Housing Movements and the Politics of Worthiness in São Paulo

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Abstract

Based on research with current and former housing activists in São Paulo, this article identifies the concept of "politics of worthiness" as central to the moral justification and technical legitimation of social movements. Attributions of worthiness have long upheld the relationship between institutionalized grassroots organizations and the state but are equally present in everyday life and social distinctions among Brazil's popular classes. By examining contrasting constructions of worthiness among both present-day housing movements and residents of areas that are the product of past mobilizations, the article contends that collective experiences of mobilization in dialogue with myriad external influences produce diverse and often ambivalent political subjectivities. The politics of worthiness sheds light on how these actors organize themselves, experience participation, and square universalist demands with the contingent solidarities and changing social, institutional, and political realities that they inhabit. [Brazil, worthiness, subjectivity, housing, social movements, technomoral politics]

Resumo

Baseado em pesquisa com ativistas (atuais e pregressos) pela habitação na periferia de São Paulo, este artigo identifica o conceito de "política do merecimento" como central à justificação moral e legitimação técnica de movimentos sociais. Por muito tempo, atribuições de merecimento sustentaram a relação entre o estado e as organizações institucionalizadas de base, embora também estivessem inscritas na vida cotidiana e nas distinções sociais entre as classes populares brasileiras. Ao examinar construções

contrastantes de merecimento entre movimentos habitacionais atuais e residentes de áreas que são o produto de mobilizações passadas, o artigo argumenta que experiências coletivas de mobilização, em diálogo com uma miríade de influências externas, produzem subjetividades diversas e, muitas vezes, ambivalentes. A política do merecimento joga luz sobre como esses atores se organizam, experimentam participação, e equilibram demandas universalistas com as solidariedades contingenciais e as realidades sociais, institucionais e políticas em mutação que eles habitam. [Brasil, merecimento, subjetividade, habitação, movimentos sociais, política tecnomoral]

Introduction

"It's painful to see what they are doing to our condominium," a 60-year-old woman voiced into the microphone. The event was an executive meeting of Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra Leste 1 (Movement of Landless Workers East 1, MTSTL1), a leading grassroots organization that has operated since 1987, held in the neighborhood of Fazenda da Juta in the eastern periphery of São Paulo, Brazil. "After five years of construction, of fights that we put up, struggling for this land, they come and squat."

MTSTL1 is part of an extensive and hierarchical landscape of social movements that flourished in the city of São Paulo as Brazil redemocratized during the late 1980s (Aquino 2015, 19). Today, it is aligned with the União dos Movimentos por Moradia (Union for Housing Movements, UMM) and the Frente de Luta por Moradia (Front for Housing Struggles, FLM), both of which emphasize governmental dialogue as a means to advocate for housing as a universal human right. Because MTSTL1 tends to rely on short-term land occupations only as tool of negotiation, some other movements, which use occupations to directly seek land redistribution, see MTSTL1 as "institutionalized," or even as "co-opted" by the state (Nogueira 2017).[1]

Like many other coordinators of MTSTL1, Elenara was also a longstanding intellectual and militant of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party, PT).[2] She explained to other community leaders that land squatting had been a well-known tactic adopted by popular movements in the past to call awareness to social issues and housing inequalities in the city. "We occupied land in Belém, Mooca,[3] and elsewhere as a tool to *conquer* housing. A legitimate process." Yet newer, less predictable and less institutionalized movements seemed to be making "invasions" a way of life, in some cases squatting, as was the case here, on land painstakingly

won after years of collective mobilization by other housing organizations. "What is happening these days is an inversion of those values."

Elenara recounted their efforts at dialogue with the squatters. "We went there to talk. We proposed that they join our movement, *become militants*; we could find land and propose a project to the municipality." Throughout her speech, she invoked a usually unuttered ethical code that categorized and ranked social movements. On one side were those that maintained accredited communication channels with the state and followed its legal frameworks as fundamental to their repertoires of collective action. On the other were outsider groups, that deployed similar tactics but without committing to the intractable temporality of state bureaucracy. To highlight this distinction, Elenara recounted the long trajectories of housing activism of each person present in the room, implicitly contrasting this with the squatters' short-term goals.

To resolve the imbroglio, Edmilson, a professional lawyer and leading figure in the movement, then offered to issue a *termo de reintegração de posse* (removal order), which would immediately reinstate the land to its rightful owners—the MTSTL1—with the logistical support of the municipal government. Ultimately, no removal order was necessary as the squatters decided to disband voluntarily after a few weeks of informal dialogue.

In this article, we examine the technomoral infrastructures that have crystallized following the proliferation of popular housing organizations like MTSTL1 since Brazil's redemocratization. Drawing on Erica Bornstein's and Aradhana Sharma's (2016) concept of "technomoral politics," we argue that a significant yet often overlooked mechanism accounting for the durability of housing movements lies in their ability to articulate moral imperatives of worthiness through technical means—that is, they *morally* justify and *technically* legitimate their claims before the state. Particularly after 2003, with the creation of direct channels for participation by PT governments, political and intellectual leaders with ramified connections to the state and in-depth knowledge of its mechanisms and bureaucratic temporalities capitalized on existing moral codes of worthiness among their poor constituencies to pursue their own "politics of redistribution" (Ferguson 2015).

