

1. Videos

A Bird's Eye view of poverty

By
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The Brazilian authorities are building cable cars to meet tourist demand to see the favelas for themselves. But is such transportation simply encouraging 'safaris among the poor'?

Since the 1990s, selected and idealized aspects of poverty which are associated with specific territories – favela, townships, slums – have been turned into a tourist commodity in various megacities of the Global South. Guided tours of diverse modalities abound, providing less or more interaction with residents, using different means of transportation (on foot, by van, jeep, coach, bicycle, or motorcycle), showcasing the area during the day or at night. Carefully planned and creatively packaged, these incursions into territories of supposed dirt, danger and despair offer peculiar juxtapositions of amusement and fear, leisure and guilt, emotional expression and exploitation. Promoted on websites and recommended by reputable guidebooks, they have an established monetary value agreed upon by promoters and consumers. This 'touristic poverty', as I call it, is thus completely incorporated into the logic of the neo-liberal model of market-based economic and social organization.

The emergence of the travelling favela

In my country, the touristic poverty finds its main empirical and symbolic territory in the so-called favelas. Twenty per cent of Rio de Janeiro's population is comprised by favela residents: about 1.3 million people live in some 1,000 communities with very different levels of urbanization and quality of life. In the international imagination, along with carnival and football, favelas have become part of the stereotypical image of Brazil. In the Brazilian imagination, as a vast bibliography demonstrates, favelas have been turned into a central discursive and material reality upon which major issues – citizenship, inequality, violence – are projected, debated and dealt with by various social actors. In the process, what I call the 'traveling favela' emerged: a space of imagination and a mobile entity. As a global commodity and trademark, the traveling favela is being used in advertising campaigns for the widest possible variety of products, in spicing up restaurants, stores and clubs worldwide. As a tourist destination, on the one hand, it is part of global narratives and practices that re-signify poverty as an object of consumption; on the other hand, it is part of the expansion of the so-called reality tours which promise direct and safe contact, under close supervision of professional personnel, with marginal territories, idealized as the perfect opposite of the world from which the tourist comes. For a few months I've been working on an on-going research project which aims to examine the roles played by mobile technologies on 'inventing' tourist destinations. Today I give special attention to a device which has been exported to different parts of the poor South: the cable car. My general purpose is to demonstrate how the Teleférico, as it is known in Rio de Janeiro, connects to transnational arrangements, which situate poverty, violence and segregation on specific 'orders of worth' – to use Boltanski and Thévenot's expression – within global tourism hierarchies.

Cable car putting the favelas on the tourist map

For two decades, public power ignored – and often openly reproached – the existence of growing flows of tourists toward these areas that it had always sought to hide. Presently, various social actors and institutions, from the public and private sectors, are nevertheless reinventing favela tourism under the principles of city marketing and urban entrepreneurialism. This is the case of the Complexo de Favelas do Alemão, a ‘complex’ composed by 11 different favelas far from Copacabana Beach, the Sugar Loaf and other famous Rio de Janeiro attractions which the cable car was central in putting into the tourist map. At the same time Complexo do Alemão is the target of arbitrary and violent actions, it receives governmental investments aiming to transform it into an official attraction of the ‘city-as-a-commodity’. ‘Rebranded’, Rio de Janeiro promotes itself, favelas included, as a welcoming site for the impressive list of mega events that the city has been and will be hosting.

The “Pacificação” process prepares social occupation

Within these increased investments in strategic planning towards ‘branding’ Rio on an international scale, one plays a central role: the so-called Pacificação. In theory, the ‘pacification’ draws on the ideal of community policing, but in practice the process works like this: the BOPE – a special unit of the Military Police trained to kill – initially occupies a territory and clears the path for the Police Pacification Units who will stand guard for an undetermined time. So far, the UPP program is confined to selected favelas, which are not necessarily those with the highest crime rates, but precisely those located in areas considered to be strategically relevant to the mega events. In the case of the Alemão Complex, the ‘pacification’ started in November 2011, in one of the largest military operations in the city’s history. Local television showed 24/7, Hollywood-style images of elite police units, along with segments of the Army and the Navy, battling their way through the Alemão while scores of bandits with automatic rifles attempted to escape into the woods. Since the occupation/pacification, not only tourism operators, but also several other business people flocked to the area. Meanwhile, major companies, mainstream media and NGOs all highly encourage those who live in Alemão to redirect their entrepreneurial skills from informal sector activities to ‘legal micro business’. The flow of people and capital pouring into Alemão is seen, thus, as part of a much-celebrated ‘social occupation’ that is ‘logically’ coming after the military one, and here the cable car is indeed a central element.

