

Introduction

I think there are more secrets, more possible freedoms, and more inventions in our future than we can imagine . . . MICHEL FOUCAULT, *TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF*

The European colonization of what is now known as the Federative Republic of Brazil started around 1500, with the Portuguese invasion of indigenous land in South America.¹ Alongside atrocities such as the pillage of native resources and the slave trade, Eurocentric concerns with Christianization, the commodification of land, and the assurance of royal sovereignty were introduced as part of the colonial project, evolving through different regimes of governmentality. In an extensive analysis of the origins and aftermath of the “colonial encounter” in Brazil, the ethnologist João Pacheco de Oliveira demonstrates that questions over the appropriate “management” of the (post)colonized populations in Latin America have mutated under different “alterity regimes”—forms of dealing with otherness—over the centuries.²

But from the time of the Enlightenment in Europe, other questions came to the fore, concerning issues of liberty: What (if anything) could justify, legally and morally, the exploitation of Amerindian and Black peoples? Could the abused populations in nascent Brazil be considered “subjects” of the Portuguese Crown? What should be the legal limits, if any, of colonial power? Slavery brought about extensive ontological debates regarding the humanity (and, consequently, rights) of the enslaved Amerindian and Black populations. In Brazil, liberty was a prominent cause

for social movements struggling toward the independence of the country as early as the eighteenth century, even if such efforts would only later lead to the formal declaration of Brazil's independence in 1822 and the so-called Proclamation of the Republic (Proclamação da República) in 1889.³

At least two overlapping genealogies must be recounted regarding the effects of colonialism and liberalism when it comes to the emergence of favelas, particularly those located in Rio de Janeiro. The formal abolition of slavery in Brazil only took place in 1888. Nevertheless, this historical event alone does not do justice to the complexities of the different processes for obtaining freedom taking place side by side with the horrors of enslavement. Even before 1888, freedom could be secured through individual manumission and, after 1871, also through birth.⁴ During the slavery period, resistance and rebellions against colonial powers were frequent, as was to be expected. In some cases, these movements led to the formation of hidden, but de facto free, maroon communities—made up of “runaway” Africans and their descendants.

As the freed Black population started to grow in the latter half of the nineteenth century, housing became a significant issue. Previously, enslaved subjects were mainly incorporated into farms and into the domestic sphere of white owners in urban centers, but once liberated, more and more Black people looked for better opportunities in the city, which lacked adequate housing.⁵ Historical data post-abolition suggests that the Black population in Rio de Janeiro lived mostly in collective “substandard” housing called *cortiços*. When fears of “freed slave” rebellions started to grow, the local government started to repress the proliferation of new *cortiços* and to demolish existing ones. Licia do Prado Valladares, for instance, discusses how Francisco Franco Pereira Passos, the mayor of Rio from 1902 to 1906, started in 1904 to demolish large *cortiços* in the central zone of the city. The Black population of Rio, along with other poor classes, were left with no affordable housing option. Some of them started to occupy the least desirable areas of the city, such as the steep hillsides and distant suburbs, turning these into their homes.⁶ This is how favelas started.

A second favela genealogy, which continues to operate as a powerful “origin narrative” of Brazilian slums, refers to a rebellion that took place in response to the newly created Brazilian Republic of 1889. What became known as the Canudos War (Guerra de Canudos) generated certain conditions of possibility for the “invention” of favelas both as physical sites and as an ideological construct.⁷

To tell the short version of the events: Around the turn of the twentieth century (1896–97), a peasant group from the Brazilian Northeast took over a very impoverished area in the dry hinterlands of the state of Bahia. This political movement followed a charismatic and religious figure, known as Antônio Conselheiro. Under his leadership, the small town of Canudos rapidly grew, attracting more and more migrants to form a new “nation.” Large farm owners in the region, together with the Catholic Church, tried their best to halt the movement. Tensions rose to the point that the Brazilian army was required to intervene in the situation. What looked like an easy task, however, turned into a series of defeats for the Republic. It took four different expeditions to vanquish the rebels—a significant moral and material cost for the Brazilian state at that point.⁸ The conscription of soldiers for those battles drew on recruits from several locations, including Rio de Janeiro, the federal capital during those years. These men were promised a series of benefits upon their victorious return to Rio, including housing. But as they returned, hundreds of soldiers discovered that the government’s promises were empty. As a form of protest—and still in need of housing—they occupied a hill centrally located in Rio de Janeiro. Today, this area is known as Morro da Providência; at the time, it became known as Favela Hill (Morro da Favela).⁹