We explore this pragmatic decision-making process whereby grassroots organizations square the pursuit of housing as a constitutional—and therefore universal—right with manifold, on-the-ground expectations and political frictions. We call this sphere of contestation the "politics of worthiness." In the day-to-day realities of policy implementation, decisions about whom to include and exclude rest on a complex bureaucratic but also moral machinery constructed over decades of mobilization. In addition to reflecting the stated values of these movements, these inevitably interact with extant moralities deeply inscribed into the everyday lives of Brazil's popular classes. Against this backdrop, we examine how worthiness is articulated and modulated in the multifaceted, and at times

contradictory, discourses and evaluative frameworks of old and new MTSTL1 participants. Presenting empirical research, we map how the politicization of worthiness interacts with varying degrees of adherence, contestation, and cynicism toward the activities of MTSTL1 and other housing actors.

Besides this introduction, the article contains six sections. First, we provide a brief overview of the relevant literature on social movements, highlighting how repertoires of contestation intersect with broader moral codes. Next, we present a historical overview of moral distinctions among Brazil's urban poor and their modulations in recent decades under shifting social and political conditions. The third section introduces the case site where we conducted our fieldwork and outlines the research methods adopted. The subsequent two sections (with two subsections each) present our empirical cases, highlighting the centrality of discourses of worthiness within housing struggles from two vantage points. The first shows how residents of *mutirões* (housing cooperatives) in a peripheral São Paulo neighborhood draw on personal histories to construct residents of nearby "invasions" as less worthy subjects. The second examines how hierarchies of worthiness flourishing within the bureaucratic architectures of participation of the MTSTL1 lead to present-day distinctions between "activist" and "dissident" workers. In the conclusion, we reflect on broader debates about social movements, housing, and worthiness in Brazil and beyond today.

Social Movements, Housing, and the State in Latin America

Since Brazil's redemocratization in 1985, social movements have become a critical force driving political and social transformation in the country's major cities. Accounts of their roles, methods, and effects have shifted in significant ways over these thirty-five years. Political scientists have often regarded them as key collective actors mediating access to and distribution of state benefits through local decision-making (Lavalle and Bueno 2011). Ethnographers have highlighted how social movements pursue their goals by mastering the language of "rights" (Holston 2008), developing diverse repertoires of action (Álvarez et al. 2017), and engaging in challenging projects of political education with their members (Albert 2020; Aquino 2008). Gianpaolo Baiocchi (2005), for example, considers the politics, culture, and day-to-day activities of citizens in participatory democracy in Porto Alegre, arguing that civic engagement relates to and is fostered by municipal mechanisms of participation. Arlei Damo (2006) has suggested that dense repertoires of participation emerge at the juncture of citizen activism and state porosity, enabling community leaders to circulate within the interstices of the state.

Notably, diverse interpretations of civic society, forms of protest, and engagement with the state have emerged in the wake of Latin America's "Pink Tide" of

the 2000s. While some claim processes of "NGOization" during this period led to the institutionalization and depoliticization of civil society, transformations were in fact far more varied and complex (Lavalle and Bueno 2011). Diverse civic organizations, political parties, and protest movements—straddling the divide between "civic" and "uncivic" forms of struggle—proliferated, leading some analysts to reject the concept of "civil society" altogether as unable to encompass such diverse forms of democratic participation (Alvarez et al. 2017). For example, Benjamin Junge (2018), also discussing Porto Alegre's Participatory Budgeting, points to how competing notions of citizenship and identity among grassroots leaders complicate official depictions of participation and political subjectivity even within one particular program.

In the Indian context, Bornstein and Sharma (2016) have proposed the concept of "technomoral politics" to conceive of how activists and movements are socialized through long-term exposure to the state and policymaking processes. On this terrain, dynamics of collaboration and confrontation between state and nonstate actors occur primarily through technocratic language and moral statements, in which institutional boundaries are redrawn and claims over public stewardship are reformulated. While these do reflect a secular shift toward a judicialization of activism, they do not represent its depoliticization nor determine its form, which includes diverse repertoires of direct and indirect action.

Specifically, on the theme of institutionalized housing movements in Brazil, studies have explored shifting institutional and political contexts and evolving repertoires of action. James Holston (2008) has paradigmatically argued that bottom-up struggles to urbanize and regularize autoconstructed peripheral settlements in São Paulo triggered processes of collective political organization and subjectivity formation between the 1970s and early 2000s. Subsequent analyses have emphasized significant institutional advances, such as the promulgation in 2001 of the City Statute, which provides legal instruments to protect the rights of marginalized urban populations, and the increased participation of social movements in the design and implementation of urban policy under the PT governments (Tatagiba and Teixeira 2016). However, many have also emphasized growing challenges, such as urban displacement driven by intense real estate speculation and the model of mass production of public housing, under the Minha Casa Minha Vida program introduced in 2009, which has tended to reproduce segregation and weak service provision in poor peripheral areas (Maricato 2015). This changing context has produced different responses, including lobbying and formal participation in state processes by established housing activists (Tatagiba, Paterniani, and Trinidade 2012), more direct action—such as protests and land occupations—by organized movements (Tatagiba, Paterniani, and Trinidade 2012), as well as more spontaneous occupations by noninstitutionalized actors (Kolling 2017). As we shall discuss, and others have noted (e.g., Álvarez-Rivadulla 2017), these

differences are often associated not only with social and political distinctions but also moral ones.

