The survival of those who couldn't "stay home": Community-based resistance and precariousness around the "new normal" in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic deepened social inequalities in Brazil's favelas. Among certain social groups, the need to keep moving to ensure survival meant greater exposure to the risks of the disease. While kinetic elites enjoyed the privilege of remaining immobile and protected, less privileged urban groups were forced to continue in movement despite the risks created by the pandemic. In this study we qualify social analyses around the so-called "new normal" based on ethnographic research conducted in urban peripheries. Empirically based on the cases of the favelas Santa Marta and Vila Vintém, we examine conditioning factors that differentiate the effects of the pandemic among favelas in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Our intent is to demonstrate the differential effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in territories where the city's most impoverished population lacks the socioeconomic conditions to "stay home". We indicate two general aspects: first, the pandemic deepened and re-signified pre-existing social problems; second, the shortage of public policies and complex requalifications of precariousness stimulated the development of various community-based actions to mitigate the risks of infection in these territories.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic; favelas; social inequalities; community-based mobilizations; urban violence.

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A sobrevivência dos que não puderam "ficar em casa": Resistência comunitária e precariedades ao redor do "novo normal" em favelas do Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

Resumo

A pandemia de Covid-19 agravou desigualdades sociais em relação às favelas no Brasil. Entre certos grupos sociais, a necessidade de se manter em movimento para garantir a sobrevivência significou maior exposição aos riscos da doença. Enquanto as elites cinéticas desfrutavam do privilégio de permanecer imóveis e protegidas, grupos urbanos menos privilegiados foram forçados a continuar em movimento apesar dos riscos da pandemia. Neste trabalho, qualificamos análises sociais ao redor do chamado "novo normal" a partir de pesquisas etnográficas realizadas em periferias urbanas. Empiricamente com base nos casos das favelas Santa Marta e Vila Vintém, examinamos os fatores condicionantes que diferenciam os efeitos da pandemia entre as favelas da cidade do Rio de Janeiro. Nossa intenção é demonstrar os efeitos diferenciais da pandemia de Covid-19 em territórios onde a população mais empobrecida da cidade carece de condições socioeconômicas para "ficar em casa". Indicamos dois aspectos gerais: primeiro, a pandemia aprofundou e ressignificou problemas sociais preexistentes; segundo, em meio à escassez de políticas públicas e complexas requalificações de precariedades, estimulou o desenvolvimento de diversas ações de base comunitária para mitigar os riscos de infecção nesses territórios.

Palavras-chave: pandemia de Covid-19; favelas; desigualdades sociais; mobilizações comunitárias; violência urbana.

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Introduction

When the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in Brazil, the expression "stay home" gained collective justification as it aligned with global epidemiological guidelines (WHO, 2020). Subsequently, different strategies emerged around these public health orientations for social distancing to prevent sharp increases in infection rates of the new viral disease. Reducing the number of bodies circulating would mitigate transmission of the disease in Brazilian cities (Fiocruz, 2020).

In March of 2020, the state government and the mayor of the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, began to implement social distancing policies. However, while the pandemic was intensifying in the country with sharp increases in the numbers of infections and deaths, it was also apparent that there was a problem of government. No reliable federal guidance about public health policies was provided to control the pandemic in the cities. Specialists affirm that former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro exploited the political instability brought by the pandemic to promote an escalation of his neoliberal authoritarianism – by adopting a "strategic ignorance" instead of undertaking political efforts to reduce the impacts of the pandemic (Ortega & Orsini, 2020).

Public debates in Brazil were marked by a dispute between supporters of this irresponsible denialism, and other groups advocating the need to adopt a new way of life during the indeterminate period of the pandemic. For those who decided to "stay home", there was an adaptation to a "new normal".

Social analysts in Brazil have characterized this new normality as the "creation of a new standard that provides people a certain protection, security, continuity, and, therefore, survival" (Insper, 2020). However, while some social groups had the privilege to debate the need to "stay home", for many other people this wasn't possible. What would the "new normal" be like for subjects who did not have the socioeconomic means to "stay home"?

The theoretical-methodological framework of the "mobilities turn" allows the understanding that the power to choose whether to move about or remain immobile is a determinant of social inequalities (Büscher & Urry, 2009; Sheller, 2018; Adey et al., 2021). We focus our heuristic attention on the Brazilian specificities of a pandemic situation primarily found in the so-called Global South, in cities such as New Delhi, São Paulo, Jakarta, and Johannesburg (Bhan et al., 2020). While "kinetic elites" enjoyed the privilege of remaining immobile

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and protected, less privileged urban groups were "forced to move along polluted roads, inside packed public transportation, while facing high risks of infection" (Freire-Medeiros & Lages 2020: 136) to provide services deemed as "essential"[2].

