

# Surviving and dying through the urban frontier: Everyday life, social brokerage and living with militias in Rio de Janeiro's West Zone

Nicholas Pope 

SOAS, UK

Urban Studies

1–17

© Urban Studies Journal Limited 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/00420980221093181

[journals.sagepub.com/home/usj](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/usj)



## Abstract

Urban margins are typically depicted as residual, apolitical spaces, where delinquent activities take place. But these spaces, with their own social, economic and political goings-on, are capable of drawing established urban economic and political structures into question. This paper brings together urban frontiers, political settlements and brokerage literatures to analyse how residents muddle through the challenges of everyday life in the urban margins and interact with coercive systems of rule. Through ethnographic fieldwork, this paper focuses on two brokers from neighbouring communities in Rio de Janeiro's West Zone; exploring how they mediate violent conditions, coercive militia rule and limited resources, and why and how they do so to different effects. By focusing on the spatial and historical dimensions of brokerage, this paper argues that power in Rio de Janeiro's margins derives not only from coercive control and domination, but also from agency, legitimacy and social energy. By doing so, this paper unearths potential for more radical possibilities for urban development.

## Keywords

brokerage, militia, urban frontiers, urban violence

---

### Corresponding author:

Nicholas Pope, Development Studies, SOAS, 10  
Thornhaugh Street, Bloomsbury, London WC1H 0XG, UK.  
Email: [nicholastpope@gmail.com](mailto:nicholastpope@gmail.com)

## 摘要

城市边缘通常被描述为残余的、非政治性的空间，同时也是违法活动猖獗之地。但是这些空间，连同它们自己的社会、经济和政治活动，却能够挑战既定的城市经济和政治结构。本文汇集了城市边缘、政治解决方案和经纪方面的文献，分析了居民如何应对城市边缘的日常生活挑战，并与强制性规则体系互动。通过人类学实地调查，本文重点关注来自里约热内卢西区邻近社区的两名经纪人；探索他们如何调解暴力情况、强制性民兵统治和有限的资源，以及他们为什么以及如何这样做以产生不同的效果。通过关注经纪业务的空间和历史维度，本文认为里约热内卢边缘的权力不仅来自强制控制和支配，还来自代理、合法性和社会能量。藉此，本文发掘了城市发展方面的、更激进的可能性。

## 关键词

经纪、民兵、城市边缘、城市暴力

Received September 2021; accepted March 2022

## Introduction

Media, policy and scholarly narratives tend to reproduce imaginaries of Brazil's urban margins as rife with criminality, poverty and violence. They depict their low-income, semi-formal neighbourhoods as lagging behind modern, progressive and civilised urban centres. This imaginary is frequently applied to Rio de Janeiro's West Zone (WZ) (Araujo and Cortado, 2020), some 50 km from downtown, once known as the 'Wild West'; the imaginary is bolstered by the presence of militias (the dominant armed group) – made up from resident 'off-duty' policemen, firemen, army soldiers, civil society leaders, politicians and civilians – who are depicted as having tamed these spaces.

These imaginaries perpetuate longstanding characterisations of 'centres' and 'peripheries' as being disconnected and opposed (Caldeira, 2000; Ventura, 1994). Yet, these centre–periphery relations are often obscured by 'diffusionist' narratives (Harvey, 2006) in which wealth, development and rights are promised to 'trickle out'. This paper highlights inaccuracies in these imaginaries. It demonstrates how urban margins are not insignificant political and economic sites. It makes the point that urban margins can be

sites of innovation, problem-solving, creativity and transformation for collective action problems; they are backstage workshops for urban centres where politics and policy initiatives are tested out.

Media narratives, dominant discourses embedded within everyday talk, and political rhetoric have, in part, reproduced these imaginaries. They link marginal spaces to Weberian-inspired theorisations of criminality and drug trafficking, suggesting 'non-state' armed activity is triggered by inactive or ineffective state security institutions. As a result, the potential of local forms of organisation, civic life and society are played down, assumed to be suppressed by violence and criminality. As a result, the urban margins are depoliticised and stripped of agency, seen as sponging off more wealthy urban centres, rather than as productive spaces with their own political life.

This paper offers a counter perspective. Instead of relying on these discourses suggesting urban violence is a foregone conclusion, it sets out an analytical model to understand how forms of community leadership and social brokerage can mediate and manage violence. This challenges assumptions that urban spaces are *only* dominated and controlled by coercion.

