



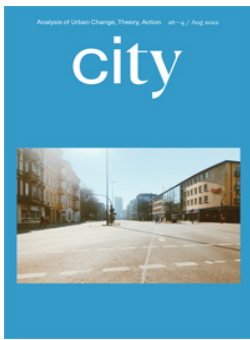
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# The “right to the city centre”: political struggles of street vendors in Belo Horizonte, Brazil

Mara Nogueira  and Hyun Bang Shin 

*The article aims to investigate the relations between work and urban space, focusing on the struggles of street vendors for the ‘right to the city centre’ in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. We join critical debates on Brazil’s internationally praised urban reform by focusing on informal workers. Beyond lacking the protection of labour laws, the ‘right to the city’ (RttC) of such workers has been consistently denied through restrictive legislations and policies. In the context of the ‘crisis’ of waged labour, we explore the increasing centrality of urban space for working-class political struggles. Looking at Belo Horizonte, the article traces the relation between urban participatory democracy and the development of legal-institutional frameworks that restricted street vendors’ access to urban space in the city. In the context of an urban revitalisation policy implemented in 2017, we then explore the use of legal frameworks to remove street vendors from public areas of the city and the resulting political resistance movement. The discussion focuses on the emergence of the Vicentão Occupation, a building squatted by homeless families and street vendors in conflict with the local state. Through this case, we explore the radical potential of contemporary articulations of Henri Lefebvre’s framework emerging*

**Keywords** the right to the city, popular economies, urban politics, crisis of labour, informality

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*from the confluence of diverse local urban struggles for ‘the right to the city centre’. Ultimately, we argue for an understanding of the RttC as a process and a site of continual struggle whose terrain is shaped, but cannot be replaced by, legal frameworks that need to be constantly contested and evolving to reflect the shifting socio-spatial relations.*

## Introduction

In May 2020, an online debate on ‘informal work’ was organised by Intersindical, a Brazilian umbrella organisation that brings various unions together and promotes working-class political struggles. Social activists and street vendors were invited to discuss the hardships experienced by informal workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. During her talk, Jô Cavalcanti, who is a social activist, a Black woman and a current state deputy in Pernambuco, argued that informal traders were the most invisibilised and harassed group of workers, disregarded by the country’s constitution and persecuted by local authorities. For Cavalcanti, the resistance of street vendors against persecution was an extension of anti-slavery struggles: ‘we went into informality since the end of slavery and we are still being persecuted’. She further added that most workers were no longer in the factory and that ‘the revolution of the working-class is happening on the streets today’. As a street vendor herself, Cavalcanti was drawing attention to the political struggles of informal workers outside waged employment, who are often among the most marginalised groups in Brazilian society (Black, low-educated, disabled) and whose livelihoods depend on their economic life on the streets. Her talk foregrounded the relevance of ‘the right to the city’ (RttC) for street vendors while raising questions about the effectiveness of Brazil’s progressive inclusion of the RttC in urban policy.

In Brazil, the RttC is recognised as a collective right by the City Statute, a federal law that regulates the country’s urban policy (Fernandes 2007). Internationally praised for its progressiveness, this institutional framework is the result of a national urban reform. Recently, however, the City Statute has been questioned by various scholars due to poor implementation (Friendly 2013) and the appropriation of its mechanisms by urban speculators and wealthier citizens (Nogueira 2019b; Rolnik 2013) among other challenges that limit its success in practice. We join this debate by focusing on informal workers, a group that has been overlooked in RttC theoretical debates as well as in activism and policy frameworks influenced by this concept (Nogueira 2019a). Our discussion responds to current calls for a reorientation of research protocols ‘beyond the proper job’ (Ferguson and Li 2018) by mobilising the notion of ‘popular economies’ (Coraggio 1998; Gago 2017) to analyse the relationship between street vending and the RttC.

The article focuses on the popular economy in the centre of Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais state. We trace the relation between the RttC, urban participatory democracy and the development of legal-institutional frameworks that restricted street vendors’ access to urban space in the city. In the context of an urban revitalisation policy implemented in 2017, we explore the use of legal

frameworks to remove street vendors from public spaces and their political resistance movement. Focusing on the Vicentão Occupation, a building squatted by homeless families and street vendors in conflict with the local state, we explore the potentialities of new expressions of the RttC and alliances emerging from (re)insurgency.