The case of the first Covid-19 victim in the greater Rio de Janeiro area highlights the interplay of gender, race, and class privilege in Brazil during the pandemic (Góes, 2022). This victim was a 63-year-old, non-white woman. She used to commute 120km by bus every week - from her home in Miguel Pereira, a municipality in the southern part of the state, to her workplace in Leblon, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the state capital. She was a domestic worker and was infected by the apartment owner, a woman who had returned from a trip to Italy – a country where an uncontrolled infection rate was already rampant. The Leblon resident quickly recovered from the illness, while the victim, Cleonice Gonçalves, tragically died on March 17, 2020 (ANPOCS, 2020).

This situation exemplifies a socioeconomic dynamic: the pandemic deepened social inequalities afflicting the impoverished populations in Brazil. The context is even more complex considering territories with specific features. For the populations living in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, the virus became a new concern that combined with previous problems - such as the scarcity of water, electricity, and sewage services in households.

However, variations among these territories should be analytical highlighted. Investigations about social inequalities in Brazil should not overlook the internal composition of the favelas in the national territory[3] (Valladares, 2005; Machado da Silva, 2016). In this regard, Rio de Janeiro can be approached as a privileged empirical territory for critical analyses of the urban space[4] (Perlman, 1979; Fischer, 2008; Larkins, 2015).

Drawing from urban sociology and anthropological research, our objective in this article is to examine the varying impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on two different favelas in Rio. Our analysis reveals that the pandemic has exacerbated and transformed pre-existing issues, while also producing the emergence of community-driven initiatives to address insufficient public policies and requalifications of precariousness. This dynamic is exemplified by the experiences of residents in the favelas of Santa Marta and Vila Vintém.

This article builds on research dialogues maintained by both researchers since 2015 (Mano, 2020, 2021; Da Motta, 2019, 2020). Our aim is to establish a comparative perspective (Giraudy et al., 2019) based on connections between community-based actions and government rationalities during the Covid-19 pandemic in Rio de Janeiro. Our methodology involves ethnographic analysis of different "social situations" (Gluckman, 1940; Van Velsen, 1979), based on long-term participant observation of everyday-life – conducted by attending community meetings, local events, and spaces of sociability, and by interviewing local residents and community leaders. Previously established relationships made it possible during the pandemic to use the digital environment as a place for participation, rather than just observation (Segata, 2020).

We perceive ethnography as an epistemic principle that productively confronts the researchers' accumulated theoretical perspectives with the worldview of the interlocutors (Peirano, 1994; Favrat-Saada, 2005; Goldman, 2006, Nader, 2011). Through the "testimonies" (Das, 2011) of local residents we seek to highlight conditions that differentiate the effects of the pandemic in Rio de Janeiro favelas. We are guided by the argument that previous

2 During the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, the government defined "essential services" as crucial activities for the provision of basic needs to the population. These services included healthcare, public safety, food production and distribution, energy, water, sanitation, transportation, logistics, and financial and communication services. However, workers in these essential services were at a higher risk of exposure to the virus - especially those in low-paying jobs and with limited access to Personal Protective Equipment and healthcare.

3 According to data from IBGE (2020), the number of occupied households in favelas in Brazil reached 5.12 million in 2019. Over nine years, this number had increased by 59%. An estimated 734 Brazilian municipalities, or 13.2%, have favelas. It is estimated that the total number of areas of this type reached 13,151, more than double the amount verified ten years ago (6,329).

4 The state of Rio de Janeiro is that with the second most households in favelas, approximately 717.3 thousand homes. Proportionally, the state is in 5th place, with 12.63% of its homes in favelas. Rio de Janeiro is the only state in Southeast Brazil with over 10% of the population living in favelas. The state capital, in turn, has 453.5 thousand households in favelas, which represents 19.3% of the total number of residences in the city.

forms of urban governance and territorial ordering conditioned differential impacts of the pandemic, largely due to the power relations and networks established in the territories (Fleury & Menezes, 2020). By adopting this framework, we hope to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the impacts of the pandemic and its effects on urban space.

In the following section, we provide an overview of the sociopolitical urban context of Rio de Janeiro in recent years. Proposing the concept of *differential regimes of precariousness*, we discuss how the pandemic has aggravated previous survival conditions in the city's favelas. We then explore ethnographical descriptions to illustrate how the reactions to the risks of infection were articulated in two different favelas of the city. Our concluding remarks return to a broader debate regarding the differential impacts of Covid-19 – and we establish a critique of what has been referred to as the "new normal".

Precariousness, urban inequalities, and the pandemic in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

In this study, we argue that the Covid-19 pandemic amplified and transformed sociopolitical issues previously existing in the history of the city of Rio de Janeiro. To fully grasp a comprehensive understanding of this analysis, it is necessary to consider the recent context of urban production surrounding the favelas and their populations.

In recent decades, one of the most debated public policies executed in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro was the Pacifying Police Units (UPP) – which established a permanent presence of military police agents in these territories (Leite, 2017; Menezes & Correa, 2018). Launched in 2008, it can be affirmed that the program's purpose was to deconstruct the social imaginaries of a "violent city" by adapting the city to international security standards (Freire-Medeiros et al., 2013). This policy emerged with the inclusion of the city of Rio in the calendar of global mega-sporting events – including the 2007 Pan American Games, the 2014 Soccer World Cup, and the 2016 Summer Olympic Games (Sánchez & Broudehoux, 2013; Müller & Gaffney, 2018).