While acknowledging the importance of approaches that focus on political culture, subjectivity, and technomoral forms of engagement that transcend the purview of civil society, we believe what is missing in this literature is a linkage between the increasingly diversified landscape of social movements—their instruments, rationalities, and tactics—and the construction and reproduction of moral hierarchies and distinctions, both within these movements and at their interface(s) with wider society. In order to understand the ways in which Brazil's housing movements have contributed to democratic participation since the 1980s, it is not sufficient to consider them as homogeneous bodies with natural connections to the state and projecting a politics of whole-cloth subjective transformation on their members. We have to interrogate how channels of influence within the state are carved out and the power relations that uphold prevailing representations of housing movements.

This includes analyzing the repercussions of these processes on various members, past and present and up and down their internal hierarchies of prestige. Through constructions of worthiness, movement vocabularies acquire meaning and shape political subjectivities, becoming an integral—albeit overlooked—dimension of how these social organizations operate. With this in mind, we turn to examine how worthiness has been historically constructed and recently modulated among Brazil's urban popular classes.

Constructions of Worthiness among Brazil's Urban Poor

Michael Katz (2013) helpfully and succinctly links the emergence of modern notions of the "undeserving poor" to the dual effects of capitalism's need to sustain a reserve army of labor and the simultaneous requirement, under representative democratic systems, to sustain popular support for low levels of social spending. However, as has been observed across diverse contexts, the drawing of boundaries between moral in-groups and out-groups is always culturally and historically situated, as subjects repurpose moral frameworks and mobilize the symbolic resources available to them (Lamont 2000).

Among the popular classes of Brazil's major cities, constructions of worthiness have historically tended to revolve around themes like criminality (Feltran 2011), informality (Brum 2012), and work (Fischer 2008). The distinction between the "*trabalhadores*" (workers) and the "*bandidos*" (criminals) has become ubiquitous in everyday speech in Brazil over recent decades, in a context of ever-rising violence (Feltran 2011). Similarly, informality is widely stigmatized in Brazilian society, most notably with regard to favelas (informal settlements) and their residents

(Brum 2012). Indeed, criminality is widely associated with these spaces and often used to justify violent police interventions within them.

However, among the poor themselves, these boundaries are often less clear-cut (Feltran 2011). The informal sector provides housing, livelihoods, and consumer goods to millions of Brazilians, making it an overly expansive and arbitrary basis for attributing moral distinctions. As María José Álvarez-Rivadulla (2017) notes, in the case of Montevideo, Uruguay, residents of informal settlements frequently draw their own symbolic boundaries between more and less organized and respectable communities. However, these do not become widely accepted by wider society, which tends to group all informal settlements into a single stigmatized category.

A more solid and widely accepted moral distinction revolves around attitudes toward work, and, related to this, perceived traits like honesty and commitment to one's family. Brodwyn Fischer (2008) discusses this in the context of the Getúlio Vargas era (1930–46), a key period in the formation of Brazil's modern social order. Vargas's workerist policies and rhetoric cemented the worker as a figure deserving of recognition and respect, while at the same time intensifying vagrancy laws and moralizing discourses against segments of the population viewed as unproductive. This language was widely reproduced by the popular classes themselves, not only the industrial laborers who benefited from Vargas's reforms but also by favela residents and informal workers whom they excluded (Fischer 2008). However, this was only possible because the poor repurposed and adapted these discourses to their everyday realities: if they worked hard and provided for their families why should they not also be considered "*trabalhadores*"? According to Fischer, these poor Brazilians "valued a work ethic, not only as a strategic cloak, but also as a quality that was essential to familial survival and personal self-esteem" (Fischer 2008, 104).

As numerous studies (Feltran 2011; Souza 2012) have shown, the status of "*trabalhador*" remains central to the construction of worthiness among lower-income Brazilians today, transcending the formal/informal divide and other markers of social difference like income, education, and consumption. While the figure of the *bandido* may provide the starkest counterpoint to the *trabalhador*, it is more common in everyday language to hear distinctions that emphasize perceived failures to work hard and provide, but that fall short of violent criminality (Arias and Rodrigues 2006). This is a very broad category, which can encompass diverse emic terms, from *vagabundo* (bum) to *malandro* (crook), and to softer terms like *folgado* (lazy). However, as our findings show, in real life these concepts are expressed through more general, and often more subtle, forms of everyday discourse rather than specific terms alone.