Methodologically, the article benefits from various fieldwork visits to Belo Horizonte between 2014 and 2019 conducted by the first author. Having jointly established the conceptual framework, our analysis builds particularly on qualitative data (interviews and field notes) and archival materials gathered between 2018 and 2019 by the first author through multiple interactions with street vendors, social activists and state agents in the city. Informed by a long-term exchange with social movements in Belo Horizonte, our joint inquiry will provide them with valuable reflections about the trade-offs potentially involved in institutionalising rights in a society dominated by inequality and conflict (Shin 2018).

We contribute to debates on the RttC and its relationship with legal rights by demonstrating how the formal institutionalisation of the RttC in Brazilian law created both possibilities and constraints for popular economy workers. In doing so, we reveal the potential of new radical articulations of the RttC that simultaneously challenge and employ legal-institutional frameworks arising from participatory democracy. We concur with Purcell’s (2014, 142) view that a radical RttC cannot be an ‘addition to existing liberal-democratic rights’, demanding instead a radical deepening and extension of the ‘contract of citizenship’ (see Lefebvre 1990) to include a ‘new and augmented set of rights’ (Purcell 2014, 146). However, we demonstrate that this articulation does not preclude the strategic use of existing legal-institutional frameworks, which are often employed by urban social movements in their struggles for social justice. We thus argue that a radical RttC involves a political practice that works simultaneously with and against the state (De Souza 2006), while ultimately geared towards the construction of a utopian world of autogestion beyond the state and capitalism with their regulatory constraints.

We begin by discussing the relationship between Lefebvre’s RttC and the liberal rights framework, with a focus on the incorporation of the RttC into Brazil’s urban policy. We situate this discussion in Belo Horizonte, exploring the local trajectories of urban participatory democracy. By analysing the case of the Vicentão Occupation, we demonstrate how the confluence of multiple urban struggles in this radical space contributed to the creation of a collective identity among local street vendors. Building on this analysis, we advocate an understanding of the RttC as a process and a site of continual dispute whose terrain is shaped, but cannot be replaced, by legal frameworks.

## The right to the city: theory, policy and practice

### The right to the city and legal frameworks

In his 1968 publication, *Le Droit à la ville*, Lefebvre described the process through which industrial capitalism had commodified the urban and introduced the notion of the RttC (Lefebvre 1996). Central to his thinking is the street, the

stage of urban living where encounter and spontaneity foster the potential for de-alienation of urban life. In this sense, he also criticised rational urban planning for imposing a bureaucratic form that despoils everyday life of its creative potential (Lefebvre 1996; Merrifield 2002). The RttC is thus presented 'as a means of challenging the controlling forces of homogenisation, fragmentation and uneven development imposed by the state, the market and the bureaucracy' (Friendly 2013, 60). It is 'like a cry and a demand' (Lefebvre 1996, 158) for the re-taking of urban space by the working class whose labour and social practices produce the city. It is not a right to return to a city in the past but rather a right to a radically different urban future (Merrifield 2002), working in tandem with other rights such as the rights to information, free expression, difference, services, and autogestion<sup>1</sup> (Lefebvre 1990, 251–253).

As urbanisation continues to rapidly unfold, his revolutionary concept gains new momentum in the twenty-first century (Kuymulu 2013). The RttC is mobilised by critical urban scholars, activists and communities to denounce profit-oriented urban governance regimes (Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2009) that engender displacement and gentrification (Lees, Shin, and López-Morales 2016), reducing access to adequate resources, infrastructure and housing (Marcuse 2008) while leading to growing episodes of urban protest and insurgency (Shin 2018). The concept is also increasingly mobilised by social movements fighting for urban justice, which popularise the RttC and generate further academic debates (Mayer 2012). Moreover, organisations such as UN-HABITAT, UNDP and UNESCO have incorporated a pragmatic version of the RttC into the human rights framework (Kuymulu 2013). As the concept continuously travels between theory, policy and practice and gets deployed in various geographies, the RttC acquires new meanings that stretch far beyond its origins.