Canudos then became more than a short-lived experiment: it became a physical and discursive territory for freedom, one that was violently repressed by the state, but that also left a heritage of possibilities. According to Euclides da Cunha, who wrote one of the best-known literary descriptions of the Canudos War,¹⁰ Canudos came to represent liberty vis-à-vis the Brazilian state, the possibility of the poor to control rights to the land and to their own labor, and to challenge compulsory federal tax payments. It would come to influence the birth of favelas as territories where the poor could not only carve out a space to live, but also to resist and claim a certain freedom from the nation-state.¹¹

Ever since, there have been several junctions in Brazilian history in which favela dwellers were implicated in wider liberal debates. In the early 1950s, for example, the Communist Party (Partido Comunista) in Brazil tried to garner more influence and support among the urban poor in Rio, mainly through their “popular democratic committees” (*comitês populares democráticos*). These had a deep impact on the political organization of at least two favelas in Rio de Janeiro: Morro do Borel and Morro do Turano. In 1952 these committees fostered the organization of the first “Residents’ Association” in Morro do Borel (Associação dos Favelados

do Morro do Borel). Among the leftist liberal plans of the Communist Party at that time, there were proposals to change the names of these two favelas: Borel would become known as Independence Hill (Morro da Independência) and Turano as Liberty Hill (Morro da Liberdade). Obviously, with the rapid change in the political scene and the right-wing military coup a few years later (1964), those plans were never implemented.¹²

During the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–85), a “tutelary regime” emerged with the objective of managing certain populations of the country, as was the case with Amerindians. What was presented as a form of state “protection” and “pacification” of minoritarian groups also constituted a denial of indigenous autonomy and an opportunity to control their territories.¹³ Military policies would also impact favela dwellers, leading to political demobilization and violent favela removals. Even during the nefarious period of dictatorship, however, Brazilians witnessed the emergence of liberal campaigns. The Brazilian Democratic Movement (Movimento Democrático Brasileiro), for instance, had a liberal rhetoric based on anti-authoritarianism, and, at different moments, items such as the protection of Universal Human Rights were also part of their agenda.

Other institutions, such as religious organizations, are also part of the liberal history of the favelas. The 1980s were the height of Catholic social movements in Brazil. Liberation theology brought great inspiration for collective amelioration projects in Favela da Rocinha in that decade.¹⁴ It carried the promise of the liberation of the oppressed through political consciousness and self-organized collective action (*mutirões*).¹⁵ Nevertheless, initiatives of Catholic groups working toward liberating the urban poor from structural violence were almost nonexistent in the favela by the time of my fieldwork.

In 1990 Fernando Collor de Mello, the first openly neoliberal president post-dictatorship, was elected. The national mood changed. From the 1990s, there has been an explosion in the number of Evangelicals in Brazil, a country mainly colonized by Portuguese Catholics.¹⁶ The rise of Neo-Pentecostal Evangelical churches, along with the implementation of neoliberal state policies, led to the popularization of more individualistic possibilities for liberation in the life of the urban poor.¹⁷

Pacheco de Oliveira asserts that different colonial mechanisms of power continue to operate in Brazil today, bringing different forms of control (and promises of liberation, I would suggest) to the daily life of Amerindian and Black populations—alongside other urban poor residents, particularly favela dwellers.¹⁸ With the end of the military regime, increasing inequalities were not effectively addressed during the re-democratization process,¹⁹ eliciting a renewed fear on the part of the elites toward poor

and Black Brazilians. Kidnappings and robberies, panic over favela dwellers' empowerment through drug trafficking, and scenes of "urban wars" started to dominate the public agenda, newspapers, and TV programs. A response to all these variables was a growing defense of neoliberal governance,²⁰ with more policing and even fewer benefits to the working classes.²¹

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, well after the end of the Brazilian military government in 1985, extremely oppressive state policies would reemerge in Rio de Janeiro—this time to curtail the autonomy of favela dwellers under the same banner of "pacification," previously used during the military dictatorship.²² Through all these historical events, and since colonization, liberal concerns and the assertion of control have walked hand in hand in Brazil.