Despite the installation of 38 UPPs among the 763 favelas of the city, the program was based on replacing the long-standing brutal police repression of these urban territories with a "militarized tutelage" of these populations (Pacheco de Oliveira, 2014). Mega-events and militarization were mutually reinforcing, and the two phenomena were linked by social, economic, and political dynamics at various scales (Davies, 2017; Farias et al, 2018; Rocha & Da Motta, 2020).[5]

When the cycle of sporting events concluded and the project for an Olympic city was terminated, many discourses about financial and political crisis started shaping the production of the social reality in Rio de Janeiro. Around 2016, as the UPPs lost strength, armed conflict between state agents and drug cartels became not just another repressive resource, but the leading institutional policy. The idea of "urban war" became institutionalized as state policy (Barros & Farias, 2017; Grillo, 2019, Magalhães, 2020).

Since the "pacification" process has also objectively affected non-pacified territories (Da Motta, 2019), the plurality of regulatory forms and agencies impacted multiple favelas across the city in distinctive ways. Analyzing the context of urban transformations impacted by these governance strategies, sociologist Márcia Leite argued that the combination of state and market in the implementation of social development in specific favelas in the city has generated different forms of regulating these populations. Through the perspective of "territorial regimes" (Leite, 2014, 2017), she emphasized the profound territorial heterogeneity among the favelas - based on different adjustments, negotiations, resistances, and conflicts around the UPPs.

5 We understand militarization as a dispositif/apparatus (in the Foucauldian sense) that combines military-type actions (carried out not only by military agents) with the dissemination of a security doctrine that reorders social life, transforming all spaces into potential "battlefields" and all types of insurgency into security threats (Rocha and da Motta, 2020).

Considering the sociopolitical composition of "precarious lives", it is possible to recognize rationalities that "frame" certain contemporary populations as societal threats. Depending on the sociopolitical context and its intersectionalities, life has different scales of valuation because certain subjects are often denied access to resources, opportunities, and protections that would make their existence more secure. Relegated to a condition of "precarious life", certain social groups are "politically induced" into disabled support networks and differentially exposed to inequalities based on violations, violence, and premature death (Butler, 2015; Fassin, 2018). Recognizing the precariousness of certain lives is important for understanding how power and public governance operate in society.

Therefore, we can affirm that in recent years, subjects living in favelas in Rio de Janeiro have faced an intensified precariousness in their lives. This is because the state – which should protect these lives – has developed more sophisticated policies in forms of warfare, which intensify risks to these populations. Considering the police violence that has continued through different modulations during recent urban processes in Rio, statistical data indicate a racist logic behind public policies. For example, a study conducted by the *Rede de Observatórios da Segurança* highlights that 86% of the victims of police actions in the state of Rio de Janeiro in 2020 were Black, although this group represents only 51.7% of the population (Ramos et al., 2021).

Necropolitics refers to a political framework in which the concept of death serves as a guiding principle for governance (Mbembe, 2016). This theory helps to examine how the rationalities and policies of certain governments prioritize certain lives over others – and how the ultimate outcome of these decisions is often a disregard for human life. Within the context of Rio de Janeiro and Brazil, necropolitical practices are primarily informed by a racist logic that disproportionately impacts historically marginalized populations. This can be observed through an analysis of police actions, as previously noted, and also in the federal government's rationality towards the Covid-19 pandemic. A study by Oliveira et al. (2020), illustrates this argument.