Although articulated as a right, Lefebvre's initial formulation of the RttC offered little clarity on what kind of right it could be (Attoh 2011). Nevertheless, the growing scholarship on the topic has begun to address this gap by reading the RttC in relation to Lefebvre's wider oeuvre. Purcell (2014, 146) draws from Lefebvre's later work to clarify his notion of rights as the 'outcome of political struggle', articulated as 'the manifestation, the end result of collective claims made by mobilized citizens'. In this sense, the recognition of rights always opens up the potential for 'further struggle' and 'renewed political agitation'. Meanwhile, Harvey (2008) has argued that the RttC should not be understood within the limits of the liberal capitalist tradition. Indeed, as noted by Purcell (2014, 142; original emphasis), the RttC is not 'an incremental addition to existing liberal-democratic rights,' but rather a political programme aimed at securing the control of spatial production by citizens and a radical struggle 'to move *beyond* both the state and capitalism'. However, this process may include the strategic use of liberal-democratic rights. In Huchzermeyer's (2018, 637) review of Lefebvre's work, she argues that he saw rights as 'opening', that is, a 'change-inducing potential'. She concludes that Lefebvre envisaged a transitional role for 'the formation of legal rights and their 'entry into social practice"', thus arguing that 'shying away altogether from a legal interpretation of the right to the city may in effect block' the path towards its realisation.

Different scholars have demonstrated how legal and institutional frameworks are often deployed by those resisting, challenging and seeking radical

transformation (O'Brien 1996; de Sousa Santos and Carlet 2009). As noted by De Souza (2006, 339), emancipatory social movements often engage successfully with the state and the law in multiple ways: 'sometimes *together with* the local state apparatus, sometimes *despite* the state, sometimes *against* the state' (original emphasis). In Brazil, Holston (2008) has shown how the urban poor became proficient in the language of the state, learning how to use the country's 'misrule of law' in their favour in order to claim for rights, expanding citizenship and transforming the state in the process. Similarly, Chinese villagers exercising the rightful resistance deployed as a popular strategy to capture 'rightful claims' using the language of 'authorities and established values' (O'Brien 1996).

As we will go on to demonstrate, the creation of progressive legal frameworks in Brazil did not guarantee rights, but created an 'opening', inaugurating new tools and arenas for social struggle. This process has been ambivalent, simultaneously expanding the repertoire of strategies for social movements and the possibilities for appropriation by urban speculators. The incorporation of the RttC by the state is the result of struggles emerging from Brazil's autoconstructed peripheries where the working-classes were claiming the rights to the city they were building themselves (Holston 2008). Although the translation of the RttC into formal institutions and the law does not guarantee its realisation, it creates new frictions as well as novel possibilities for struggles that both incorporate and challenge legality to demand a radical expansion of citizenship.

### **The right to the city and participatory urban democracy in Brazil**

Situating the RttC in urban Brazil requires a brief history of the country's model of urban policy. In the late 1980s, re-democratisation inaugurated a period of intense experimentation with participatory urban policy in various cities. In 2001, many of those initiatives were institutionalised in the federal law known as the City Statute (CS), a move that clearly goes against the conventional understanding of how legal innovations are often used to undermine the rights of survival among the marginalised and disadvantaged (Mitchell and Heynen 2009). The CS was the result of more than 20 years of societal debates involving multiple actors, including academics and social activists, and is intended to re-appropriate urban space for its democratic use. Praised widely as an innovative and progressive urban law (Fernandes 2007), the CS was largely inspired by Lefebvre's political-philosophical framework (Huchzermeyer 2015) and it embraces the RttC, which is codified legally as 'the combination of the principles of the social function of property and of the city and the democratic management of cities' (Friendly 2013, 158).

Many scholars have explored how the entanglement of democratisation and neoliberalism have limited the CS success in engendering the urban poor's RttC (Caldeira and Holston 2015; Rolnik 2013). For Klink and Denaldi (2016, 404), 'the disappointing results of 'really existing' Brazilian urban reform' relate to a shift from an initial radical rights-based agenda to a professionalised practice of urban reform embedded in the state. There is evidence showing how progressive instruments of the CS have been appropriated by profit-oriented coalitions in various contexts (Rolnik and Santoro 2013). Yet urban social movements such as the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto* (Roofless Workers' Movement, MTST) have also been successful in deploying the CS and other constitutional rights



(e.g. the right to housing) to advance progressive agendas (Zhang 2021). This echoes the work of Huchzermeyer (2018) who draws from Mitchel (2003) to argue that 'the institutionalization of rights may result in the wrong interests being protected, [but] the same institutionalization, resulting from processes such as direct action and class struggle, can lead to the '(liberal) state' becoming 'a key protector of the weak' (Mitchell 2003, 25)'. In fact, as we show in this paper, the urban reform has opened new arenas for social struggle.

