Capital Conversion and Organized Crime in Rio de Janeiro Favelas

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Rio de Janeiro's favelas (a local term standing for peripheral slums) are socially and economically marginal sectors of urban space. Within these neighbourhoods, drug crime is pervasive, to the point of often managing important aspects of the local public sphere. Due to limited government intervention in security and public services in the favelas, criminal governance has further reinforced exclusion and poverty.
This paper employs Bourdieu's key concepts of social, economic, cultural, and symbolic capital, and the conversions among them, to illustrate some of the ways in which local organized crime holds control over the social interactions interconnecting the everyday experiences of favela dwellers. In so doing, the paper will also show how criminal gangs acquire, retain, and reproduce power over the social space of favelas, while having a dramatic impact on contemporary Brazilian society.

Introduction

As a developing power and emerging economy, Brazil has increasingly gained a remarkable presence in the international market. Nonetheless, despite ranking as the seventh wealthiest nation-state in the world (with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of $2.35 trillion USD), it also exhibits one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world (World Bank, 2012). A clear illustration of this is the state of Rio de Janeiro, which is recognized for having the second largest GDP in the country, and is known for its favelas, urban slums segregated in the outskirt hills of a city (Davis, 2006, p. 34). These neighbourhoods are located on territory often neglected by federal jurisdiction. Favela residents regularly construct their own homes without license, thus occupying public land illegally. Due to the absence of state provided public infrastructures (transportation, fuel, electricity, water), even the favela residents' need for basic social services may be fulfilled informally. Several local drug dealer gangs collect informal fees from the local residents, in exchange for providing them with alternative forms of "quasi-public" transportations, fuel distribution, electric power, water, and regular access to cable television and internet (Chétry, 2013). This management of resources has increased drug gangs' power in the favelas, leading to higher indices of violence (Chétry, 2013; Souza, 2000).

Classic social scientific debate has explained poverty as a result of lack of capital in its economic (Bronwyn & Farnsworth, 2011; Dale & Sparkes, 2008; Lemon Osterling, 2007), cultural (e.g., tastes, academic credentials; Sullivan, 2001), and social forms (e.g., group memberships, titles; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Wu, 2008). A corpus of text focuses on the presence of these types of capital (e.g., Deuchar & Holligan, 2010; Karadag, 2009; Kisida et al., 2014; Prieur et al., 2008). These works center around the role of capital and show that the residents of low-income neighbourhoods can mobilize their own social resources and eventually turn them into economic

value through contextual webs of mutual (and quite often unequal) exchanges.

According to Bourdieu (1986), capital can take four main forms: economic, symbolic, cultural and social. Economic capital involves resources that are converted to monetary value in a direct way and can be institutionalized as property rights. Symbolic capital is a resource that translates into cultural and phenomenological codes such as socio-political legitimation, honour, and prestige (Bourdieu, 1989). Bourdieu (1984) refers to this concept as "the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability" (p. 291). It is the degree of accumulated influence and the recognized form of other capitals (Bourdieu, 1989), that is, the form that other types of capital embody when they are perceived as legitimate. In the favela, symbolic capital can be illustrated as the community's acceptance of power and informal administration that drug groups exert in the neighbourhoods.

Cultural capital represents the general cultural background, knowledge, dispositions and skills of individuals. It may express itself in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. The embodied form refers to the assimilation, incorporation, and cultivation of cultural capital. It represents long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body (Bourdieu, 1986). The objectified state is taken in the form of cultural goods or resources possessing symbolic value that is culturally and socially distinct. Finally, the institutionalized state is expressed as the specialized knowledge and institutional recognition of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1989) further states that cultural capital reproduces the culture of the dominant classes. In the favelas, the dominant class is composed of successful gangs. They establish their internal culture as worthy of pursuit while having the power to impose connotations that favor them (Penglase, 2005). Last, social capital encompasses resources that are obtained through sets of relations and group memberships.

It is maintained and reinforced through exchanges performed within a stable network of connections and social formations (Bourdieu, 1989). Social capital in the favelas consists of networks and informal organizations through which gangs build coalitions to achieve common goals. These alliances allow them to exploit the resources and skills of various member groups (Arias, 2004).