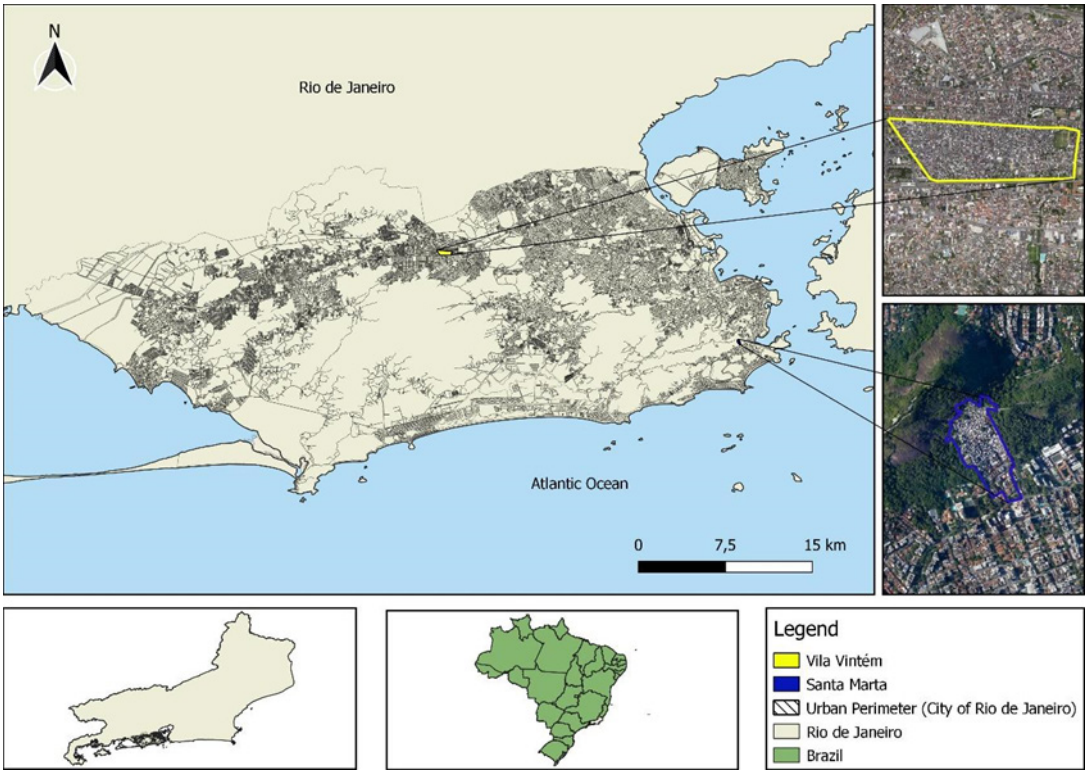
To understand why certain territories and populations required special attention from government during the pandemic, we need to examine demographic data. In 2018, in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro, 30.5% of the Black or Brown population was living in favelas compared to 14.3% of the white population. Similar proportions were found in terms of basic amenities, such as: 12.5% of those who are Black or Brown had no garbage collection, compared to 6% of whites; and17.9% of Blacks and Browns had no water supply compared to 6% of whites; while 42.8% of Blacks and Browns lacked basic sewerage compared to 26.5% of whites (IBGE, 2019).

The impact of existing inequalities was evident from the onset of the pandemic. According to the Development Secretary of Rio de Janeiro, still in the first months of 2020, the unemployment rate among Black women increased from 17.6% to 22% (Prefeitura, 2021). During the same period, the black population experienced a 20% decrease in formal jobs - while the white population had an 8% decrease for women and a 4% decrease for men. In addition, 72% of the population in favelas said that they could not follow quarantine measures due to economic need. These disparities reflect the systemic and structural issues that perpetuate inequalities in Brazil.

Reflecting on these circumstances, sociologist Marcia Leite (2020) argues that the political responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil "have expanded the historical precariousness endured by the lower classes in our society" (Leite, 2020: 3). Drawing on the ideas of Foucault and Mbembe, Leite describes this phenomenon as a "biopolitics of precariousness" - in which vulnerable populations are caught between "making live precariously" in the absence of public health policies and "letting die" due to the active presence of the state's police apparatus.

Thus, we argue that with the onset of the pandemic, territorial regimes were modulated into *differential regimes of precariousness*, affecting different territories in distinct settings. Establishing connections between statistical data and empirical descriptions is an unavoidable task for a critical ethnography in times of a pandemic (Rui et al., 2021). This is why we are exploring two favelas in the city of Rio.

Map 1: Geographical location of Vila Vintém and Santa Marta. Prepared by the authors using the QGIS Software.



Source: Data Rio.

Informed by the aforementioned framework, and recognizing that favelas in Rio de Janeiro are characterized by different sociocultural and economic contexts (Valladares, 2005), we discuss geographically distinct territories (as indicated in Map 1) that have different backgrounds based on recent public policies. The favela Santa Marta was the first, and an exemplary, "pacified favela", while the non-pacified Vila Vintém suffered an expanding flow of drug cartels from other parts of the city.

Our objective is to explore how these favelas can be differentiated from one another based on the effects of urban governance and in terms of community-based responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Amid the pandemic scenario, in which the everyday configuration of the state operated as a dually precarious agent (letting people die because of a lack of public health policies and making people die through the violence of police raids), each favela devised different mechanisms to mitigate the risks to life caused by the pandemic.

We will address two community-based actions configured as forms of resistance to the precariousness of the pandemic, even if this resistance is extremely situated, diffuse, and limited. We intend to demonstrate empirical forms of resistance orchestrated by these local groups to deal with the precariousness resettled under the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Community-based actions as a possibility for resistance

Santa Marta Favela – Botafogo/RJ

As the sun rises on any given weekday, the streets, lanes, and alleyways of the Santa Marta favela in Rio de Janeiro are bustling with people leaving their homes and beginning their commute to work[6]. These workers in professional services are employed in different neighborhoods and regions – and many face the stigma of marginality and urban segregation because of their places of residence. Despite representations of the favelas as a separate urban space and a "problem" for the general territory of the city (Machado da Silva, 2011), residents of these territories belong to the formal and economically productive structure of the formal society.

During the first months of 2020, an unusual sight was witnessed among these workers and their daily hustle: a group of people wearing personal protective equipment, spraying chemical products, and walking at a slower pace. Dodging local residents who descended the stairs towards the exits of the favela, this group of people in distinctive white suits moved in the opposite direction, going up the hills and further into the territory.