In a number of cities, new 'invited spaces' (Cornwall 2004) were created, such as urban participatory councils and city conferences, expanding opportunities for civil society engagement that produced heterogeneous impacts. Citizen participation is often organised around class-based groups, unevenly empowered to affect final policy outcomes (Caldeira and Holston 2015; Nogueira 2019b). This issue can be located within the wider criticisms to the RttC literature and its relative lack of attention to how gender, race, ability and class can influence the capacity of citizens to participate equally in democratic urban governance (Beebeejaun 2017). As noted by Fischer (2020, 4), the CS broadly ignores 'the roles played by racial discrimination (historically and currently) in fomenting social and urban injustice'. Indeed, the urban reform was theoretically influenced by a particular school of critical thought in Brazil, which 'has disregarded racialisation as a structuring element in the socio-spatial inequalities which characterize Brazilian cities' (Figueiredo, Estévez, and Rosa 2020, 58). This aspect will be further developed in this article as we consider the relationship between Brazil's racialised labour market and the city.

### **Labour and urban space: the missing link**

In Brazil, informal street vendors face not only the lack of institutional support but also restrictive legislations that criminalise their work and constrain their access to urban space (Nogueira 2019a). Although urban livelihoods often presuppose access to urban space, this aspect has been mostly ignored by urban policies in Brazil and elsewhere (Schindler 2014; Brown 2015). Recently, revitalisation and renewal policies worldwide have sought to reshape cities in order to attract global capital (Lees, Shin, and López-Morales 2016) often resulting in the removal of street vendors from targeted areas (Crossa 2009; Itikawa 2016; Swanson 2007). Such unwanted populations are criminalised by the urban authorities who use the language of informality as strategic discourses to legitimise restrictive policies (Crossa 2016). Analysing the brutal eviction of traders in Johannesburg, Bénit-Gbaffou (2016, 1102) observes that the majority of displaced workers were not accustomed to making collective claims employing the language of 'rights' and were rather 'used to adopting a politics of invisibility, of everyday arrangements and constant mobility'. Such tactics allow for ephemeral arrangements aimed at guaranteeing immediate impromptu access to space rather than securing rights to space. Relegated by traditional unions, the political action of informal workers, such as street vendors, has gained more scholarly attention in the context of the global crisis of waged labour (Breman and van der Linden 2014).

The recent restructuring of global capitalist production and a series of economic crises have imposed serious risks to the sustainability of extant welfare systems (Andersen, and P, and Jensen 2002). In Latin America, however,



welfare systems were never fully developed and access to the full entitlements of citizenship has been historically limited to a small portion of the working class associated with the 'modern' industrial sector (Kraychete 2016). Currently, informal workers encompass more than 40% of the labour force in Brazil (IBGE 2020), but while 47.3% of Black workers in the labour force are informal, 34.6% of white workers are in the same situation (IBGE 2019). As noted by Cavalcanti at the outset of this article, such racialised contours of Brazil's labour market is a direct inheritance of colonialism and slavery (Bernardino-Costa 2015).

Brazil was the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery in 1888 and 'the persistence of racial discriminatory practices and inequalities' in the country 'can be traced back both to the legacy of slavery and the particular ways in which the transition to wage labour was undertaken' (Manzano, Krein, and Abílio 2021, 229). In an effort to 'whiten' its population, the country encouraged the immigration of white Europeans to compose the expanding waged sector and no policies were developed to incorporate former slaves into 'modern' employment. When the country's first labour law was instituted in 1943, it expanded rights only to formalised workers, mainly in industry and commerce, excluding a huge mass of workers from the full entitlements of citizenship. While the 1988 Constitution has, in theory, expanded social rights to all citizens, the labour market remains stratified and access to rights, unequal. Informality has been historically more prevalent among the Black population, demonstrating the racial dimensions of labour precarity in the country (Araújo and Lombardi 2013). Unprotected by labour laws, informal workers have been historically excluded from citizenship rights mediated by formalised labour and ignored by the working-class unions (Chun and Agarwala 2016).