Bourdieu (1986) analyzes the ways in which differential access to capital drives social and economic exclusion. He states that the accumulation of capital by certain sectors of society leads to the reproduction of class inequalities. The aggregation of capital can happen in settings characterized by poverty. For instance, drug lords in Rio de Janeiro are able to acquire local legitimation while sustaining unequal relations in the favela in which they dwell (Logan & Laurance, 2003). Their legitimacy reinforces unequal relations between favela residents and the residents of middle-upper class areas in Rio de Janeiro. The authority of drug lords entails further stratification given that the favelas remain at the bottom of the hierarchy as their residents are continuously stigmatized, neglected, and excluded (Steinbrink, 2013). Such treatment derives from the fact that these neighbourhoods are targeted en masse as territory controlled by drug lords (Steinbrink, 2013).

Each of the aforementioned types of capital can be converted into a different form. In doing so, hierarchical systems, social structures, and power relations go through ongoing processes of reification. I argue that specific capital conversions among drug traffickers in the favelas reinforce structural inequalities and perpetuate social segregation. Through a literature review, the aim of this paper is to use classic theory to analyze the power dynamics in favelas. Specifically, Bourdieu's (1986) approach to capital is applied to understand how inequality and poverty are reinforced when groups other than elites monopolize resources. Such social theory was chosen on the basis of its conceptual

framework, which implicates mechanisms of power and control of assets, both relevant elements in understanding social inequality. This work contributes to the existing body of literature on the topics of capital conversion and reproduction of social inequality. It elaborates on these studies to instigate a greater understanding of the various ways in which drug gangs retain their power in the favelas, amid the bolstering of structural inequalities.

The Drug Regime of the Favela

Pivotal insights about the study of life conditions within social spaces, which are regimented by structural states of socio-economic deprivation, can be provided by an exploration of the ways in which locally collected forms of capital are converted and shared on the local ground. The hierarchical systems and power relations derived from capital conversions are ultimately based on the degree of agency that specific local social actors can strategically express in the management of contextual relationships. Through these social connections, certain transformative processes can occur among different forms of capital. Conversions happen according to the gang network-related cultural authority on issues of violence, trust, and public consent (Chétry, 2013). Through this continuously expanding influence, drug groups have increasingly become the designers of a communal layout embedded in fear and uncertainty.

When gang members discovered the potential profits from cocaine and marijuana transactions, violent control over the favela's social space started to spread. By employing strategies of aggression, intimidation, and knowledge of the territory, drug dealers were able to impose their system (Penglase, 2005). To maintain their authority, drug lords regulate two main resources, drugs and guns (Logan & Laurance, 2003). Drug gangs impose a military-type control over a delimited territory, and guns enable them to retain command over a particular land, settle debts,

prevent competition, and scare potential witnesses. Consequently, they restrict the movement of residents and government agents and limit their access to public services. If a resident from a certain favela enters another one considered to be enemy territory, due to drug gangs' disputes, the person may be killed (Zaluar, 2010).

Converting Economic to Symbolic Capital

Economic capital may be represented as the monetary power acquired from gangs' drug operations. To illustrate this conversion, drug gangs support and fund festivities to maintain the support of the favela residents (Rial y Costas, 2011). The money used to organize these events is converted to symbolic capital in the form of acceptance and legitimation of the drug gangs, reflected by public affirmation that these groups are in control (Sneed, 2007). Similarly, their economic capital is converted to an "image of respectability", as when youth admire drug lords and aspire to become involved in the business given the economic wealth it may bring (Zaluar, 2010). Drug groups' economic and symbolic power may be observed when these groups are able to stave off corrupt police from their turf through bribery (Arias, 2006; Rial y Costas, 2011). As officers maintain this distance, they are acknowledging and implicitly accepting the drug groups' control over the favelas. Significant portions of these areas have no regular policing and police enforcement (Zaluar, 2010). Thus, monetary rewards derived from the drug enterprise come to be understood by the local community as a symbol of domination.

Converting Cultural to Symbolic Capital

Cultural capital can be expressed in the form of music; it is encoded in context within musical performances. In the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, various criminal organizations sponsor dances such as funk events. A subcategory of this genre, known as 'proibidao funk', emerged from the

linkage of funk and organized crime. The lyrics of this music genre are quite often characterized by their devotion to violence, drugs, and killing police officers (Rodriguez et al., 2011; Sneed, 2007), while drug lords pay music acts as informal mass-media producers and distributors. These funk dances have become regular community-based events in the favela (Ria y Costas, 2011). The fact that criminal activity is coupled indexically with the 'proibidao funk', both among favela residents and within the national public sphere, acknowledges the drug gangs' attempt to informally appropriate this type of music artistic canons (at least on the semiotic level). The music and lyrics of these 'proibidao funks' are transformed into public recognition of the drug groups and their lords.