Figure 1: Community-based sanitization action in favela Santa Marta.

Source: Reproduction – Santa Marta Contra o Covid-19[7]

6 Favela Santa Marta is located on the south slope of the hill Dona Marta, in the neighborhood of Botafogo. The favela has its origins in the 1930s, when the territory was occupied due to the ease of access to labor markets in the neighborhoods of the South Zone. Over the past decade, the favela was conceived as the "model favela" for the Pacifying Police Units' public security program. Despite the 2010 census listing 1,176 households and 3,908 residents, the Residents Association indicates the number of 6,000 residents in 2021.

7 Available in: https://www.facebook.com/santamartacontraocovid19

Following this group, which attracted considerable attention – due to the aesthetics of their clothes and their noisy machines – a change could be noticed in the smells of the environment as the mechanical equipment moved along: the unpleasant odor of dirt was replaced by an acidic, and equally unpleasant smell of cleaning products. The open-air sewerage ditches and heaps of garbage piled up on street corners illustrated the insalubrious conditions of that favela. Amid a global pandemic, these conditions created even further direct and indirect health risks to local inhabitants. In addition to the fear of contracting Covid-19, many favela residents expressed a fear of falling ill to other diseases and not being able to receive healthcare services in public hospitals. After all, the pandemic did not cease the spread of pests and viruses that cause periodic mortality in the city, such as dengue, chikungunya, and zika.

Amidst celebrations of bystanders who crossed their path, applauses from residents, hands raised in prayer, and glasses of water being offered, the arduous climb up the stairways and hills of the favela reached an emblematic resting point: a touristic statue of Michael Jackson at a lookout point in the favela. The statue is placed at the location where the artist recorded images for his 1996 music video "They don't care about us". Groups with photographic equipment and video cameras were waiting there.

The journalists hurrying towards the clean-up group that had just arrived held microphones displaying the logos of Brazil's leading TV channels such as Globo, Globonews, Record, Band - and of international broadcasters such as CNN International. The group leader, in a thoroughly articulate technical repertoire, surprised the interviewers as he countered their romanticized narratives about the autonomous actions organized in the favelas. Through his reflections, we can illustrate one of many examples in which "favela organizations' responses to the state necropolitics represent practices and politics underlying life beyond the current pandemic governance" (Basile, 2022: 14). In his eloquent discourse, the Black man challenged the lenses pointed at him, criticizing and denouncing politicians who produce forms of government that are discriminatory towards the favelas:

> The state is not absent, because the police is always here, shooting up the favela. But where is the garbage collection and the maintenance of sewerage pipes? Where is the water distribution? How can we wash our hands as we are instructed to? In the middle of a pandemic, everyone who lives here needs to go to work, but there is no pandemic protection policy for the favela. And we all know there won't be one! There never has been and there never will be! (Coordinator of the Sanitization Campaign in Favelas – Interview granted in July /2020).

From the top of that hill, the movement of cars, buses, and pedestrians were visible in various parts of the city. For those living in the formal regions of the city, complying with social distancing guidelines, and remaining protected in their homes were feasible possibilities. However, most of the formal and informal workers leaving the favela had to be present for their jobs around the city every day. Therefore, local residents decided to volunteer and mobilize themselves in an example of a "counter-hegemonic, transgressive and imaginative" strategy of insurgent planning in a favela territory (Friendly, 2022). They organized a community-based sanitization action to disinfect the streets and alleyways transited by workers who were obliged to leave their homes during the pandemic to earn their wages and support their families.

Figure 2: Poster promoting the community-based action in the favela: "Be a volunteer for sanitization – Santa Marta against Covid-19 – Make a difference – Your support is very important to the continuity of our actions".

Source: Reproduction - Reproduction – Santa Marta Contra o Covid-19

The coordinator of the action mentioned during a research interview that news about the particular conditions of the first death caused by Covid-19 in the city "awakened" him. According to his narrative, accumulated knowledge led him to understand that the government never guarantees policies planned to safeguard rights and preserve lives in Rio de Janeiro favelas. With the onset of the pandemic, he knew that this situation was unlikely to change. Social inequality in the favela would remain. For them, there would be no signs of a "new normal".

The mobilization to sanitize the Santa Marta favela rapidly attracted notoriety on digital networks, in online news stories, and even in national and international newspaper headlines. The initiative was only possible because this community leader had experience in articulating his accumulated experiences and networks (Mano & Menezes, 2021). With a long life trajectory of involvement in a range of community-based organizations, in addition to his profession as a favela tourist guide and entrepreneur, he managed to articulate various contacts and collaborations to organize, facilitate, and publicize the mobilization. This experience allows analyzing how different capacities, interests, and interlocutions were articulated to exercise a collective "network capital" (Elliot & Urry, 2010; Urry, 2012), materializing forms of action based on capacities to generate, sustain, and implement relationships through the development of connectivity and digital technologies.

This network capital involved the resident's previous contacts inside and outside the favela, in addition to the productive use of digital communication technologies. Contacts and information gathered by the community leader made it possible to devise a pandemic mitigation mobilization to protect lives in the favela (Menezes & Mano, 2020).