As flexibility and precariousness become widespread features in a neoliberal world, dualistic theorisations of formal/informal are increasingly unhelpful to understand the dynamics of the labour market (Telles 2015). Facing insecurity and precarious conditions, people increasingly negotiate with flexible arrangements between formal and informal jobs. Some scholars have thus suggested the need to move beyond 'informality' as an analytical lens, reviving the concept of 'popular economies' (Coraggio 1998). This notion has been developed by Latin American scholars, such as Orlando Nuñez, Luis Razeto and Jose Luis Coraggio, since the 1970s as a critical counterpoint to the notion of the 'informal sector' (Diniz 2020). Simone (2019, 618) argues that 'popular economies' refer to 'the variegated, promiscuous forms of organising the production of things, their repair, distribution, use, as well as the provision of social reproduction services that simultaneous fall inside and outside the ambit of formal capitalist production'. The concept highlights the ways in which these economies are characterised by the co-existence of solidarity and individualist behaviours while operating through domestic units (in lieu of 'firms') where the social reproduction of their members (rather than accumulation per se) is the main goal.

The move from the informal to the popular intends to transcend a normative approach to this phenomenon though the lenses of 'formality', perceived as 'more desirable than, if not superior to, its 'other' counterpart' (Acuto, Dinardi, and Marx 2019, 476). In doing so, we foreground how the state's attempt at formalisation imposes a bureaucratic form that destabilises this economy

creating further precarity. This article is, therefore, concerned with the collective action in the popular economy for the right to work on the street as vendors. Contrary to 'traditional' working class politics, their collective actions manifest a desire for inclusion that does not fit modern accounts of 'formality'. Such claims also foreground the street, emphasising the role of urban space not only as a site of capital accumulation but also the stage where a redefined working-class politics is structured. In paying attention to the political struggles of street vendors to guarantee the 'right to the city centre', this article demonstrates how they simultaneously build on and disrupt the institutionalisation of the RttC. In what follows, we provide a short account of how participatory urban democracy has acted to limit the RttC of workers in the popular economy whose resistance movement we will analyse. In doing so, we argue that these struggles may be seen as an 'opening' towards more radical articulations of the RttC.

## Participatory urban democracy and the popular economy in Belo Horizonte, Brazil

Belo Horizonte's 1st Municipal Conference on Urban Policy in 1999 was a pioneering experience of participatory democracy in the country, gathering more than 700 participants and 125 representatives of various sectors of the civil society (COMPUR 2000). The final report, which compiles resolutions and recommendations to the local government, explicitly mentioned the 'popular economy' while recommending formalisation and the creation of formal jobs as ways to 'demarginalise' the growing informal economy.

Following an unsuccessful attempt to regulate the 'irregular' trade in the 1990s, there was increasing pressure for a more vigorous approach towards this issue coming from various sectors of the civil society (Carrieri and Murta 2011). In this context, the 2nd Municipal Conference on Urban Policy took place between 2001 and 2002. The final report does not mention the 'popular economy' but emphasises conflicts over the disorderly occupation of urban spaces by the 'informal' commerce (COMPUR 2003). This change symbolises a shift from framing the discussion as a matter of economic development to a matter of spatial order. Final recommendations included the promotion of urban 'revitalisation' and the approval of the *Código de Posturas* (Code of Placements), a legal framework that was later sanctioned by the City Council and enacted in 2004. The law prohibits the use of public space for commercial purposes with no appropriate license. Simultaneously, the local government launched a program for the 'revitalisation' of the city centre (*Centro Vivo*) that relocated previously licensed street vendors to newly constructed popular malls. Not all of them were given a place and the attitude towards those that remained on the streets was a policy of 'zero tolerance'.

The criminalisation of street vending and the displacement of vendors from the streets were recommendations arising from a participatory democratic process. The popular economy was approached as an urban problem that required the promotion of 'rational planning and control of these activities' (COMPUR 2003, 143). Informal traders in Belo Horizonte were thus negatively affected by local frameworks arising from participatory channels. In the next

section, we explore how new alliances that build on the achievements of the urban reform have begun to challenge such exclusion, revealing the processual nature of struggles for the RttC.

## The vicentão occupation and ‘the right to the city centre’

Following a period of growth, social inclusion and formalisation in the early 2000s, Brazil went into a prolonged economic crisis. Markedly after 2013, this reality was visible on the streets where a growing number of street vendors strive to make a living. In this section we explore the struggles and alliances of street vendors against a new round of ‘urban revitalisation’ for the ‘right to the city centre’.