Conversions of cultural into symbolic capital can be observed in drug lord narratives about order and protection (Saegert & Winkel, 2004). According to Arias (2004), residents of the favelas in Rio de Janeiro do not trust the state and have lost faith in it as a result of police abuse and government neglect. Acknowledging this social mood, drug groups use authorities' indifference and police violence to depict the government as the enemy and to present themselves as the local residents' protectors (Penglase, 2005). In doing so, they attempt to further reinforce cultural validation of their own aggression, and extend their influence in the favelas' social interactions. These narratives, which are part of the cultural capital repertoire, are readily translated into legitimation. Through such acceptance, people living in the favelas justify the actions taken by drug gangs to enforce protection and order. It is important to note that the conversion of cultural into symbolic capital happens in both affluent sectors and lower class neighbourhods in Rio de Janeiro, where the hierarchy is reproduced in an analogous fashion. Nevertheless, differences can be observed in the contextual doxa. In mainstream Brazilian society, the conversion of cultural capital into symbolic capital is socially interpreted as a legitimate practice. However, when the same

mechanism is placed on the favela milieu, and operationalized by drug groups, it is labeled by the public mainstream as illegitimate and illegal. In the favelas, this internal dynamic may also be justified on a cultural level. These dynamics maintain inner fragmentation and outer segregation. Feelings of antagonism arise from criminal gang narratives vis-à-vis the state, which in turn validate their actions (Rial y Costas, 2011; Zaluar, 2010).

Converting Social to Symbolic Capital

Social capital is manifested in the form of networks, which are based on mutual protection and which allow drug groups to exchange information, weapons and merchandise. Such trade and social capital further extends their control over the favela (Chétry, 2013). The gang members' social connections, and the resources exchanged from these networks, are converted to economic capital. For instance, drug transactions that are conducted across the commercial web they have established result in economic profit for the gangs. Likewise, both social and economic capital are transformed into symbolic capital, particularly when there is further legitimation of the drug group's power based on their networks of influence and the economic resources obtained from the drug trade business.

Discussion and Implications

Structural patterns of the distribution and transformation of capital maintain social seclusion. As these processes unravel, not only is poverty reinforced in the favela, but the wealth in the drug business market is too. Capital conversion grants control gang members over the territory, which in turn bolsters social isolation of the favelas as the government de facto acknowledges that the area is under the command of the drug lords. The reproduction of such an unequal system occurs both internally and externally. On the one hand, it is replicated at an organizational level inside the favela, with a

hierarchical community where drug dealers control and convert capital, subsequently maintaining drug-related violence and high indices of violence (Logan & Laurance, 2003). On the other hand, the gang mandate reinforces government neglect, resulting in an estrangement of the population from the authorities (Zaluar, 2010). As a result, this system of inequality is sustained through the widening gap between favelas and middle-upper class sectors of Rio de Janeiro. In the midst of geopolitical marginalization, the accumulation and conversion of capital, not the lack of it, reproduces poverty (Arias, 2006; Chétry, 2013; Rial y Costas, 2011). Furthermore, institutional disregard for these isolated sectors is normalized, since their state of precariousness starts to be perceived as natural. The prevalence of social exclusion and structural inequalities reflects the manifestation of capital conversion among drug groups.

The ethnographic works discussed in this paper illustrate the diverse capital conversions occurring among drug groups and how these transformations replicate the division of classes inside and outside the favelas. Over the last decades, favelas have been increasingly acting as an autonomous territory, having their own local mechanisms; consequently, residents have been experiencing alienation and feelings of estrangement toward Rio de Janeiro's mainstream society (Perlman, 2010). Informality in these territories has allowed the violent command of drug groups to proliferate (Zaluar, 2010) and, as they enforce power, marginalization is sustained. Additionally, the control strategies of these groups maintain fear, violence, and a lack of public health provision from the government (Fernandes, 2013). Once drug gangs successfully transform their capital into power, they recreate a double stigmatization, where the authorities and the communities in the favelas conceive of each other as a danger (Zaluar, 2010). As with any threat that must be avoided, this results in both parties distancing from each other. Drug leaders are able to dictate variations between normality and emergency

(Chétry, 2013; Oliveira, 2007). They do not merely impose control through normative systems; they construct divided realities, exploit through different argumentations, and diffuse the notions of victim and victimizer (Penglase, 2005). This paper illustrated the diverse ways in which capital is converted and how these processes strengthen drug gangs' power and territorial control in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. When such mechanisms take place, institutional neglect is consistently reproduced as the drug groups increase their influence. Drug groups bolster marginalization when they enforce power, which leads to social alienation, lack of public health provision, and feelings of disintegration. As drug lords translate their capital into further power, they perpetuate a double stigmatization where authorities and inhabitants of the favelas perceive each other as a danger.