The connection between empirical situations and theoretical contributions allows us to advance some lines of reflection. The sanitization resulted in an apparent reduction in the expected number of deaths in the favela, raised community awareness about the pandemic and gained media repercussion of complaints

against the government[8]. Nonetheless, despite the general impact in national and international newspapers and the apparent effectiveness of community-based sanitization actions, the initiative did not receive any institutional support from the city or state government, such as financial resources or appropriate equipment. This leads us to reflect on how it is "normalized" that certain social groups must act (and survive) on their own - as analyzed in the work of Polycarpo and Fleury (2022) based on the discourses spread by the government and part of the commercial media.

Complementarily, despite the general perception of positive results from the community-based sanitization, residents in the favela reported various problems. In addition to deaths, multiple indirect forms of exposure to death have been aggravated in the Santa Marta favela, such as: numerous cases of depression, suspension of continued clinical care services for elderly women, as well as several families who now lacked financial assistance due to other deaths. Among multiple cases of abuse related to police violence, one incident is quite illustrative. During a police raid on a morning in January 2021, a resident was awakened by police officers who invaded his house with guns pointed at him and his daughter. Favela residents were facing precariousness compounded by urban violence and the pandemic: in addition to the risk of life posed by guns, and police officers not wearing masks.

Vila Vintém Favela – Padre Miguel/RJ

Favela Vila Vintém[9] is situated in the West Zone of the city of Rio de Janeiro. During the first weeks of the pandemic, there was no "new normal" as the environment remained similar to how it had been in previous months: workers coming and going, children playing in the streets, people walking around without protection masks, and facial expressions denoting total serenity. Although the city was already under social distancing measures at the time, and given the abundant information conveyed by the media about the lethality of the virus, the everyday life of the community continued as if the risks of the pandemic were located elsewhere – as if the favela was not part of that pandemic reality. As the socioeconomic profile of the local residents is comprised mostly of poor subjects, and racially composed as predominantly Black and Brown, people had to pursue their livelihood by working - formally or informally. To "stay home" was not an option.

In the following months, with the rise in Covid-19 infections and deaths in Rio de Janeiro, the dynamics slowly shifted. While the mainstream media amplified information about the escalation of cases and deaths of Covid-19, rumors began to circulate around the territory of Vila Vintém. People were mentioning that residents were contracting the disease and even dying from complications caused by the virus. While this information was not verifiable, it raised awareness in the community. The pandemic was no longer distant. It had arrived at the doorsteps of the favela, traversing their lives and their everyday habits.

Soon, in late April, the local drug cartel ordered an indefinite suspension of the traditional *baile funk*[10]. This information was shared with its organizers and the public through networks of people with ties to organized crime – wives, family members, and friends of drug dealers. To legitimate the order, an image that circulated

8 A study conducted by a team from the Radioecology and Global Changes Laboratory of the State University of Rio de Janeiro with equipment called "Coronatrack" found significant results regarding this mobilization. They concluded that aspects such as ventilation, humidity, and the agglomeration of houses made the sanitization more effective in the favela than in other places without these features. They also mentioned that when sanitization was more frequent, there were fewer cases of Covid-19 in the territory (Evangelista et al., 2022).

9 Vila Vintém is a favela in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro, more specifically in Planning Area 5. Located in a flat topographic region between the neighborhoods of Padre Miguel and Realengo, it has an estimated population of 15,298 inhabitants (according to the 2010 Census), which makes it one of the largest favelas in the region. The location is a symbol of Rio's criminal underworld, being the birthplace of the criminal faction Amigo-dos-Amigos (ADA), which still controls the favela today.

10 The baile funk, or funk party, is a musical event that takes place in the favela, usually organized by the drug cartel. Local residents along with people from other regions interact to the music broadcast by huge speakers at an extremely loud volume. Drugs and alcohol are commonly sold at these events.

on WhatsApp groups organized by Vila Vintém residents showed the boss of the favela – who was in prison at the time – alongside information about a curfew in every territory dominated by that criminal group. The image also included a specific order to suspend the *baile funk* in Vila Vintém.

That image signified that rumors about the risks of the pandemic were true and that residents now needed to take the pandemic more seriously. In addition to many residents, even people with social ties to the illegal drug trade began wearing masks (of all kinds) motivated by orders from the local drug cartel.

Observing "what moves" based on the conceptual framework of the "mobilities turn" not only refers to bodies in effective, potential, or interrupted circulation. Images and information also engage in intermittent movements, which "in a real or potential way, organizes and structures social life" (Sheller & Urry, 2006: 212). Many residents reflected that the criminal organization's actions were influenced by the rising number of infections in Rio de Janeiro and the favela itself.

