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Peace, Power, and Precarity: Examining Brazil's Potential as an Emerging Global and Regional Leader

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Abstract

Brazil is poised to emerge as a critical player in the Southern Hemisphere. The nation's economic success has been accompanied by efforts to play a prominent role in international peace and security. This financial dynamism has offered the country a degree of legitimacy on issues of global trade and energy. However, a protracted social conflict in Rio De Janeiro's favelas threatens that status. Brazil cannot access international esteem and influence without addressing its domestic situation. This paper applies Edward Azar's protracted social conflict theory to reveal an internal state of disorder in Brazilian favelas that impairs the nation's ability to claim its role as a fully realized actor in the international sphere.

Keywords

Cover Page Footnote

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Examining Brazil's Potential as an Emerging Global and Regional Leader

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Abstract:

  Brazil is poised to emerge as a critical player in the Southern Hemisphere. The nation's economic success, despite infrequent fluctuations, has been accompanied by efforts to play a prominent role in international peace and security (Abdenur & Call, 2017). This financial dynamism has offered the country a degree of legitimacy on issues of global trade and energy. However, a protracted social conflict in Rio De Janeiro's favelas threatens that status. Brazil cannot access international esteem and influence without addressing its domestic situation. This paper uses Edward Azar's protracted social conflict structure to argue that an internal state of disorder in Brazilian favelas impairs the nation's ability to claim its role as a fully realized actor in the international sphere.[1]

Keywords:
Brazil, climate change, international stage, favelas, protracted social conflict

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Introduction

Brazil's economic success, despite infrequent fluctuations, has been accompanied by efforts to play a prominent role in international peace and security (Abdenur & Call, 2017). Coined by Edward Azar, the term "protracted social conflict" describes a conflict in which communal groups battle over basic needs, creating a prolonged struggle (International Alert, p. 55). Azar lays out conceptual components to capture the holistic drivers of conflict to predict outcomes. Azar's model argues that conflict is best understood through four lenses: communal content, human needs, government or state role, and international linkages (International Alert, p. 55). Analyzing the Brazilian conflict from this perspective reveals dynamic processes that highlight communities' and states' actions and strategies, all while examining the built-in mechanisms of conflict (International Alert, p. 54). This internal state of disorder in Brazilian favelas may impair the nation's ability to claim its role as a fully realized actor in the international sphere. An attentiveness to this relationship reveals a key perspective on conflict causation and prolongation.

Origins of Protracted Social Conflict

In implementing Azar's framework in the Brazilian context, one must first examine the "genesis" from which protracted social conflict arose. Azar defines the "genesis" as a set of conditions that are "responsible for the transformation of non-conflictual situations into conflictual ones" (International Alert, p. 54). In the 14th century, Portuguese sailors landed on Brazil's eastern coast. They established a colonial economy that relied heavily on the coerced labor of indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Africans brought to Brazil's plantations against their will. Scholars agree that it is impossible to understand Brazilian society and its interactions without expressing the profoundness of enslavement and its economic structure on

the country and its consciousness (Taralico, 2019). As the colonial economy grew, Brazil became ever more reliant on the labor of its black residents and restricted their access to land to deprive enslaved Africans of economic opportunity and freedom. As Brazil never fostered a leftist rebellion in response to its dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s, the country failed to redistribute land from its colonial configuration (Parenti, 2012, p. 501). Today, 3% of Brazil's population owns almost 2/3 of the land, disenfranchising Brazilian farmers and people of color (Parenti, 2012, p. 501). This extreme and unfair distribution of arable land across racial lines contribute heavily to Brazil's protracted social conflict.

Digging deeper into Azar's "genesis" analysis, Brazil's economic history is fundamental in understanding the current situation in Rio De Janeiro and other megacities. In the post-Cold War period, a defining calamity struck the country's economy as neoliberal policies crippled the domestic sector during the Latin American Debt Crisis. The combination of a flawed import-substitute-industrialization strategy, rigid International Monetary Fund loan requirements, and austerity measures enforced by the World Bank caused high unemployment, rising poverty, and growing urbanization (Parenti, 2012, p. 504). Overwhelmed by an unmanageable influx of poor migrants, cities like Rio De Janeiro faced a crisis of legitimacy as "the criminalization of the local state…evolved out of the crisis of neo-liberalization" (Parenti, 2012, p. 506). In Rio de Janeiro, shantytowns called favelas are built into hillsides where residents face overcrowding, poor resource management, and displacement as state institutions fail to support the rising population.