### **The unification of urban struggles in the context of (re)insurgency**

In mid-2017, Belo Horizonte’s newly appointed mayor, Alexandre Kalil (Social Democratic Party—PSD), launched a revitalisation plan for the hyper-centre<sup>2</sup> aimed at removing and relocating street vendors from public spaces to popular shopping malls. Echoing the early 2000s experience when the streets were first ‘cleaned’, the policy was legally supported by the aforementioned ‘Code of Placements’ that prohibits unlicensed street vending. Similar to the earlier experience, this policy disarticulated a vibrant popular economy that was an important source of income for the urban poor. While some workers accepted the government’s relocation offer, many others remained on the streets ‘illegally’. Both groups faced difficulties sustaining their livelihoods due to either the harassment of the public authorities on the streets or the lack of demand in the mall. This point is explained by Elena, a Black women who is a social activist and a street vendor currently working as a parliamentary advisor:

The street vendors could not afford rent. They were unable to sustain themselves ... Not all of them but the majority. Those who work in the popular mall complain that they cannot get enough money to eat properly. And when they try to go to the streets, the inspection agents confiscate their products. (...) The inspection agents harass them, they lose their products, they are unable to pay rent and they get evicted. The occupation is the key. It is where you learn about politics. It’s an education. It’s very powerful! (Interview, 03/07/2019)

In January 2018, an empty building in the city centre legally owned by a bankrupt bank was occupied by organised local social movements. The ‘Vicentão Occupation’ gathered homeless families and street vendors who were displaced by the revitalisation policy. The name ‘Vicentão’ was a tribute to Vicente Gonçalves, a Black man from the *favela* who was a people’s lawyer in Belo Horizonte and a housing activist for over 70 years. The new occupation was innovative, marking the confluence of diverse urban struggles (Paolinelli and Canettieri 2019) and demonstrating through practice the complex interrelations amid production and reproduction, between the working and housing strategies of the urban poor (Nogueira 2019a).

The 'Vicentão Occupation' must be situated in the local context of re-insurgency in which the persistent failure of the government to house the poor has led to the proliferation of new urban occupations. Occupation is 'the term used by social movements to refer to an area of private or public land that does not fulfill its social function as property and is occupied by poor residents (mostly organised by militant housing movements)' (Nascimento 2016, 1). Recent occupations are connected to the traditional movement for housing in Brazil but present some peculiarities (Tonucci Filho 2017). That is, they normally involve a complex array of agents which include the residents, organised social movements (old and new), agents connected to organised institutions (such as the Catholic Church, government agencies, the Public Defender's office and the Public Ministry) and academics. The legal support of people's lawyers, the Public Ministry and the public defenders allow occupations to repel repossession orders by using the legislation to fight against eviction (Zhang 2021). The 'urban occupation' movement differs from the 1950s-1980s social movements for housing partially because they build on the achievements of those previous struggles. They also reveal the potentialities as well as the limitations of legal-institutional frameworks emerging from Brazil's urban reform, which are themselves a product of a particular set of socio-spatial relations.

The occupation movement can also be understood as a contemporary form of *quilombo* as conceptualised by Brazil's Black activist and scholar, Beatriz Nascimento, that is, 'as a multi-sited territorialisation of Black space from the *favela*, to the *baile* Blacks (Black dance parties), to the *terreiro* (*candomblé* ritual house), and actual 'remnant quilombo communities' (Smith, Davies, and Gomes 2021, 286).<sup>3</sup> Much like the quilombo, urban occupations represent the oppression and the resistance of the Black and the poor against 'processes of modernisation which dismantle specific modes of existence' (Figueiredo, Estévez, and Rosa 2020, 59). Unlike most quilombos and occupations, the Vicentão was located in the centre and heart of the city.

### Occupying the 'city centre'

On 29 June 2018, an event entitled the 'Right to the City Caravan' took place at the Vicentão Occupation. Beyond the reference in the event title, Lefebvre's framework was also visible in a sign at the entrance of the building (see Figure 1). The gathering conjoined local politicians, social activists, residents of urban occupations and leaderships in the city. The discussion centred on the relationship between multiple aspects of the lives of the urban poor and the city centre, including mobility, access to health and cultural services. Maria, a Black woman residing in another urban occupation, talked about her experience of living in the centre and gaining access to things she didn't even know existed, such as the theatre (Fieldnotes, 29/06/2018). Her experience, however, was permeated by intolerance as she narrated being discriminated for being a *negra* [a Black woman]. In the sequence, a Brazilian Indigenous woman and street vendor, Aline, compared the struggles of Indigenous people to the oppression suffered by street vendors: 'the centre does not want to accept us, it wants us to come, sell our labour force for nothing and go home.' She added that 'the struggles are all the same: a fight for territory, for the good life, for the right to the city, for being who we are' (Fieldnotes, 29/06/2018). Her powerful speech



**Figure 1:** 'Vicentão Occupation: Occupation, Right to the City, Housing, Communion' (Photo: Mara Nogueira, 2018).

highlighted how the fight for the RttC has the potential to generate alliances across diverse groups.