In dialogs with a local resident - a middle-aged Black woman – one of us learned about the importance of the media for insights to the context of the pandemic. According to this interlocutor, it was through television news and social media posts that the population of Vila Vintém realized the seriousness of the situation. It's possible that this also motivated the intervention of non-state criminal actors in the territory. It is important to point out that the curfew in question was not an arbitrary imposition, forcing all residents to comply without question. Due to the softened and less emphatic discourse of the drug cartel, residents understood it as a guideline – a way to make the population aware of the risks of the disease.

From a sanitary perspective, the suspension of the baile funk was essential for mitigating the risk of infection in the favela. Yet it caused losses to criminals and local businesses – because the event is essential to the local economy. This funk party usually took place almost every Saturday night, attracting around 3,000 people - including local residents and people from adjacent regions. The baile funk was suspended between late April and early July 2020. Research has shown that, in recent years, drug cartels have lost income in the city of Rio de Janeiro[11]. The drug cartel in Vila Vintém gave up part of its revenue to implement an incisive order against the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to Arias (2013), favelas with strong criminal consolidation and low proximity by the state have a kind of shared territorial control. Vila Vintém is an example in which, regardless of the extent to which criminal leaders control the local population, there is a constant need to remain cautious to not provoke an all-out conflict with the state. In this regard, the "favela boss" has historically sought to expand the supply of "political goods" (Misse, 1999) to state agents – even if such arrangements did not always prevent armed conflicts. This attitude was justified by the fact that he is considered an "old school" leader, who had never been deprived of his authority and who conveys a paternalistic and philanthropic image. This figure can be understood as a kind of "seasoned bandit" (Zaluar, 1985), someone that respects local residents. In turn, the local community perceives these agents as vigilantes who protect their area from violent enemies. These characteristics are essential to perpetuate their legitimacy among the local population and maintain agreements with state agents.

Many of the residents in Vila Vintém struggled to adapt their lives to the new pandemic reality. Despite the drug cartel's instructions, people continued to gather in groups in the favela, often without masks. Since they needed to work because of their precarious financial condition, they also wanted to preserve their means of entertainment. Many of them asked similar questions: "Why is it normal to be at risk when working, but we can't enjoy our free time? Why is only one kind of exposure important?" Without the baile funk, some residents began to search for leisure activities in bars in the favela. The "boredom" of adapting to health safety norms was replaced by the dangerous pursuit of entertainment options, even if this meant going against the drug cartel's explicit guidelines.

11 For a detailed discussion about the drug cartels' loss of profitability in Rio de Janeiro, see Hirata and Grillo (2019). On the consequences of this loss of profitability for crime, see Da Motta (2020).

A specific situation in May 2020 was a divisive moment amid this conflict of expectations regarding the pandemic. As a result of their pursuit of leisure, many people began to gather at a bar located on one of the main streets in the community. After the suspension of the baile funk was ordered, this bar began to receive many more clients than customary – to the point where people crowded in the street because there was no more room inside the establishment.

That month, an image of people agglomerated in front of the bar circulated - both in formal media and in WhatsApp groups around the city. It was perceived as a symbol of the general contempt for social distancing rules in the city's West Zone. More than 300 people, mostly youngsters, were seen attending this bar in the favela.

The image depicts a street completely packed with people, leaving little space to walk. The photo also "went viral" on digital networks such as Twitter and Facebook, causing deep discomfort among local residents and criminals. There were already orders to end such overcrowding situations in the favela. Following this incident, drug dealers took action and closed the bar with chains and padlocks. This was a display of their power to arbitrate in the territory. The owner of the bar did not suffer physical or violent retaliations, but his establishment was closed without financial compensation.

Figure 4 – Crowding at a bar in Vila Vintém

Source: Received through social media - modified by the authors.

Forms of circulation are important ways of informing and structuring everyday life. A few days later, a Volkswagen Kombi [van] with a powerful loudspeaker drove around the favela announcing the following message:

> Attention! Attention, residents of Vila Vintém! Walking in the community without masks is prohibited. Avoid crowds in bars as well as parties in any bar or environment within the community. If you are a resident or visitor, and you know how our community works, and your car has tinted windows, be sure to lower the windows when you enter the community to avoid any accidents, whether during the day or at night.

The closure of the bar was a clear indication that the drug cartel was no longer sharing instructions, but imposing a definitive order during the pandemic – something that also happened in other favelas (Miagusko & Da Motta, 2021). The local criminals asserted their authority, converting guidelines into a punishable norm in the event of transgression. It should be noted that this norm only applied to leisure venues that caused crowding. At no time did the drug dealers interfere with people's work or religious activities in the favela.

Following the event, people began to comply with the order and avoided public gatherings. However, the residents changed their strategies and began to organize private parties and gatherings in their own houses. Walking around the community, one could see people in smaller groups inside their homes, enjoying loud music, dancing, games, and conversation. The drug cartel did not take any action against small-scale gatherings as they were taking place inside residents' private spaces. This suggests that the sovereignty of the drug dealers is primarily restricted to public spaces in the favela, with some exceptions. These occur when people display serious hostility towards the power of the cartel, such as listening to "proibidão" [absolutely prohibited] funk songs from other criminal groups or invoking symbolic elements from enemy cartels.