Communal Content and The Favelas

While Brazil's past enterprises still affect its citizens, some argue that Brazil's place in the modern international market subjects the nation to a different influence – globalization.

Adamson (2005) argues that globalization and the transnational networks which it sponsors create opportunities for non-state political entrepreneurs to build on these grids and feed a 'grey economy' blurred between domestic and international politics (Adamson, 2005, p. 117). While globalization's networks enable the funding of conflict through the trade of arms and drugs, others argue that there is another uniquely ethnic dimension to the spread of globalization. Chua (2002) argues that a 'market-dominant minority' concentrates wealth by dominating global markets in a three-pronged interaction of globalization, ethnic violence, and democratic power. As such, oppressed black and indigenous Brazilians engage in backlashes against wealth, democracy, and the European minority and are met with brutal state-led repression deployed to solidify the existing power distribution. As such, Brazil's society is divided along racial and economic lines, restricting many residents of cities like Rio De Janeiro to society's margins.

Hence, Brazil's protracted social conflict is nestled in the archetypal favela. Here, the "communal content," a multigroup community characterized by "the disarticulation between state and society as a whole," experiences social, economic, and political strife (International Alert, p. 54). Azar describes group composition as the product of either "divide-and-rule" colonial tactics or one group's dominance over another (International Alert, p. 54). However, Brazil is actually a case of both in which white Portuguese descendants exert power over the rest of Brazil's population in the continuity of colonial divisions. Azar argues that any attempt to reconcile these divisions by enforcing cooperation negates the "nation-building process, strains the social fabric, and eventually breeds fragmentation and protracted social conflict" (International Alert, p. 54). Overpopulated cities like Rio De Janeiro situate rich and poor, multiracial Brazilians in close quarters to one another, imposing cooperation and revealing the inequalities ingrained in the institutions that implement their divide.

Life in the Favelas

The favelas exacerbate the differences perceived between groups, eliciting Azar's "human needs" variable. This variable considers the extent to which identity groups can access developmental needs, both for their physical well-being and immaterial sustenance (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2016, p. 117). The basic requirements for survival are barely provided within the favela system. While some residents have access to food, water, and shelter, many lack security and do not vest their faith in Rio De Janeiro's state-led police force. Rio De Janeiro's police force is infamous for its brutality and unjustified killings of favela residents, usually young, black men (Skidmore, 2010). Some scholars call Brazil's democracy nominal because certain citizens are systematically prevented from accessing their fundamental rights to a secure and peaceful existence, without discrimination and useless violence (Skidmore, 2010). Within such a violent and racially charged environment, it is "the deprivation experienced in relation to the status of others, or in relation to what could be, should be, or once was, that hurts the most and drives crime, rebellion, and violence" (Parenti, 2012, p. 501). In this sense, relative deprivation dismantles communal social cohesion. When human needs go unaddressed, sources of authority lose legitimacy, and the environment becomes increasingly ripe for protracted social conflict.

State Capacity

The third aspect of Azar's analysis assesses state capacity and the government's ability to ensure equitable access for all identity groups (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2016, p. 118). Rio De Janeiro's black and indigenous women have fought to gain access to abortion and bodily autonomy, noting that those who can afford a steep buy-in receive abortions at private healthcare facilities (Refinery 29, 2020). Thus, the country's universal law falls heavily and

disproportionately on a particular identity group while breeding exceptionalism among those who can afford to buy access to specific rights. While abortion access is not designated as a fundamental human right, the lack of autonomy over their bodies force Rio De Janeiro's women to continue a cycle of procreation that worsens overcrowding and overpopulation in the favelas. This system keeps Rio De Janeiro's women of color impoverished and disenfranchised, allowing the dominant group to "resist the participation of minority groups" in the democratic process (International Alert, p. 54). Gender equality and reproductive rights are pivotal battles in ending Brazil's legacy of gender-based violence and racial oppression. The plight of black Brazilian women is a symptom of this structural violence.

