BUSINESS AS USUAL? TRANSFORMING BRAZILIAN SLUMSCAPES IN HYPER-NEOLIBERAL DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS

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Too much ink has been spent on examining the socio-economic conditions under which shantytowns emerge as urban enclaves and develop into unique lifeworlds. As 'cities within global cities', such as Delhi, Cape Town, Kingston, Buenos Aires or Rio de Janeiro (Frenzel Koens and Steinbrink 2012), but also as spaces declared by various constituencies in a 'permanent state of exception' (Agamben 1998), slums harbour postmodern ethical contradictions. This is so because of their increasing marketing as alternative holidays for those who can afford the ticket and are bored enough with luxury hotels. These tourists look for new experiences of gazing, listening, performing or living like the 'destitute other' under exotic cultural conditions – but only for a few days. Alongside such ego-enhancing journeys (Dann 1977) that facilitate expressions of – usually Western but also non-Western affluent – individualism (Giddens 1991), there are genuine, if at times misguided, humanitarian gestures. These may include independent charity projects or documentaries and other recorded testimonies on living conditions in the slum, widely disseminated across the world by independent artists. The distant humanitarian gaze produces all the right emotions to the gazer who never visited these places; not using those affective-come-emotional means to help others would contradict the nature of middle-class radicalism (Crossley 2003).

There are nevertheless other considerations at play in such contexts of touring and pouring one's heart when one considers accusations that slum charity fosters a new ideology of 'poorism'. Inversely, local regulation of tourism as an activist tool might be distorted. This slum tourist activism (tourism managed exclusively by slumdwellers for the slumdwellers) runs the risk of completing a vicious circle in which advocacy of the native right to self-regulation, a better life or 'difference' might support local anti-cosmopolitan ethics or the neo-colonial rationale of Westernization by native means (Argyrou 2005: 78; Korstanje 2011: 166; Tzanelli 2013: chapter 6). For research into parts of the world in which humanitarian activism was promoted through both religious (Catholic, Orthodox, Hindu) institutions and the particular religious doctrine's anthropocentric ethical tenets, the old Marxist term 'ideology' can be safely replaced by 'cosmology': the structured views we are acculturated to embrace as natural givens, but also the competences we acquire in the socio-cultural environment that generates these worldviews.

But I am mostly concerned with the novel multi-sited, technological, political and economic environments in which such distant tourist mobilities are produced and maintained. This generates new questions concerning the production or dissemination of cosmologies, as well as their *profitable simulation*. I place my sociological spyglass on Rio de Janeiro's slum tourism, which seems to experience a 'second Renaissance' on the eve of two major, global athletic events: the World Cup 2014 and the much-anticipated Olympic Games of Rio de Janeiro in 2016. Just out of an extended authoritarian regime that helped turn religious humanism into charity activism, and just into its first socialist government that now faces

[favela protests for its 'unjust' urban planning](#), Rio 'slumming' appears to have joined the new knowledge economies. These economies of tourism or 'poorism' are regulated from many different business sites, including those of Rio, and are progressively more digitised. It is in fact their online façade that invites one to examine old questions of exploitation, representation and development anew, in their new shiny bottles. Organised journeys to favelas such as [Rocinha](#) might be fronted by locals, as is the case with Mumbai's [Reality Tours](#), a business with a strong virtual (Internet) presence that currently donates 80% of its profits to local development projects. The tours might be bringing business to local shops, which, in the case of Rio's favelas, [act as 'proof'](#) that civilising the disorderly, 'dirty' populations of a glamorous city is underway. Back in 2010, when Rio started getting seriously ready to host the World Cup and the Olympics, the city's hillside shantytowns became the target of a government clean-up that in turn was '[being used as a springboard to develop tourism in the favelas with special tours](#)'.

But what sort of tourism is that – and how much of it is truly regulated by the Brazilian centre, when all relevant tourist business entices digital visitors to become terrestrial tourists with its own online messages? Are favelas' virtual representations as bright, entrepreneurial social milieus actually hiding the realities of making ends meet on the site, or staying at the margins of mainstream society while acting as the object of desire? Just as the eighteenth-century shantytowns of European cities and the twentieth-century slums' connection to great traumas of modernity such as the Holocaust and the universal tale of genocide, Rio's favelas act as repositories of global memory (Bauman 1989). As *lieux of memoire* (Nora 1989), they concentrate and capitalise on stories of global or regional migration, resettlement and oppression, which in Rio date back to histories of slavery and more recent authoritarian control alike. Any digital or terrestrial tourism to these sites is a form of thanatotourism or dark tourism that in certain representational formats might sustain racist consumption. Finally, local responses to the 'tourist gaze' (Urry & Larsen 2011) could sustain activism alongside tourist development, but still push localities to reproduce global stereotypes of the swindler of charitable donors, the irrational rebel or the mystical primitive who sells simulations of their sociality in search of recognition they never get 'at home'. Labelling e-tourism business 'evil' or inconsiderate may also be unhelpful. In contemporary hyper-neoliberal environments sociologists need to consider first what technological means and tools do to society and how. Internet projections of favela lifeworlds and slumscapes are often designed or maintained by professionals who are not familiar with local realities; when they are, they have to reduce them to globally intelligible 'facts'. What do such new 'economies of signs and space' (Lash & Urry 1994) have in store for those who live in the enhanced terrestrial environments that will host the greatest mega-events of humanity?

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