I draw together contemporary literatures on brokerage (Anwar, 2014) and urban frontiers (McGregor and Chatiza, 2019) to examine how community leaders, or ‘social brokers’, mediate violent, volatile, churning conditions in urban margins. I understand (social) brokerage as underpinning bargaining processes within political settlements (Khan, 2010), often spanning the margins and centres of cities (Mitlin, 2020). This framework has potential for understanding the pathologies of urban margins and highlighting how their social orders intersect with urban development processes. It also identifies how urban frontiers can be sites of innovation that attempt to deal with and correct, but simultaneously perpetuate, structural and institutional violence.

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted between September 2015 and May 2017, I examine the everyday relationships, negotiations and goings-on in two WZ neighbourhoods. I explore how and why stark social and political differences exist between these communities, barely 200 m

apart (Figure 1). I reflect on the social dynamics of community residents, their leaders and representatives, and militias, and how they interact with one another to negotiate survival, prosperity and death; but also, how these interactions shape the local management of dis/order. Through the life histories of two community leaders, conducted via interviews, participant observation, oral histories and documentary evidence, I examine the strategies, practices and inter-relations of Pamela from Santo Cristo (SC) and Marcela from Floresta da Campinha (FC) as they mediate different opportunities and challenges, between the demands of communities and the resources available to them. I reflect on their practices, ideas and values and understand how their everyday rhythms are situated within shared (and competing) understandings of identity, spatiality and culture. These are, I argue, important parameters for defining how individuals navigate and respond to everyday assertions of power, domination and violence in the urban margins. They are also



**Figure 1.** Map of Campinha Road.

Source: Author.

important for understanding how individuals respond to moments of transition and change, and chart sometimes radical pathways to imagined and alternative futures.

The next section outlines a conceptual framework. Section three sets out the context of urbanisation in the WZ, before I examine the relationships between community leaders, residents and militias in SC (section four) and FC (section five). Then, I bring together an analysis and set out some reflections for the literature in section six. In section seven, I table my conclusions regarding the implications for urban development thinking, more broadly.

### **Conceptual framework: Social brokerage and urban frontiers**

Everyday life in the urban margins is inherently political and shaped by agency, contrary to the characterisations within the aforementioned discourses. Political settlements, understood as the balance of power between contending social groups and social classes (Khan, 2010), can be used to make sense of politics and power dynamics in the urban margins, and to situate these within a broader urban political landscape. Through the notion of ‘bargaining processes’, the political settlements framework facilitates understanding about how resources are distributed, power is negotiated, and, fundamentally, how politics are brokered.

The framework facilitates thinking about urban marginal political processes beyond the static, elusive boundaries of the Weberian-inspired state, and to examine overlapping spheres of public–private, formal–informal or legal–illegal (Migdal, 2001). It also helps to reveal how violence and dis/order are central to power relations, and how local orders continually evolve through compromise, contestation and hybrid negotiations (Boege et al., 2009).

Different organisations or groups with the greatest ‘holding power’ – defined as ‘the capability of an individual or group to engage and survive in conflicts’ (Khan, 2010: 6) – can succeed over others at different points in time. This means the shape of the political settlement, and, thus, of development, can be explained historically through dynamic processes of coalition formation through which new structures of authority, culture and norms emerge (Schultze-Kraft, 2017).

Foundational political settlements literature suggests that violent contestation emerges when the formal distribution of resources in society does not reflect the underlying reality of who wields coercive power (and when there is limited scope to address this imbalance through non-violent means) (Khan, 2010). However, the ways that violence can be mediated and shaped through social dynamics – including beliefs, ideas and legitimacy – *within* political settlements, have been relatively understudied. This paper argues that social dynamics within political settlements have the potential to mitigate and manage different guises of violence, and even influence how conflict emerges.

Although there has been a growing interest among urban scholars about political settlements for analysing urban politics, much of the focus has, so far, been on how large, capital cities affect national-level political settlements (Goodfellow, 2018; Mitlin, 2020). There has been much less focus on the sub-national dimensions of political settlements (Meehan and Goodhand, 2018), that is, how political settlements can explain urban political life, and how marginal urban activities might underlie historical, global or trans-national processes (Mitlin, 2020).

This paper extends political settlements to marginal urban space and its political dynamics. In doing so, it identifies the spatial

characteristics of different political formations within the urban landscape, including militias, elected politicians and different types of elites. Given that the political settlements framework is particularly useful for identifying distributions of rents and accumulation opportunities, there is value in using this concept to understand urban development dynamics. Political, business and state elites can seek to exert influence over urbanisation and development in marginal spaces, whilst simultaneously engaging in clientelistic or ‘corrupt’ practices to advantage themselves and shore up rents (Brenner et al., 2012). This suggests centre–periphery dependencies – and the violent systems of rule they often entail in the margins – may be convenient, desired or even perpetuated by those in power; rather than problematised.

