated by informal workers such as street vendors. In Brazilian urban contexts, beyond a site for the reproduction of capital accumulation, the urban - and particularly the street - emerges as the main stage of working-class politics. Looking at the collective struggles of street vendors for rights to space in urban Brazil, this paper has analysed the radical potential emerging from the confluence of diverse urban struggles in the country, which in turn creates the impetus to exert pressure on reformulating some of the central tenets of City Statute and the Code of Placements.

We further argue that the RttC is a process that involves multiple strategies that combine resistance and engagement with both the law and the state. By focusing on the relationship between the RttC, the state and the law, we point towards the process through which the law is produced, appropriated and contested; how it may be used by different actors in multiple ways both to deny rights and to fight for social justice. Ultimately, the research seeks to contribute to a holistic vision that overcomes binary understandings of production/reproduction and formal/informal, while emphasising the need to think about the complex relations between heterogenous forms of living and urban space.

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