Those different accounts in tandem demonstrate how the central location of the occupation was perceived symbolically as a re-taking of the urban centre by the unwanted poor and racialised bodies who are often relegated to the peripheries of the city (Figueiredo, Estévez, and Rosa 2020). Living in the centre of Belo Horizonte translated into access to better infrastructure, but also to urban culture and political life. Such features were particularly relevant for the emerging struggles of marginalised street vendors who began to organise weekly meetings at Vicentão.

Apart from the fact that key leaders of the movement were living there, its location made it easier for vendors working in the city centre to join gatherings where vendors exchanged experiences and discussed political strategies. According to Lucas, a white man who is an activist of the Brigadas Populares<sup>4</sup> involved in the day-to-day organisation of the occupation, the Vicentão created a territorial reference for street vendors:

This reference had an *agglomerative effect* that resulted, for instance, in well-attended meetings... Another thing is that to have this place of support made their work on the streets easier... That is why we've been thinking about creating a *reference point* for street vendors here, a centre where they can store their belongings and their products, for instance... A third point relates to *political activities*. When there is a public hearing, a demonstration, a meeting in the City Hall, you are in the city centre already... So, the work, the housing, the services, the political action and so on and so forth... This concentration of all of these things here enhances the creation of a *collective identity for the street vendors*. (Interview, 23/08/2018; emphasis added)

Beyond functioning as shelter, the Vicentão enabled the coming together of vendors, which fostered important alliances and a sense of collective struggle for otherwise spatially dispersed street vendors. As noted by Chun and Agarwala (2016, 635), the struggles of non-waged workers often involve the cultivation of “alternative cultures’ of organizing’, which entail different spaces and scales of collective organisation beyond the shop floor. In Brazil, street vendors have been historically neglected by both the state and the traditional unions. However, as noted by Jô Cavalcanti, quoted at the outset of this article, the bulk of urban struggles is now happening on the streets.

### **‘Working-class struggle on urban space’**

The housing movement in Belo Horizonte and in other Brazilian cities has been able to build numerous alliances while using legal-institutional frameworks to fight evictions and generate social awareness (Nascimento 2016; Zhang 2021). Such networks are yet to be created for the street vendors’ movement. Only recently have social activists and academics started to pay attention to the relationship between the popular economy and the urban beyond the framing of informality.<sup>5</sup> This process was discussed by Bella Gonçalves, a white woman who is a militant of the Brigadas Populares and councilwoman (Socialism and Liberty Party, PSOL), during an interview:

It was a conversation that we had [in the Brigadas Populares] that led us to prioritise this struggle for a symbolic change of the perception of street vendors in Belo Horizonte. Our priority then became to give them dignity and visibility as workers ... Because the work of street vendors is an urban question, it is a question of the struggles for rights on urban space, working-class struggles on urban space. This is not an automatic perception, not even in academia ... It is necessary to create alliances and a social network. Alliances with the potential to transform the symbolic perception about work. (Interview, 25/06/2019)

Her view demonstrates how social activists in Belo Horizonte are aware of the processual nature of political struggles for rights. They are also sensitive to the political environment and switch between resistance *to the state* and negotiation *with the state* when needed (De Souza 2006). In June 2018, the Vicentão Occupation successfully resisted a repossession lawsuit through legal means with the help of people’s lawyers. In December 2018, the government of Minas Gerais offered rental support for two years and the permanent relocation of the fifty families after this period in exchange for ending the occupation. Although there was some desire to reject the offer, residents and activists decided to accept it in light of the uncertain political landscape delineated by Bolsonaro’s victory and the election of a right-wing governor.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the end of the occupation, its legacy led to fundamental steps towards the creation of a collective identity among street vendors that has materialised, for instance, in the creation of the *Centro de Apoio ao Trabalhador Ambulante* (CATA—Support Centre for Street Vendors). Located in the city centre, the CATA has been described as ‘Vicentão’s child’ (Interview, 15/02/2022) by Paulo, a street vendor with a mixed ethnicity who coordinates the Centre. Since 2019, it hosts meetings while also functioning as a collective deposit for products



and other materials. During the pandemic, the CATA organised distribution of food baskets to street vendors who have been negatively impacted. Also worth mentioning is the participation of representatives of workers in the popular economy in the 5th Municipal Conference on Urban Policy in 2018. The conference report recommended the recognition of informal uses of space, the promotion of the popular economy in public spaces as well as public policies for the sector (COMPUR 2018). It also advised the ‘flexibilization of municipal legislation to facilitate the regulated use of public space for informal work’ (COMPUR 2018, 52). Although the conference is only a consultation, past experiences have demonstrated its influence on public policy.

