

## **Notes from the Field: Inequality and Fear in a Brazilian destination for “Academic Tourism”**

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*“And how have you heard about our project?” Pause. “Ok, but have you read about the work already done...we already have something on microfinance, done by students from Oxford University.” Pause. “I see, I see, we also have something about that. There was a research done by some students from France on this topic.” Pause. “Look on the website, there is a list of all research projects already done here.” Long pause. “Ok, but when are you planning to come here? Now we have a student from Romania, in March we will have one from France, and a team of three from University of Columbia, and we will have some more planned by the end of the year.” Conversation ends. “Another one....one more study about our community bank.” I overheard this phone conversation when first visiting my field site. And, no, his tone was not one of joy or of pride.*

### **At the margins of world’s fifth most unequal city**

This is a story about a community bank situated at the margins of Fortaleza, in the state of Ceará, situated in the northeast of Brazil. This region is one of Brazil’s poorest areas, with a harsh historical memory of drought and inequality, and a twentieth-century political system relying upon nepotism and clientelism. Not only do natural and historical elements present a continuous challenge to building inclusive and democratic governance, the region’s ethnic diversity adds another layer of complexity.

According to a 2011 United Nations Report on urban

poverty, Fortaleza is the world's fifth most unequal city (State of the World's Cities 2010/2011). This is again demonstrated in a recent study conducted with the municipality, which calculated the Human Development Index (HDI) – a measure of life expectancy, education and income indices – for each of the 119 neighborhoods that form Fortaleza and its periphery (United Nations Development Programme 2015). This study shows that the city's HDI values range from 0.95 in Meireles, the city's richest neighborhood, to 0.11 in Fortaleza's poorest neighborhood, situated at the extreme southwest periphery. If these numbers are correct, then Fortaleza hosts, in its 300 square kilometers and among its 3.5 million people, both areas with the richness of Germany and sites experiencing the poverty of Ethiopia. But it is exactly this poorest site – let's call it conventionally a "community" – located at the southwest periphery of Fortaleza that created its own bank, its own local currency, and became famous around the world.

The story of struggle, or "luta," is long, but locals feel very proud to share it as an example for other favelas – Brazil's informal urban areas, or slums – seeking their way out of poverty. In the 1970s, fishermen living on the coast of Fortaleza had been displaced from several different areas into what the municipality promised them to be a "Conjunto habitacional," a social housing site. From the postcard beaches they had left, the communities came to inhabit one of the most peripheral sites in the city (De Freitas Silva, Fernandes Soares, & Raposo Pereira, 2010). A friend tells me in a nostalgic tone: "My mother sometimes remembers that when they were living down there, sometimes in the morning there was sand in the house because during the night the waves would come and wash the floor of our house. Now there is nothing of that; these high buildings [that you could see because the community is situated in a basin] prevent even wind from blowing up to here." Ironically, Conjunto Palmeiras's most feared favela is situated on a hill, so you can see the belt of skyscrapers that forms the richest

area of the city, which itself faces the sea, the port, and all of the tourist beaches. From the 1970s, the community began organizing around the association of inhabitants who had built the site itself from scratch, including self-constructed drainage systems, roads, and houses (Conjunto Palmeira- Memoria de nossas lutas, Volume II, 1998). Another fruit of this work was a community bank with its own currency, which created incentives within what today in Brazil is institutionalized at the state level as a “solidarity economy.” This model of community participation was in line with efforts made to overcome corruption and clientelism, and to create a more democratic and equal Brazil. The model of a solidarity economy based around the ruling principle that “no one surpasses poverty alone” (Singer 2013)—a motto that is today written on the front wall of the Palmas Bank—led to the creation of 70 community banks in the northeast alone, and 103 across Brazil. The services they cover are usually microcredit, micro-insurance, and social currencies that circulate in the community only, and which together are meant to increase local production and local consumption. A solidarity economy turns a favela into a destination for academic tourism

The person in charge of external communication at the community bank where I am beginning to conduct fieldwork – we will call him Fernando – is by now exhausted at the thought of “one more” scholar. The phone calls, Skype rings, emails, and surveys come in from scholars in the United States, France, Belgium, Japan, Germany, Finland, or Spain. Everyone wants to understand this model and how it functions, giving it as an example to show how “a luta continua” – how the fight goes on. Scholars come and leave, express their amazement, ask questions, collect data, travel back in three planes, drink a lot of coffee, write papers, get published, get jobs, and become famous or not.

Poverty remains here and, as the bank president puts it, “it’s getting worse and worse.” The community grows

through people settling down at its edges, occupying the land illegally, and building their two room houses from bricks; they carry on with their lives at the margins of poverty, trying to get a better life. Meanwhile, they use the public goods that the old community – those who came here in the 1970s – created, and the few existing facilities. The two health centers cannot cover the needs of the 36,600 people officially recognized in the 2010 census as living in this “bairro,” or neighborhood (Prefeitura de Fortaleza 2015). This community replicates the model of the larger city: the poorest neighborhood in Fortaleza also has its margins and its own favelas where not even health agents go. People in the “favelas of the favela” virtually do not exist bureaucratically: they do not have land titles, many don’t have health care documents, and they do not exist in most of the academic papers published on this area, with a few exceptions. They are what Barbara Harriss-White would call “the very poorest of the poor” (2005: 881).