While such themes have long been central to the construction of distinctions among Brazil's popular classes, they have arguably been reinforced in recent years by changing political and policy conditions. The period of PT government brought

with it an expansion of diverse income-support policies, from minimum wage increases and higher education grants to welfarist poverty reduction programs like Bolsa Família. In response, right-wing political discourse came to attack some of these programs for supposedly undermining meritocratic principles and encouraging dependency, while also claiming they were subject to widespread fraud (Richmond 2020). While the attitudes of lower-income groups may be more nuanced, moral distinctions associated with hard work and honesty can also lead to criticism of assistentialist programs (Álvarez-Rivadulla 2017; Richmond 2020).

Case Site and Methodology

Fazenda da Juta

We conducted fieldwork in the neighborhood of Fazenda da Juta in the district of Sapopemba in São Paulo's East Zone. "Juta," as it is known by residents, has a population of around 38,000 residents (IBGE, 2010), who are distributed between auto-constructed family homes, state-built social housing projects, and *mutirões* (housing cooperatives). The neighborhood was primarily settled via a drawn-out and contentious urbanization process, including adverse land occupations and several *mutirão* projects. These mainly occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, coinciding with Brazil's redemocratization (Ferreira 2018; Miagusko 2011).

The *mutirões*, on which the article mainly focuses, first got underway during the radical administration of PT Mayor Luiza Erundina (1989–92). These projects were built through an innovative partnership model, bringing together the future residents of the homes organized through MTSTL1 and an architectural NGO, Usina, which designed the homes and managed construction. Meanwhile, the São Paulo state housing company Companhia de Desenvolvimento Habitacional e Urbano (Housing and Urban Development Company, CDHU) purchased the land, and city hall provided resources and technical support. To pay back these costs, residents were required to provide labor power for the construction of the homes, and, once they moved in, to commit to long-term repayment plans. During the mid- to late-1990s, conservative municipal administrations withheld funds, causing delays and placing the future of the projects in doubt. Eventually, however, new agreements were negotiated and all of Juta's *mutirões* had been completed by the early 2000s.

While the space of Fazenda da Juta today is largely saturated and there are no active *mutirão* projects in the area, it remains an important symbolic territory for the *mutirão* movement. There is a strong network of community organizations historically linked to the housing movements, including the União da Juta, which began as the association of the *mutirantes* (participants in the *mutirões*) in the early 1990s. Today these organizations deliver a range of statutory educational and

Figure 1   *Mutirão housing in Fazenda da Juta. Photo credit: Matthew Richmond, May 2019.*

care services for local populations and organize regular events in which they raise awareness about Juta's history and their own activities. The União da Juta also hosts a regional office of the MTSTL1, where meetings are held and new *mutirões* to be built elsewhere in São Paulo's East Zone are organized (see below).

Today, most of the *mutirões* are highly consolidated spaces that give a visual impression of orderliness and respectability (Fig. 1).[4] The *mutirão* apartment blocks are surrounded by fences, have electronically controlled front gates, and usually have well-maintained shared green spaces, features that lead many to refer to them as "*condomínios*."[5] While many of the original *mutirantes* remain, new residents have also arrived through the rental or purchase of *mutirão* homes. Meanwhile, over the past fifteen years or so, a number of vacant strips of land between and surrounding the *mutirões* have been occupied by precarious, autoconstructed informal settlements, typically referred to by residents as "invasions" (Fig. 2).

Methodology

The material presented below is the product of postdoctoral research conducted by the coauthors in Fazenda da Juta from 2016 to 2017. Matthew Richmond conducted eighteen months of fieldwork for a project on spatial development,

Figure 2   *A recent land occupation in Fazenda da Juta. Photo credit: Matthew Richmond, September 2017.*

place, and subjectivity formation in urban peripheries. This included over 50 interviews with residents and representatives of local institutions in Juta, as well as ethnographic observation in diverse local organizations. Eight of the interviews conducted were with individuals who had personally participated in the *mutirões* and six more with other current *mutirão* residents (all children of *mutirantes*). Moisés Kopper conducted ten months of fieldwork among present-day leaders and both long-standing and new members of MTSTL1, exploring how the various levels and tactics of political socialization influenced subjectivity and consciousness. Participant observation was conducted at different scales of participation, from recruitment activities to the construction of a new *mutirão*.

Although focusing on different themes, these two research projects were conducted simultaneously and overlapped significantly, including some direct collaboration in the field. As we discuss in the next two sections, drawing on past and present housing struggles made us attentive to how constructions of worthiness are modulated amid challenging realities, revealing durable legacies of participation.

The Afterlife of Fazenda da Juta's *Mutirão* Movement

Past Struggles, Present Ambivalence

In our interviews with former *mutirantes*, the formative experience of taking part in these movements and, for some, the political education gained as a result, clearly underpinned ambivalent attitudes held toward the

neighborhood today. These combined recognition of significant improvements to local infrastructure and services—acknowledged as victories of collective mobilization—but also concerns about insecurity and social change in the neighborhood. These concerns tended to crystallize most clearly in discussions about the several precarious occupations that had cropped up in recent years. Henrique, a teacher at a local school, who taught students from both the *mutirões* and the occupations, described how he perceived this relationship: "A significant part of the population that lives here loves the neighborhood… . They built the neighborhood and today suffer from its degradation, you know. So today there is a narrative that the neighborhood deteriorated and that these invasions … changed the face of the neighborhood… . It's like there are two Jutas: the Juta that lives inside the condominiums and that one that lives outside the condominiums. And I perceive that there isn't a great dialogue between them, you know."