Internal Outsiders

Debates on urban poverty have touched upon questions over agency, autonomy, and freedom in the life of slum dwellers and other populations living in what has come to be known as favelas, barrios, or ghettos. There have been extensive arguments regarding the enduring "habits" and "culture" that limit the life experiences of the poor in areas like the slums of Latin America. The supposed existence of a "culture of poverty" would make it difficult (if not impossible) for slum dwellers to escape their own condition, partly because the poor may get so used to their lifeways that they resist change.²³ Meanwhile, under the framing of "structural violence," others had been debating over the social mechanisms of oppression that turned poverty into some sort of entrapment.²⁴

Familiarizing myself with this literature before starting my fieldwork in Favela da Rocinha impacted (but did not determine) my initial understanding of favelas as territories plagued not just by a lack of material resources, but also a lack of freedom. In a sense, this book is a contribution to some of these long-standing debates. It presents a theory of liberalism based on the daily life experiences of Brazilian favela dwellers. I offer a mode of reconceptualizing "liberalism" that challenges normative conceptions of poverty and oppression, as well as the boundaries between the free and the unfree.

Consider this passage from *Development as Freedom*, a treatise on the need for "development" by the philosopher and economist Amartya Sen, which presumes that poverty, along with undemocratic political systems, are the major sources of "unfreedom" in the world today. Sen argues:

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes the lack of substantive freedoms relates directly to economic poverty, which robs people of the freedom to satisfy hunger, or to achieve sufficient nutrition, or to obtain remedies for treatable illnesses, or the opportunity to be adequately clothed or sheltered, or to enjoy clean water or sanitary facilities. In other cases, the unfreedom links closely to the lack of public facilities and social care, such as the absence of epidemiological programs, or of organized arrangements for health care or educational facilities, or of effective institutions for the maintenance of local peace and order. In still other cases, the violation of freedom results directly from a denial of political and civil liberties by authoritarian regimes and from imposed restrictions on the freedom to participate in the social, political and economic life of the community.²⁵

Since the 1990s, generations of scholars have been trying to expose challenges like these, generated by oppressive social structures, but without necessarily falling into the same trap as the “culture of poverty” approach: blaming the poor for a supposed resistance to change, that is, blaming the “victim” for their situation.²⁶ Most of these works on “structural violence” were marked by an explicit “call to action,”²⁷ so that these studies also aspired to be instrumental for social transformation.

Medical anthropologist Paul Farmer states with confident brevity in *Infections and Inequalities*: “. . . poverty is the great limiting factor of freedom.”²⁸ Similar arguments can be found in the most diverse academic fields. In fact, the philosopher Matt Whitt has argued that poverty necessarily constitutes a state of unfreedom in modern states. In the author’s rationale: “The state’s promise of actualized freedom can only be fulfilled in relation to a group of internal ‘outsiders’ to whom that freedom cannot extend.”²⁹ For Whitt, the “poor” were, by definition, a group of “internal outsiders” with limited access to freedom. When I elaborated a project to research the operations of liberalism in Brazilian favelas, the intention was, at first, to understand a form of life excluded from *liberdade* (freedoms and liberties).

In my wanderings with Natasha, however, I came across liberalisms that were not created for the elites to protect other elites. Favela residents have their own mode of liberal politics, which in some favelas is more distinct than in others.³⁰ Some dwellers in Rocinha were more concerned with obtaining a radical form of *liberdade*, at any cost. As part of my field research, I was once talking to a student in the Basic English class that I taught in the slum. He was a former drug trafficker and got fired up, telling me about his experiences: “Let’s get hold of guns! Fucking crazy. For us, it was like that, freedom, jail, or death!” Other favela residents, however, were more skeptical about the authentic possibility of acquiring *liberdade* through violence and were more confident

in the power of Jesus, with great faith and desire for spiritual liberation. I started to trace all these different experiences in the favela, even when they seemed unusual to me. Through this grounded approach, and through the lenses of minoritarian modes of liberalism, this book contributes to an understanding of urban life in Latin America.

The Colonial Apparatus

After my first experiences in the favela, I came to suspect that there was a problem with my original research framework. Namely, it was based on assumptions that were themselves a product of normative liberalism. Was there something constitutive of liberalism, at least as I understood it, that prescribed certain freedoms as the norm while denying other possibilities? Was it necessarily a problem that favela dwellers seemed to lack the liberal freedoms valued by those in “developed” countries in Europe and North America? The colonial dimension of the “universal freedom” project started to become more evident. It bothered me, just as it had others before me. An appreciation of life in Favela da Rocinha demanded a more explicit decolonial attitude.

Just a few lines before those cited in the epigraph to this introduction, Michel Foucault expresses his concerns regarding universalisms: “What I am afraid of about humanism is that it presents a certain form of our ethics as a universal model for any kind of freedom.”³¹ The French historian and philosopher formulated this critique during an interview in which he had been asked to comment on the relationship between processes of “normalization” and the “concept of man.” If humanism normalizes a particularly located “human” as a universal character, it sounded plausible to me that normative liberalism did the same in relation to always already located experiences of freedom and liberty. For instance, Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”³² What humans? What rights? What freedoms?