Meanwhile, scholars keep coming; according to people working at the bank, researchers usually spend a few months here, write their reports, and it seems that only a few give something back to the community itself or to the community bank that hosts them. Some start foreign language classes and leave in the middle. Some start friendships; from my conversations with community members, this may be the most valuable return. The idea of a favela with such a strong social capital and power of organization, to the point of creating their own currency, appeals to many academics and development practitioners. For many of us, this is what we are trying to understand: how to create economically resilient communities based on local participation and ownership of their space and resources. In theory, it sounds like a perfect case study. Creating a currency within an existing community signals that it has strong common beliefs: the currency is a symbol resulting from the trust that keeps this community together and in which everyone believes and accepts. With so many

scholars coming here to understand this community just by looking at the social currency, and not the wider structures that reproduce poverty, many bank employees see academia to be like a bubble: separated from the real world, rarely informing policies, and often dismissing “reality in favor of their own ideas, what they think is actually good or bad, important for us or not,” as one of the bank members said to me. “You see, this is exactly why we are tired of, ‘academicos’ here.” Today the local social currency, Palmas, is actually almost nonexistent and this made one of the bank employees say to me, “I’ve had enough with people asking about it.”

Recently I met a cinematographer from Fortaleza doing documentaries on social themes and currently working on a documentary about this same community bank. “If it is a favela or a community, generally speaking, that is very popular in Brazil, then it is this one; no other favela has become as popular around the world as the one that was able to create its own bank and its own currency,” she says. This community also became famous by being one of the few who did not protest against the World Cup. On the contrary, it applied the rule that many economists like: turn crises into opportunities. Organized with a stand, flyers, and brochures telling their stories, they went right to the international airport to welcome tourists. There is even a hostel in the community where tourists can come and stay, and a direct bus line from the area that leaves people right at the Estádio Castelão, the newly reconstructed football stadium in Fortaleza.

### **Participant observation when inequality hurts**

Economic inequality, a high unemployment rate (IBGE 2015), and drugs are the ingredients producing urban violence and transforming fear into a way of life (Green, 1999) in the poorest of Fortaleza’s neighborhoods. Drug gangs situated in different areas of the neighborhood often find reasons to fight, and, for

everyone else, this situation means that each day must be filled with strategies for avoiding violence or being caught in the middle of these fights.

Locals know the "mined areas" and avoid them, but, even with that local knowledge, a friend tells me: "You can be in the wrong place at the wrong time and it's over." Every person I have met from this community has been robbed at least once, and, among the younger people, some have been robbed up to seven times. Humor is a dark strategy that people use to deal with fear and make their lives worth living while waiting for changes that seem beyond their own power. The first question I was asked when enrolling to the Federal Police in Fortaleza as an immigrant was if I had been robbed yet. I answered humbly, "not yet," but I am in line, I know my turn will come soon and I'm trying to be prepared. "Brazil is the country of lines," one my Brazilian friends told me when I got here. Saying that you are in line to be robbed makes Brazilians smile and consider you one of those who understood that there is no way of coping with violence but joking about it, and integrating it into a kind of normality, a daily routine.

To understand the depth and the complexity of this area, which seems situated beyond what the existing literature has covered, I try to be a part of this daily reality as much as possible. Being in this community ten hours per day, often six days per week, makes me question myself and the limits of research more than anything else. The theme of the gift in Marcel Mauss's text is what rings like a bell in my head almost each day. People give me their trust and protection, and share with me their stories, but what can I do now, while here, for them? I can share what I know, and, so far, teaching English and helping students pass the end of high school English test is what I have thought best. For the moment, this is my personal return, and my way of being grateful for the support, protection, and trust I receive here each day.

Studies have demonstrated the impact of poverty on

health and on psychological stress (Sapolsky 2005). But how do you study poverty when fear blurs sometimes even your own understandings of reality? What do you do as an anthropologist when your “informants” are afraid of speaking for themselves, throw away the paper they write on, whisper, and do not trust anyone? What do you do when, during English class, you hear shots outside followed by moments of silence? Or, when teaching the verb “to be” turns into a discussion about how to differentiate gunshots from fireworks? Or, when your “informants” ask you if you have ever been downtown, and then ask you to describe the beach separated from them by a one-hour bus ride? Even worse, what do you do when you realize that your own field notes systematically contain the words “violence” and “fear,” and you feel that you cannot be objective in a cold, impersonal, and almost cynical “scientific” way? All of these questions make me wonder if one can actually understand poverty and violence without personally experiencing both, since words and concepts seem often unable to encompass the realities, decisions, feelings, and emotions that construct everyday life in a context like this one.

While I try to understand how to adapt my carefully written research question to consider this context, I try to understand the nature of poverty and violence while reminding myself that my work will have to expand what is known, while in the same time not being “just another researcher” that confirms the outcomes of local socio-economic practices that the scholar thinks are important and worth documenting.

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