## Conclusion

Lefebvre emphasised the role of the working class for the realisation of the RttC through ‘radical metamorphosis’ (1996, 156). He states that ‘[o]nly the working class can become the agent, the social carrier or support of this realization’ (1996, 158), while at the same time referring frequently to urban *inhabitants*. Purcell (2002, 106) sees the conflation of ‘inhabitant’ with ‘working class’ as Lefebvre’s ‘key weakness,’ and advocates that the RttC conceptualisation gains its strength when the social force that fights for the RttC is ‘not limited to a single social category,’ a viewpoint that also speaks to Marcuse’s (2009) emphasis on producing a Gramscian ‘social bloc’ for the RttC struggle. Building on this, we argue for the need to consider how classical notions of the worker and of working-class politics have been reshaped (Breman and van der Linden 2014). While the Western Europe in which Lefebvre situated his RttC was transforming from an industrial to a post-industrial society that saw threats to the organised labour movements, we argue for the need to examine more carefully the geographically situated political struggles of non-waged workers. This is a necessary step for expanding the RttC to all in racialised Brazil (Figueiredo, Estévez, and Rosa 2020) where Black workers and other groups (e.g. low-educated, disabled) are disadvantaged in the labour market. Building a ‘social bloc’ calls for inclusive approaches to diverse identities and our article calls for critical attention to the intersection between class, race and informality.

Despite the centrality of accessing workspace for urban livelihoods, social movements in Brazil have only recently started to notice the vital relationship of the popular economy with urban space. Beyond a site for the reproduction of capital accumulation, the urban—and particularly the street—emerges as the main stage of working-class politics in Brazil. It is also a site of fugitivity (Smith, Davies, and Gomes 2021) where improvised Black geographies struggle to refute the normativity, bureaucracy and violence of the state to forge new ways of existing in the world, which incorporate alternative understandings of what it means to live a ‘good life’. Looking at the collective struggles of street vendors for rights to space in urban Brazil, this article has analysed the radical potential emerging from the confluence of diverse urban movements for the ‘right to the city centre’. Their alliance reveals how production and reproduction, work and housing, are articulated and mediated by the city. While building on the past achievements of social movements enshrined in the country’s constitution and



legal-institutional frameworks, this radical movement also creates the impetus to rethink some of their central tenets.

We argue that the RttC is a process that involves strategic resistance and engagement with both the law and the state. By focusing on the relationship between the RttC, the state and the law, we point towards the process through which the law is produced, appropriated and contested; how it may be used by different actors in multiple ways both to deny rights and to fight for social justice. In line with Lefebvre (1990), we advocate for a radical extension of the 'citizenship contract' that can create an 'opening' for multiple struggles and take us closer to a utopian future beyond the state and capitalism. More attention to the political action of unprotected workers for recognition and their relationship with the city and the state may expand our theoretical understanding of the RttC, informing a new repertoire of strategies and alliances for social movements and activists.

## Notes

- 1 Commonly translated as 'self-management', autogestion was initially conceptualised in alternative Marxian traditions in relation to workers taking control of factories and self-managing production. The term was later generalised by Lefebvre (1990) and others to include all areas of life, including the self-management of cities through 'grassroots decision making and the decentralization of control to autonomous local units' (Purcell 2014, 147).
- 2 The hyper-centre has been defined as a planning zone by the Municipal law No. 7.166/1996. The area is a transportation hub with intense footfall and commercial activity, mainly catering to low-income customers.
- 3 In this collection for the *Antipode*, Smith, Davies, and Gomes (2021) introduce and present original translations of two essays and two poems by Brazilian Black activist and thinker Beatriz Nascimento (1942-1995).
- 4 The *Brigadas Populares* is a social movement and a political organisation founded in 2005, originally as a Marxist study group.
- 5 Exceptions exist, such as the work of Coraggio (1998).
- 6 Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, the government has stopped paying the rent support, leading to fear of eviction and protests against the governor Romeu Zema (New Party) (Intersindical 2020).

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