While the distinction between "condominiums" and "invasions" seems to imply a simple socio-spatial hierarchy based on social difference and a reified formal/informal divide, the reality is more subtle. Most residents of the *mutirões* today earn less than two minimum wages (IBGE 2010) and in interviews regularly referred to themselves as "*trabalhadores*" or even "*pobres*" (poor people) (Richmond 2020). Furthermore, all vividly remembered a recent past when their neighborhood lacked basic infrastructure and was itself stigmatized by outsiders. Rather than the construction of a simple socio-spatial hierarchy, what most strongly characterized the discourses of former *mutirantes* toward the newer occupations was instead the technomoral claim that they represented a disorganized, depoliticized, and thus illegitimate form of social mobilization. As Henrique went on to comment, the main problem according to older residents was that "this new disordered process of urbanization … doesn't have any kind of civil organization leading it, no leadership."

The technomoral critique of the occupations came out clearly in an interview with Francisca, a *mutirante* and activist during the 1990s and today a coordinator at one of Juta's NGOs. Francisca proudly recounted her history with the *mutirão* movement, which closely resembled the trajectories of the other *mutirantes* interviewed. Francisca had moved to São Paulo as a young woman from a small town in the state's interior. She was living in a more central neighborhood, about 6 km from Juta, when she got involved in the movement via a Catholic community group. She dreamed of a better life for her family and to no longer have to pay rent. Eventually, after several years of struggle to balance work and the *mutirão*, they finally moved into their home in 1998.

That was only the beginning, however. As Francisca explained: "We had to struggle for basic sanitation, we had to struggle for water … it was all just mud around here, you know?" They created commissions, lobbied politicians, even went and set up camps outside the city hall. As a result of these efforts, they gradually saw

their neighborhood transformed. They also had to deal with stigma associated with the neighborhood. Like several other interviewees, she remembered how they were disparagingly nicknamed "*pés de barro*" (muddy feet) by residents of surrounding areas that already had paved streets. She doesn't speak with any bitterness, however. "It was a beautiful struggle," she tells us. "If I had to, I would do it all again."

However, Francisca felt very differently about more recent developments in the neighborhood. In particular, she drew a sharp distinction between the struggle she had participated in and the newer occupations in the area: "In those days, only the strugglers who were really struggling for housing came here. These others who came (later) were troublemakers (*eram da bagunça*). They came from other places to take advantage… . They're people who occupied and then sold to others."

Francisca received children who lived in these settlements at her NGO. According to her, their parents had bought plots of land from the "troublemakers" who had first established the occupations. She spoke about them with some nuance, explaining that many had nowhere else to go and faced extreme poverty, although she also believed others in the occupations were "taking advantage."

However, she was critical even of those she believed were deserving of housing: "Ok, 'I'm going to struggle for housing,' but *how* are you going to struggle for housing? In our day we knew things took time. These days they want everything easy … for today. That's why there are lots of occupations." For Francisca, "struggling" (*luta*) was a technomoral category. It was not a question of one's social status but of having a particular kind of consciousness that could undergird consistent strategic action in pursuit of clear goals.

Modulating Worthiness

Given her biography and the way she appeared to explicitly reproduce the political values of the *mutirão* movement, Francisca might be seen as lying close to the movement's organizational center and socializing influence. By contrast, other *mutirão* residents we spoke to either had been less directly involved (i.e., because they were relatives of *mutirantes*, not direct participants themselves) or because they had been less deeply politicized by their experiences. Although traces of influence could still be detected in the constructions of worthiness mobilized by these subjects, these seemed to vie with alternatives absorbed from other socializing influences.

One example of this was Arnaldo, a 38-year-old security guard who lived in a *mutirão* apartment with his wife and two young daughters. Arnaldo had grown up as one of nine siblings in a favela elsewhere in the district. However, his mother had participated in the *mutirão* movement over several years, often taking him and his siblings along with her on weekends when she worked on the project. When she finally received her apartment, she decided to cede it to Arnaldo and his young

family. At the time of our interview with Arnaldo, he and his family had lived there for several years, he was well liked in the community, and he got along well with his neighbors. They were also active members of a local Evangelical Church, of the Congregação Cristã (Christian Congregation) denomination, which they attended three times a week.

When our conversation got onto the topic of the local occupations, Arnaldo immediately declared, "Ninety-nine percent of the people who invaded acted in bad faith." Unlike Francisca, he did not know anyone who lived there; however, he had heard what he believed were reliable claims that the occupiers already had permanent homes to live in. He believed they had squatted on the assumption that they would eventually be evicted and then rehoused or compensated by the state government. Such strategies by occupiers have been documented in Brazil (Kolling 2017) and other interviewees also made similar claims, including some who had more direct knowledge of the occupations.[6] Arnaldo's claims should thus not simply be read as the straightforward reproduction of a stigmatizing antiwelfare discourse. Indeed, he himself had grown up in a favela and claimed Bolsa Família, a program he supported and that he said "helped a lot." Nonetheless, he detected unworthiness in the behavior of the occupiers that he did not believe applied to his own circumstances.