As I reflected upon the emergence of liberalism in Brazil, Elizabeth Povinelli’s work called my attention and helped me to conceptualize liberalism not as a form of power simply opposed to colonialism, but as a fundamental part of the colonial apparatus. She asks: “In secular states, we are free to worship any god we choose. But can we choose not to worship freedom? In this way, freedom is the Law of law; it distributes the values of truth and falsity, good and evil, without being subject to them.”³³

The work of Saba Mahmood corroborates this (post)colonial critique.

Deeply engaged with political theory, Mahmood argues that liberalism often presents itself as a colonial artifact in the experiences of “non-Western” populations.³⁴ Mahmood questions the expectation that there must be a universal innate desire for freedom in all forms of human life by demonstrating, ethnographically, that the agency of pious Muslim women in Egypt should not be limited to what she calls “normative liberal assumptions.”³⁵ She explains that one of the consequences of the Enlightenment and humanism, most of all in its secular inflection, has been the establishment of a certain normative ideal that “the most legitimate source of authorization for a person’s opinions, actions, and beliefs must be his or her self.” This sense of “self-authorization,” Mahmood argues, has been proposed as a foundational form of freedom for any “civilization,” one that is not just supposed to be universally cherished, but also institutionally established. As Povinelli also observes, this situation would lead to different effects, for example, making “freedom from social relations seem natural and desirable.”³⁶

Similarly, Dipesh Chakrabarty, another important postcolonial theorist, argues that “the phenomenon of ‘political modernity’—namely, the rule by modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy, and capitalist enterprise—is impossible to *think* of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe.”³⁷ If the Eurocentric, white, liberal project has extended itself from the age of Enlightenment to the present, it is toward the operations of a more recent variation of liberalism, known as neoliberalism, that a vast amount of more contemporary critique has been geared.

Whereas the roots of liberalism derive from classic European thought, the source of neoliberalism springs mostly from North America.³⁸ In this regard, for example, the sociologist Loïc Wacquant states: “Neoliberalism is ‘a transnational project,’ originating in the United States and spread by a new dominant class, seeking the top-down reorganization of the relationships between market, state, and citizenship.”³⁹ I will not try to summarize here the vast literature focused on the critical examination of neoliberalism. It suffices to say that, in anthropology, Mathieu Hilgers identifies at least three “modes” of engagement with neoliberal phenomena:⁴⁰ neoliberalism as culture (examining neoliberal shared symbols, beliefs, and practice),⁴¹ neoliberalism as a system (aiming at identifying enduring neoliberal structures and constitutive relationships),⁴² and neoliberalism as governmentality (inspired by a Foucauldian analysis of power regimes).⁴³

In most of these debates, there seems to be little disagreement that (neo)liberalism is part of a colonial project of domination. For as much as life in Brazilian favelas may prove to be difficult, universal (neo)liberal prescriptions such as individualism, privatization, and more police power have caused even further harm.⁴⁴ The decolonization of liberalism, therefore—and of my own research agenda—presented themselves as crucial endeavors.

Anthropology and Decolonization

The understanding that liberalism is an artifact of colonialism is not the same as saying that the actual operations of the concept must be taken for granted. Despite her critical analysis on the effects of liberalism, Povinelli has also acknowledged that in practical terms “an equally cogent critique might point out that no matter the ultimate reality of freedom as a state of being, its authority has been constitutive of a variety of social goods for a variety of subjugated social groups. Homosexuals, colonial subjects, women, and indigenous worlds: all have seemed to benefit from their struggle for freedom.”⁴⁵ Although this might be true, an anthropological unwillingness (or incapacity) to ethnographically conceive of liberalism beyond its Eurocentric matrix may corroborate liberalism’s colonial effects.