Connections to Climate Change

While the Brazilian state's management of the favelas is a domestic issue, this phenomenon is also part of an interrelated network of global influences that dictate internal affairs called "international linkages" (International Alert, p. 54). Brazil's protracted social conflict partially results from one daunting and destructive international linkage: climate change. As the globe continues to warm, weather patterns become more erratic and extreme, especially those concentrated near the equator (Parenti, 2012, p. 500). In the Intertropical Convergence Zone, a brutal cycle of weather shocks, droughts, and flash floods repeatedly destroy infrastructure, wipe out roads and bridges, and take hundreds of lives (Parenti, 2012, p. 500). This phenomenon displaces farmers from northeast Brazil and channels them into the favelas, illustrating how "the extreme weather associated with climate change fuels Rio De Janeiro's crime wars" (Parenti, 2012, p. 500). As farmers continue to be displaced from the few plots of arable land available to them, Brazil's protracted social conflict worsens. Land ownership inequality is staggering and nearly 50 percent of the arable land in Brazil is owned by 4% of the

population (Taralico, 2019). Crook (2006) notes that poor land security "constitutes a substantial impediment" to economic stability and growth by depriving citizens of their basic needs of housing and food (Crook, 2006, p. 365). Looking forward, the effects of climate change will be felt acutely in northeast Brazil as the nation's remaining farmers are pushed to join the 80% of Brazilians living in cities and cultivating protracted social conflict (Parenti, 2012, p. 501).

Fragmentation

Following Azar's 'processes analysis,' both communal and state actions have demonstrated an explicit fragmentation in the Brazilian government's capacity to meet citizens' needs. The COVID-19 crisis best exemplifies this phase of the protracted social conflict theory. Brazil's unequal healthcare system and large privatized sector failed to support the nation. Due to unbalanced access to healthcare, the public system was unprepared to provide services to infected citizens, specifically in the Northeast, and prevent a catastrophic loss of life in the favelas and other racialized, poor areas where many have compromised immune systems (Pires, De Carvalho & Rawet, 2021, p. 44). For many in Brazil's favelas, protracted social conflicts came to fruition as President Bolsonaro's actions served as a "trigger of collective recognition" of the country's conservative policies and historical repression of its abused citizens (International Alert, p. 55). A social analysis reveals inequality to be a risk factor itself, demonstrating how multidimensional poverty and structural racism cause minorities to be vulnerable to infection because "those living near the poverty line [do] not have the means to avoid infection" (Pires, De Carvalho & Rawet, 2021, p. 37). In the long-term, the tensions exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic will be manifested in "negative reciprocal images which perpetuate communal antagonisms and solidify protracted social conflict" (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2016, p. 119). In identifying Brazil's defective healthcare institution as a

built-in conflict mechanism, Azar's model reveals that protracted social conflict in the favelas will reach a boiling point.

Looking Forward (Conclusion)

The theory of protracted social conflict dictates that Brazil faces one of four possible outcomes. The nature of Brazil's conflict points to the eventuality of institutional deformity, the evolution of an outdated colonial system expanding unsustainably. Azar would predict that the favela's protracted social conflict will become part of the nation's culture and build a sense of paralysis that will inhibit "constructive negotiation for any resolution of society" (International Alert, p. 56). Brazil's policies on peacebuilding, a theme within its broader diplomacy and security policy, offer a window into Brazil's security and development interdependence (Abednur & Call, 2017, Introduction). Despite its deeply polarized social and political domestic state and "adversarial culture," Brazil advocates for litigation in dispute resolution, and the nation's foreign policy features an array of peacebuilding and ADR-supportive initiatives. (Abednur & Call, 2017, Introduction). Due to the severity of Rio De Janeiro's protracted social conflict, one must question if Brazil is a dependable vessel for international peacebuilding operations.

In acknowledging the country's racist roots, perhaps Brazil can find a solution to its dilemma and assume the global position it desires. However, suppose Brazil attempts to step onto the international stage as an advocate for peace without addressing the factors of its protracted social conflict. In that case, the effort may be viewed as an act of naïve hypocrisy, damaging the country's legitimacy and efficacy in international and regional communities – two spheres in which it currently sits in a strong position. One must question if Brazil is truly poised to take up an international mantle of regional leadership.

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