Unlike Francisca, Arnaldo did not criticize the occupiers based on their level of politicization or the effectiveness of their tactics. Instead, his understanding of worthiness revolved primarily around the notion of "need" and a more individualized understanding of what constituted "struggling." Arnaldo believed that occupying land and receiving welfare payments were justified on the condition that "people were really in need," as he put it, when "the person is struggling, has built their hut because they don't have anywhere to go." He asserted, for example, that as soon as he was able, he would stop claiming Bolsa Família, to "leave it for someone else who really needed it." However, he also expressed concern that some Bolsa Família recipients became too relaxed, that "people rely too much on it, people don't work, they don't push themselves, they just get trapped in it." There may have been traces in Arnaldo's understanding of worthiness derived from the "gospel of prosperity" of worldly self-improvement, associated with Evangelicalism in Brazil (Cunha 2018). However, this did not translate into especially moralistic attitudes or blanket opposition to welfare programs. Rather it informed, at a more general level, who could be regarded as being "in need" and as really "struggling."

It is worth reflecting on how such boundaries are drawn. Most *mutirantes* technically also "had somewhere to live" when they entered the movement, albeit in precarious or overcrowded homes or paying high rents. Arnaldo, meanwhile, received Bolsa Família, despite the fact he and his wife both worked and earned at least a minimum wage. Evaluations of who is "in need" and who is "struggling," then, are not framed by objective parameters but modulated according to

individual perceptions and criteria that are in turn shaped by diverse socializing influences. These influences may include social movements, but also other institutions like churches, schools, workplaces, or more diverse representations of poverty, informality, and respectability embedded in popular culture. Inevitably, social movements must interact with these varying frameworks for evaluating worthiness, many of which may diverge in important ways from their own.

Bureaucracies of Worthiness

Accreting Participation

It is against this backdrop of contested notions of worthiness that housing movements have developed their bureaucratic and political architecture. Over two decades, MTSTL1 honed complex and intricate infrastructures to manage grassroots participation. Sign-in logs, identification forms, membership cards, and bookkeeping records were first established to foster transparency, reduce uncertainty, and verify the validity of claims for housing. While providing leaders with objective measures to track participation, for on-the-ground participants these procedures were enveloped in anxiety and expectation, becoming the prism through which they conceptualized activism and worthiness.

The organization's entry point are grupos de origem—origin groups—formations of up to 100 members that convene twice a month in various neighborhoods in São Paulo's East Zone. Families are redirected to one of the 34 origin groups after partaking in cadastramento—an enrollment activity that takes place a few Sundays in the year when hundreds of new members are recruited. During this hectic event, newcomers have to attend a lecture on MTSTL1's operation and guidelines (see Fig. 3), where they learn about the association's past achievements. Additionally, applicants are required to pay a R$20 fee after completing an extensive membership form that includes contact information, addresses, jobs, family members, and household income. The generated bureaucracy is later uploaded to a computational system administrated by two secretaries hired to work permanently at the association's headquarters, located in the backyard of the União da Juta premises.

Origin groups are presided over by teams of up to three coordinators. They meet weekly with constituencies in their respective localities, passing on updated information received days earlier at the so-called executive meetings. These are coordinators-only gatherings organized by MTSTL1's executive board—a select group of a few senior housing militants like Elenara and Edmilson, elected for 2-year-long terms. Whereas executive meetings follow a specific protocol typical of deliberative democracy—with written briefings and minute taking, respect for hierarchies, preregistered and time-controlled speeches—origin groups are

Figure 3　*MTSTL1 Cadastramento day at the União da Juta. Photo credit: Moisés Kopper, June 2017.*

generally less structured. Despite efforts from coordinators to jot down agendas on blackboards, meeting flows are easily sidetracked by participants, who range from newcomers to members slated to move to new mutirões.[7]

Over decades, MTSTL1 has produced an intricate rating score system to accrete and gauge participation. This mechanism is used to select members for upcoming housing projects by attributing points to them according to the type of activity performed, both within origin groups and at the level of the organization. For example, participation in occupations yields 15 points while attendance of group meetings and payment of membership fees is worth only 1 point; marching demonstrations generate 10 points while static demonstrations earn only 5 points. Overall, assistance in activities promoted directly by the association or its broader political networks are far more highly valuated than attendance of meetings, to the point that, over time, it is only with a high level of political activism that one qualifies for a housing benefit.

To many coordinators, the rating score system was seen as a better way to make political dispositions come to bear. "The idea," we heard from one of them, "is that each mutirante comes to perceive that he or she is not just in it for the points, but that points are the political consequence of partaking in meetings and demonstrations, by his/her own free will." Points were thus first envisioned as mechanisms to level out socioeconomic and subjective differences through individual effort while also facilitating the development of collective political consciousness.