There are a few implications of this topic that should be considered. Specifically, class divisions in Brazilian society are openly validated and justified through various segregation practices. It is important to draw attention to this matter, in particular since the country may intensify such activities as it participates in the global scene and as it finds itself under international spotlight. For instance, hosting mega-events such as the Soccer World Cup in 2014 has reinforced state practices of 'cleansing' and 'pacification', which include evictions, demolitions, constructing separation barriers, and the use of violence (De Onis, 2014; Gaffney, 2010; McMichael, 2013; Steinbrink, 2011). Large-scale international events may increase feelings of antagonism among residents of the favelas toward the government as they are deliberately excluded from the mainstream Brazilian society. In turn, drug lords could potentially employ this mistrust to further justify their own authority in the favelas. Further academic research could explore the impact of these events on the drug lords' influence and on the reproduction of structural inequalities in Brazil.

The approach taken in this paper analyzes power with a focus on resource control in impoverished areas. It is relevant to examine the diverse conversions of capital in the favelas as they can enhance our comprehension of the various dynamics in which organized crime engages. As discussed, access to resources and the various transformations that these undergo reinforces instability. Evaluating capital and its transformations can also provide insight into the social, cultural, and territorial influence of drug groups, not only in Rio de Janeiro, but also in other urban localities where organized crime proliferates, as conversions are an apparatus translating in other contexts. Studying the ways in which drug groups conduct their affairs, as well as the impacts of these activities, allows for further examination of the allocation of power given that drug production and distribution go through a supply chain process, which correspondingly follows a chain of command. Scrutinizing this hierarchy can trace the origins of some of the social problems that result from the circulation of drugs and the outcome of gang operations, such as the intensification of criminal activity. Employing Bourdieu's (1986) theoretical conceptualizations in these areas of research can contribute to the expansion of academic groundwork that addresses organized crime, the diverse capital transactions it engages in, and the effects of this in society.

Empirical work of this nature may potentially encourage the development of social policy that advocates for change in social concerns such as the lack of public health provision in the favelas. In addition to granting the analysis of sociopolitical hierarchies and their impact, capital conversion may reveal some of the approaches that the government undertakes when engaging in security, surveillance, or military practices, hence raising concerns around social justice and humanitarian issues. It allows us to understand how social exclusion is a direct result of the drug lords' criminal governance, in tandem with the societal and governmental reactions to the favela's informal authority.

It is important to recognize that the state of isolation in these neighbourhoods is not a process reinforced unilaterally. Rather, it is a mutual process in which segregation is also self-enforced due to the fact that gang members and dwellers of the favelas do not perceive themselves as accepted by mainstream society, nor by the state. Based on a geopolitical relationship, isolation is preserved through social narratives and discourses antagonizing the government or the favela's organized crime, given that these parties fabricate scripts against each other. Moreover, aside from the state, the drug groups, and the favela inhabitants, middle-upper classes also participate in this dynamic. This happens as they become partisans, either actively or passively, once they engage in practices of social interpretation and meaning-making on the topic. Thus alienation is a result of a shared collaboration, both direct and indirect, among factions.

Conclusion

Bourdieu's (1986) theory permits the identification of the means by which individuals make sense of their reality, and the ways in which people embrace different social narratives that justify the state of affairs of their community. Additionally, this theoretical approach can expose the modus operandi of those in control, how and where power arises and is reproduced, and how power is organized. In essence, it can lead to an understanding of how life and local institutions are organized.

Knowledge of capital dynamics in precarious environments is fundamental for analyzing the nature of internal divisions in society, as well as the effects these have on institutions, practices, and the community in general. Therefore, inequality can be more closely studied, facilitating the comprehension of differential access to power and its consequences. Such information may raise awareness, which can in turn promote international recognition of this often overlooked,

yet prominent, issue of social stratification in the newly emerging Brazilian economy.

Acknowledgements

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