The cartel imposed a biopolitical authority through the political position of protecting the favela population from the local effects of a global pandemic. After the definitive order, residents were forced to reduce crowding in public places and to seek private interactions. Local business owners also began demanding the use of masks inside their establishments. These orders lasted until mid-July 2020, when the cartel began to relax the guidelines, allowing bars to reopen and suggesting the optional use of masks inside the favela. Interestingly, the chronology of these isolation measures and their relaxation in Vila Vintém closely follows the city government's guidelines. In June 2020, the city of Rio de Janeiro began a gradual reopening of the city in five phases – as a result of social pressure and political disputes, particularly from local and national economic sectors[12]. The local drug cartel may have been following these same guidelines in the favela to implement its "power technique" (Foucault, 1979).

The case of Vila Vintém allows us to reflect on contradictions encountered during the pandemic in Rio de Janeiro related to the state's political production and different types of "territorial regimes" (Leite, 2014, 2017). According to residents we interviewed, there were no public policies concerning sanitization or awareness-raising during this period, yet there was an increase in police raids and consequently armed conflicts. Therefore, we observe not only a clash between legal and illegal boundaries (Telles, 2010) but also the inversion of moral boundaries. The legal order configures itself as a double agent of precariousness (Butler, 2015; Mbembe, 2016; Fassin, 2018): a) when it does not politically safeguard its population from the risk of infection, and b) when it exposes them to risk of death through police raids. On the other hand, the illegal order of the local drug cartel indicates how it uses its strength and authority to carry out a public awareness campaign for mitigating risks of the disease.

12 <https://prefeitura.rio/cidade/prefeitura-anuncia-fase-4-da-flexibilizacao-pontos-turisticos-voltam-com-regras-comercio-de-rua-abre-mais-cedo-aos-sabados-e-estacionamento-da-orla-sera-liberado/> Accessed on November/2021.

Final Considerations: the "old normal" in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro

Although the expression "new normal" may accurately describe the general situation of many Brazilian social groups during the Covid-19 pandemic, the idea is clearly inconsistent for analyzing the empirical reality of Rio de Janeiro favelas. If this concept is based on circumstances brought by the pandemic, in terms of social isolation for protection and survival, it surely does not consider these territories. We are not affirming that there was nothing new. However, the new standards for some social groups were only possible because many others did not experience a similar transformation of their "normality". The pandemic social dynamics were not "democratic".

Favelas in Rio de Janeiro are very diverse (Preteceille & Valladares, 2000), but we can argue that the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated general inequalities. Ethnographic analyses confirm and requalify statistical data. An already challenging situation was worsened through price increases associated to the inadequate distribution of income and insufficient public protection by the federal government. This dynamic particularly affected low-income Brazilians - mainly Blacks and residents of peripheries and favelas (Lima, 2020).

These are the socioeconomic necessities that implied conditions of precariousness for those who couldn't "stay home". When the pandemic started, we reached long-term interlocutors and nobody mentioned any comments or perceptions about a "new normality". The sensation of neglect by the government was supported by previous experiences in life. There was no "new normal" in Rio's favelas because the Covid-19 pandemic context presented a continuity of historical social inequalities.

As Leite and Machado (2008) noted, the Brazilian state does not operate in the favelas through the language of rights, because these populations are historically relegated to a "citizenship of variable geometry". In this logic, residents of territories such as the favelas in Rio are not perceived by government rationalities as social groups to be protected and safeguarded by state policies.

Reflecting on what is considered "normal" for these populations, we must highlight that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the favelas of Rio remained under the previous governmental logic of a biopolitics of precariousness. Three prominent dimensions of the "normality" in these territories should be noted: a) the socioeconomic inequalities that were exacerbated in the pandemic; b) the neglect of state institutions that did not mitigate the risks of the disease through public policies; and c) the public security agents that expanded their policy of confrontational warfare. During the Covid-19 pandemic, what was experienced in Rio de Janeiro's favelas was not a "new normal", but an "old normal" perpetuated through political neglect, lack of public protection, and armed production of risks to life.

Nevertheless, despite these deepened circumstances of inequalities, there are forms of political imagination that emerge from these initiatives (Telles et al., 2020). This is why we described resistance strategies in these two territories. A network of contacts was essential to make it possible for community leaders in Santa Marta to criticize the lack of public protection and articulate a community-based mobilization. On the other side of the city, the population of Vila Vintém experienced "mimicry" of the state by drug traffickers, showing that in addition to the power and violence of the state (Grillo, 2013), other actors were able to "control biopolitics" (Foucault, 2005) given the lack of public awareness and hygiene policies.

To conclude, we highlight the discourse of various social leaders of historically marginalized groups who articulated resistance actions during the pandemic: the government should have also protected their lives, families, and territories with public policies. Many of them raised an argument that emerged from the narratives produced during the Covid-19 pandemic. If we are going to think about a "new" normality, this scenario should compensate for the public policies that have historically segregated certain populations. For this reason, it is necessary to learn from the knowledge and experiences that are organized in the favelas and peripheries of Brazil.

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