Marketing Third World cities through transport infrastructures

Investigating the Colombian case, sociologists Álvarez and Bocarejo argue that “for politicians and planners, cable cars offer new ways of governing urban poverty at the same time that they bring the promise of marketing their Third World cities”. The same argument seems to hold true in the case of the Teleférico de Alemão. “We are experiencing a very important moment for Brazil,” said President Dilma Rousseff at the festive opening ceremony of the Teleférico in July 2011. Rousseff also insisted on some ‘technical’ facts: the cable car system produces less pollution; it shortens travel time between its two extreme stations from 50 minutes by foot up-and-down an unpaved hillside to 16 minutes; all residents of the Complexo do Alemão have the right to two free rides per day. In this sense, the Teleférico carries the promise of fostering physical, social and economic integration. Rousseff and her political supporters are much aware, however, that the Teleférico’s values exceeds its impact on the mobility of the underprivileged: the ski-slope technology represents to Rio de Janeiro, as whole, a much-valued ticket for riding on the magical wheel of the global tourism cities. According to Supervia Trens Urbanos, the company in charge of the administration of the Teleférico, 14,000 people would transit daily through the suspended wagons; out of this number, 35.7% refer to tourists on weekdays and 64.3% on weekends. The quantitative, which the Minister of Tourism insisted in pointing out, is superior to the one registered by the Sugar Loaf wagons.

The teleférico produces favelas as landscapes

If green jeeps have become iconic to Rocinha tourism, inspiring comparisons between favela tourism and a 'safari among the poor', what to say of this filmic, almost idyllic landscape of a favela seen from far above what the Teleférico offers us? It is indeed impressive, the scope of the Rio de Janeiro landscape one sees from the belvederes at Complexo do Alemão, a view very similar to the other ones that have been traveling the world through postcards, travel guides and Hollywood movies since the 1930s. However, the Alemão landscape, now resignified by the new mobility system, is also the spatial representation of the current power regime. As authors such as Yves Lacoste and Paul Virilio have argued, there is an undeniable relation between militarism and tourism, between war strategies and the capture and production of images and landscapes. War and tourism are both activities mediated by optical instruments such as binoculars and camera. They equally depend on establishing high and distant points of view, through which grandiose field perspectives are revealed. This relationship becomes explicit in the case of the touristic Alemão: on each one of the six stations, one finds impressive buildings for the Pacifying Police Headquarters as well as colourful panels created by world-famous Brazilian artist Romero Britto. Combined, they allow for enjoyment and surveillance. The Teleférico celebrates, therefore, the favela as a territory with the potential to be reshaped, according to the logic of the neo-liberal model of market-based economic and social organization. According to this logic, and paraphrasing Boltanski, one could say that the worthiness of a specific favela as a tourist attraction is now measured based on the efficiency of services it can provide for the tourists, its residents' performance as hosts and micro business people, as well as its capacity to ensure what is expected from a generic favela, i.e. poverty, some level of disorder, and joy.

Morro da Providência: from tourism to evictions

This doesn't mean that the installation of the cable car technology and the tourist investments around it go without tensions at Alemão and in other favelas. The most dramatic case might be that of the Morro da Providência, which counts roughly 5,000 inhabitants and was pacified in March 2010. Considered Rio de Janeiro's oldest favela, it is situated on a steep hill not far from the old port. Within the context of the preparations for the Olympic Games and high real-estate speculation, the port area is being completely 'revitalized'. This cost-intensive urban development project includes a cable car system that will connect the docklands, the central train station, the Cidade do Samba, where the floats for the carnival processions are built (and which is also one of Rio's most famous tourist attractions), and the favela, Morro da Providencia. A quick walk through Morro da Providencia reveals the appalling state of uncertainty residents are living in: at the very top of the hill, some 70 percent of homes are marked for eviction. Critics accurately argue that the cable car is actually designed in such a way that it purposely sacrifices many houses to the bulldozer. Residents attempted to block the construction works, but were prevented from doing so by UPP units. Although the city claims that investments will benefit residents, the only 'public meetings' held were to warn residents of their fate. The Mayor's Office is indeed investing on the 'divide and conquer' approach: residents are confronted individually to sign up for relocation, and no communitywide negotiations are permitted. Moreover, authorities declared the 'relocations' to be in the interest of residents because they live in 'risky areas' where landslides might occur and because 'de-densification' is required to improve quality of life. An important report by the local engineers showed, nevertheless, that the risk factors announced by the city were inadequately studied and inaccurate. Residents also argued that the priority for the community should be basic sanitation and, in terms of mobility, a funicular tram would not only be much cheaper, but would also create more integration and not drain local business, as a cable car would. Residents complain that the millions-worth building project does not at all meet their most urgent needs – education, jobs and healthcare. In this sense, they are indeed putting into doubt the official bet which loudly advertises that the future of the favela would fit comfortably in a cable car.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication

industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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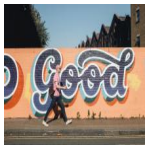
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