However, to many members—old and new—the rating score system became a continuous source of anxiety and calculation and a technomoral index of self-worth. Under the guise of transparency, the waiting time for achieving one's homeownership dream had morphed into a time of active mobilization and competition for scarce resources. We frequently saw overwhelmed leaders hauling around piles of folders and venting about endless debates with their constituencies over the merits and proper registration of points.

Berenice is the most experienced coordinator of Sítio Conceição, one of the few origin groups whose meetings we followed during fieldwork. After two years of painstaking participation in MTSTL1's activities, she had accumulated enough points to classify for a housing unit at the most recent and desirable mutirão in the middle-class neighborhood of Belém—a project landed through negotiations during PT mayor Fernando Haddad's term in office (2013–17). This posed the challenge of finding and preparing new leaders for Sítio Conceição—a task that did not prove easy, as Berenice herself continues to manage meetings today.

During the gatherings we observed, it was common to see dissatisfied members express their grievances about points "disappearing" from online records. Indeed, these confrontations between participants and confounded leaders took up most of the meetings—from the moment people lined up to register attendance to veered-off conversations about who had been to last week's demonstration in downtown. Berenice often found herself having to move away from the scheduled topics she had outlined on a blackboard, only to explain to members how to "read" the system and calculate their position. She also confided to us, in a private conversation, that she kept her private record of points for Sítio Conceição to avoid future quarrels. This was how she once uncovered a "point laundering" scheme in which other coordinators in her origin group tampered with members' scores to artificially keep themselves at the top of the rankings. Without exposing the issue, Berenice went back into the computer system and "corrected" the scores according to her own logs.

"Unfortunately," Berenice concluded, "people are only in it for the points. I try to be as transparent as possible. I hand out printouts of the rankings to instill competitiveness in our members. Otherwise, they are too slow. We need them to participate."

Politicized vs. Dissident Workers

These bottom-up bureaucracies have refashioned the meanings and workings of political participation in São Paulo's peripheries. The belief—sponsored mostly by long-standing leaders, senior participants, and mutirão residents—that objective sorting systems unequivocally lead to political consciousness has itself become a consequential tactic of socialization into the ranks of the organization. It reflects

the ever more competitive—and morally blurred—terrain in which established housing movements fight for increasingly scarce resources. However, it also serves to obscure the myriad ways members on the ground have always engaged with MTSTL1's protocols on a regular basis.

In present-day social movements, rating scores illuminate a new modulation of worthiness among the urban poor: the distinction between the activist and the dissident worker. Elaine is in her forties and has lived and worked as a receptionist in Fazenda da Juta for over twenty years. We encountered her before her first origin group meeting. She learned about the group from a client who had just been selected for a mutirão. Early on, she was told by coordinators and other members about the intricacies involved in participation: "I heard that we have to attend these demonstrations, that we have to lay bricks… . I won't have time for all that," she grumbled.

To move away from unconscionable rental prices, Elaine was interested in locating a member who was about to receive an apartment and willing to accept an exchange: her life savings for the housing unit. Stories of favoritism and corruption abounded and inspired her to try the same. Nevertheless, over the months of fieldwork, she remained undeterred. Elaine would attend meetings yet without joining demonstrations that took place during work hours. Knowingly lagging in the point hierarchy, she couldn't afford to put her stable job at risk amid increasing political and economic instability.

Other senior coordinators described similar trajectories. "It is tough to get new members to take over the coordination of origin groups," we once heard. "They get tangled in personal conflicts and rapidly lose interest." Another leader overhearing that conversation added: "People are too raw and depoliticized when they first arrive at the movement. They only know that they want a house. They cannot see beyond this primary desire. You have to sit down, talk them through it, open up new horizons. This takes time, dedication, and patience and doesn't always work out."

However, far from withdrawing or giving in to cynicism, dissatisfied people like Elaine kept coming and puzzling the coordinators, who referred to less politicized members as dissidents. Similar to the land squatters mentioned in the introduction, who were seen as lacking knowledge of and respect for the association's protocols, leaders identified dissident workers as operating according to an instrumental political logic and refusing to assimilate elementary participatory codes that could ultimately convert them into worthy beneficiaries.

Yet Elaine's experience, like that of many others we encountered during fieldwork, suggests that her subjectivity was characterized by ambivalence and uncertainty toward the movement and its infrastructures of participation, rather than withdrawal per se. This was also the case of Domenico, another origin group coordinator, who told us, as he was waiting in line to deliver piles of accountability

documents to one of MTSTL1's executive leaders: "I sense people are not really comfortable being asked to take to the streets to defend the PT only because they need a house that would free them from renting."

In their pragmatic critique of this political socialization, Elaine and Domenico rejected the idea that their right to housing should hinge on political commitments made between the association and the government that required them to live up to a homogenized image of the poor as partisan activists. They did not so much mind the strenuous bureaucracy intrinsic to any institutionalized social movement. They even sympathized with the need for a ranking score system—which, although imperfect, they reasoned, had to be in place to rationalize housing allocations and keep members engaged. Instead, their gripe was with how worthiness was being modulated as an extension of these infrastructures of participation. For "dissident" workers in today's moral economy—with the weakening of the Left, high-profile corruption scandals, and the expansion of credit, consumption, and the service sector in peripheries—ideals of personal effort and dreams of upward social mobility should be decoupled from the fraught workings of partisan politics.