William Mazzarella addresses a similar point, but from a different angle. In his writings on politics and populism, the author argues that given recent challenges to our liberal assumptions—brought about mainly by the rise of authoritarian, fascist-leaning governments in several countries during the 2010s—constructs such as “the liberal state” and the “the liberal subject” demand, more than ever, critical examination. Mazzarella states:

The founding principle of anthropology is that nothing about the social is self-evident. Too often, however, this radical suspension of certainty in our many ethnographic elsewhere has been sustained by a stable foil: some figuring of “the liberal state,” “the liberal subject,” and so on. Now that the liberal settlement is under populist pressure, this intellectual bargain is no longer sustainable.⁴⁶

In a provocative review article entitled “The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn,” Ryan Jobson seems to agree with Mazzarella. Jobson argues that, as a colonial discourse, “liberal humanism” has proved insufficient

to counter the dangers of climate disasters and the rise of authoritarian governance. He proposes: “By abandoning the universal liberal subject as a stable foil for a renewed project of cultural critique, the field of anthropology cannot presume a coherent human subject as its point of departure but must adopt a radical humanism as its political horizon.”⁴⁷

To abandon the anthropologist’s faith in the “universal liberal subject as a stable foil,” I suggest introducing instability to such a “compulsory” form of liberalism. This demands that we dedicate still more ethnographic attention to contemporary liberal operations. We might realize, for example, that liberalism has been creatively maneuvered by the very subjects that, at first sight, were most criticized for not adopting it. There are emergent forms of liberalism that do not follow what colonization has imposed as “the Law of law.” Recognizing the existence and legitimacy of “non-normative” liberalisms could allow anthropology to serve in favor of decolonization. The main problem does not lie with liberal desires and dreams per se, but with the historical processes of domination, slavery, and normalization to which *all possibilities* of liberalism seem to have been historically subjected.

The decolonization of liberalism could prove to be a paramount step toward an “anthropology for liberation.”⁴⁸ As Savannah Shange would put it regarding Black politics, we need an abolitionist strategy. “Abolition is not a synonym for resistance; it encompasses the ways in which Black people and our accomplices work within, against, and beyond the state in the service of collective liberation. As an analytic, abolition demands specificity—the very kinds of granularity that ethnography offers.”⁴⁹ This book puts forward such an ethnography of decolonial liberalism as a viable anthropological contribution to political struggles toward freedom. In doing so, it acknowledges the historical roots and struggles for liberation that emerge from Black politics at the same time that, ethnographically, it recognizes that the challenges faced by queer slum dwellers are intertwined with multiple forms of oppression and colonial heritage. In that sense, I assume that an “anthropology for liberation” must necessarily be abolitionist, and it must confront several different power dimensions, particularly those that naturalize a particular mode of liberalism as *the norm*.

The anthropologist and activist Faye Harrison has argued for the decolonization of anthropology building on the concept of “double consciousness” developed by W. E. B. Du Bois.⁵⁰ In the context of more and more anthropologists who are conducting fieldwork “at home” or in groups with whom they have some kind of shared political interests, Harrison argues, “anthropologists with *multiple* consciousness and vi-

sion are rooted in some combination and interpenetration of national, racial, sexual, or class oppressions.” She further explains that “this form of critical consciousness emerges from the tension in between, on the one hand, membership in a Western society, a Western-dominated profession, or a relatively privileged class or social category, and, on the other hand, belonging to, or having an organic relationship with an oppressed social category or people.”⁵¹

I carry privileges of race and class in Brazil, and I have grappled with what these privileges afforded to me—what they have meant to me as a person and as an ethnographer. However, as a Brazilian migrant in Europe and the United States, I have at times experienced an intense dislocation of my racial and class privileges. Given these territorial differences, it was common for me to transition into a non-white (or brown) and relatively poor migrant status outside of Brazil. Both in Brazil and abroad, however, my non-heteronormative sexuality always added a dimension of oppression to my existence. Indeed, as much as I’ve benefited from privilege during my life, normative liberalism has also failed me, mostly as a queer person. Meanwhile, though my suffering as a migrant abroad wasn’t deserving of much empathy in Rocinha, not being heterosexual was critical to facilitating my relationship with Natasha and others in the favela. My ethnographic experiences with queer friends from the slum have been an inspiration for the particular mode of decolonial anthropology I present here.⁵²

Conceptual Scheme

For the purposes of my argument, “liberalism” will be understood as any set of ideas, desires, or practices in favor of freedom and liberty,⁵³ regardless of their conformity with more established Western philosophical traditions. Inspired by Mahmood, I will further qualify as “normative liberalism” what others have considered to be the standard and universalizing mode of liberalism derived from European and North American history, philosophy, and political theory since the Enlightenment—a dominant set of modes of freedom based on the prescription of individualism, autonomy, private property, and, at the same time, dependence on state protection, as its trademark. The term *neoliberalism* will be treated as a variant of normative liberalism.

Throughout the book, I engage with the concept of minoritarian liberalisms, which refers to alternative liberal modes that operate through processes of “disidentification”⁵⁴ with the norms imposed by the dominant