As previously seen, past housing communities continually face the dilemma of how to best preserve their achievements in rapidly changing political-economic environments, leading to new modulations of worthiness as they assess the "rights" and efforts of others who, like them in the past, claim housing as a constitutional right. Similarly, Elaine's idea of "struggle" as a personal and pragmatic piecemeal familial project subverts the homogeneous political language whereby leaders seek to maintain cohesion and members' engagement before powerful outside actors (including the state). That Elaine and Domenico found ways to build spaces for their "dissident" political subjectivity within the premises and promises of MTSTL1's hegemonic protocols attest to the fact that constructions of worthiness can be modulated to encompass competing visions of participation and mobilization for (universal) rights.

Conclusion: Worthiness and Struggle at the Margins

In this article we have examined how leaders, ordinary members, and other beneficiaries of a housing movement in São Paulo engage in what we call the "politics of worthiness." As our empirical material demonstrates, actors involved both directly and indirectly with MTSTL1 mobilize distinct and sometimes competing constructions of worthiness. We understand the politics of worthiness as linked to what Bornstein and Sharma (2016) call "technomoral politics," whereby social movements combine technical, legal, and bureaucratic reasoning—typical of the architecture of democratic institutions—with carefully calibrated moral claims in their contentious repertoires of engagement with the state.

While the politics of worthiness creates pivotal mechanisms that account for the durability of institutionalized social movements, our cases have shown it also, to varying degrees, shapes political socialization and consciousness among participants. Through sorting systems carefully calibrated over decades, movements like MTSTL1 seek to maintain coherence, power, and influence in relation to both external actors and internal members. It is clear that their stated goals—to shift participation from an individual and instrumental to a collective and political logic—are successful to an extent. However, this varies significantly within the movement. Resistance may take the form of individuals failing to internalize movement values despite following the desired protocols, or it may be explicit, as in the case of "dissident workers" who are seen as gaming these systems by refusing to abandon instrumental logics. In both cases, we argue, this should not be understood as a failure to mold "depoliticized" subjects from scratch. Rather, it reveals contestations between technomoral constructions of worthiness and others to which members are also exposed in their everyday lives.

Attention to these competing conceptions of worthiness and their underlying power dynamics helps reveal more granular differences among actors within social movements over how morality and technicality are mobilized to pursue projects based on the distribution of scarce goods like social housing. For example, it appears that constructions of worthiness depart more radically from those promoted by MTSTL1 the further an individual is from the movement organizationally and/or temporally. By extension, it appears that the ways worthiness is modulated to rank more and less deserving subjects is also related to forces outside these movements, whether in the form of diffuse social norms or rival frameworks promoted by other organizational actors. This can be seen in how different constructions of worthiness coexist and may be mobilized by the same subject at different moments. *Mutirão* residents can sometimes draw on technomoral constructions or more diffuse notions of worthiness rooted in values like hard work or honesty in their critiques of disorganized land occupations. At other moments, depending on the topic at hand, they might draw on these same frameworks to defend marginalized groups, or perhaps reach for entirely different frameworks.

We believe this double dislocation of perspective—towards both internal diversity and external context—brings crucial dimensions of contentious social movement politics more clearly into focus. It shifts our attention to how social movements interact not only with the state but also broader sociocultural and organizational landscapes and the multiple moral frameworks they contain.

In Brazil, in recent years, these contestations have played out against the backdrop of dramatic social and political changes, which may have made modulations of worthiness even more volatile. However, some principles still appear to anchor notions of worthiness among Brazil's urban popular classes, including in their relationship to housing movements. As our empirical discussion has suggested,

key principles seem to be drawn together in the powerful emic concept of *struggle*, which can variously encompass technomoral, individualized, religious, and various other understandings of worthiness. While this means the term can be used in bounded and exclusionary ways, it also evokes principles of universal rights to housing and the moral legitimacy of challenging unjust social orders. In the coming years, the politics of worthiness may increasingly be fought on the terrain of whom is to be included or excluded from this imagined community of "strugglers."

Acknowledgments

Notes

[1] This is the case, for example, of the *Movimento Sem-Teto do Centro* (Aquino 2015).

[2] Pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

[3] Other neighborhoods in the East Zone of São Paulo.

[4] A partial exception to this is the first of Juta's *mutirões*, which was built as terraced houses rather than apartment blocks. These houses have subsequently been significantly altered by residents, giving them a more irregular appearance.

[5] While the term "*condomínio*" has connotations with elite gated condominiums, it is also used more generally to refer to enclosed residential spaces where residents pay a fee for the upkeep of shared infrastructures. As such, use of the term should not be assumed to always express social distinction, though at times it may.

[6] Although there is no space to address the views of the residents of the occupations themselves, of the five we interviewed, this did not appear to have been a deliberate objective of any.

[7] *Mutirões* are groups of hundreds of families that convene separately from origin groups once land is secured and the government approves funds for the construction of a new housing project.

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