This article stretches the political settlements framework with the urban frontier hermeneutic, as a way of fusing together urban spatial processes with political economic ones. The urban frontier – understood as a *process* through which centrifugal dynamics de-territorialise existing orders of authority and control, and centripetal forces construct and territorialise with new ones (McGregor and Chatiza, 2019; Rasmussen and Lund, 2018) – offers a ‘way in’ to understanding how violent and uprooting processes of capital accumulation and/or state development play out in urban marginal spaces (Sivaramakrishnan, 2019) and how marginalised populations respond to these processes in order to survive.

Although these processes can be violent and destructive, they can also incite, incentivise and politicise frontier actors in diverse ways, as they seek out survival strategies to mitigate or manage structural forces and muddle through frontier dynamics. A resurgent brokerage literature (e.g. James, 2011; Lindquist, 2015) helps to highlight how political settlements can be shaped by

different types of brokers, including coercive brokers (Pope, 2022; Sanin, 2019), political brokers (Gay, 1999) or commercial traders (Walther, 2015), amongst others. From a unique vantage point, brokers occupy different spaces, structures, orders and institutions and devise specialist solutions to specific collective action problems. They can simultaneously restructure power relations by bridging fissures and synapses.

Brokers are skilled operators with the agency and capabilities to master and navigate the complexities of the urban frontier – complete with its rich legacies of migration, overlapping cultures, ideas and practices. When residents, community leaders and representatives of communities emerge into brokerage roles (Anwar, 2014; De Wit and Berner, 2009), their proximity to, and sustained relationships with community residents (Massey, 1994) means their social embeddedness and ability to connect and invigorate social energy can be a comparative advantage over other actors, even those with access to the means of coercion. These ‘social brokers’ can co-produce bonds of trust, shared political subjectivities and spatial identities (Milton Santos, in Melgaço and Prouse, 2017), and can simultaneously compel a desire to protect and provide for family, friends and neighbours. This can have disruptive, productive, creative and transformative potential (Bhan, 2019) and contribute to place-making, and local sovereignties can emerge that push-back against the logics of the central state or market (Hansen and Stepputat, 2006).

Social, political and economic life in the frontier can – through brokerage – work against the grain of the political settlement. In this sense, urban frontiers can incubate social and insurgent (Holston, 2009) forms of brokerage which can test out and construct new power structures that lead to a different urban life.

## The setting: Urbanisation, violence and social dynamics in Rio de Janeiro

The WZ was subjected to rapid transformation during the post-World War II period, following decreasing agricultural profitability and urban migration flows from the countryside. Further restructuring during the 1980s and 1990s, linked to the end of military rule, democratisation, political decentralisation and global economic liberalisations, led to the roll-back of state institutions and services in the WZ, rising unemployment and reduced levels of policing.

During these moments, the WZ was particularly affected by market-led urbanisation, as unregulated and often-informal developers mopped up land to maximise investments and returns. Land reform, which tended to exclude those without access to capital or credit (typically women, Afro-Brazilians and low-income families), prompted resistance and 'pushback' from civil society and community leaders. The Landless Workers' Movement organised *ocupações* (or *ocupação* in its singular form; this translates into English as 'occupation' and it involves a large group of people entering an estate and occupying unproductive land) and networks of community leaders lobbied to influence state policies and secure legal changes to open up access to land and critical infrastructure. Many community leaders were able to broker deals with political patrons who had a voice in the formal political system and access to state resources.

A by-product of these rapidly restructuring processes was the expansion of informal and illicit economies, which many marginalised residents turned to in order to survive. The arrival of cocaine in Rio de Janeiro in the 1970s coincided with soaring profitability, and drug gangs expanded rapidly to capitalise on this. As the market became increasingly competitive, they broke into factions and bloody conflicts erupted as they

competed for control over communities from where they could service domestic and international markets.

Searching for ways to mitigate the violence, residents turned to community leaders, friends and relatives within and near to their communities, many of whom had access to the means of violence, typically with connections into the police, military or fire brigade. These actors took the responsibility of 'making safe' and defending the communities where they lived, as well as establishing self-help schemes with essential services and infrastructure for residents. They provided protection for their families and friends and attempted to eradicate drug-trafficking organisations (DTOs). But these actions, in turn, generated a spiralling set of revenge attacks between a variety of players all of whom were contesting urban land, legitimacy and power in the region. These self-defence groups, later known as 'militias', became the dominant armed group in the WZ.

In what follows, I examine how Pamela and Marcela brokered these different aspects of the urban frontier.

### Santo Cristo: The path of low resistance

On the day of the *ocupação*, Pamela and her family walked for hours to Campinha Road. As dusk fell, families gathered and started hacking back the overgrowth. Pamela and her new-born baby, mother and family pitched up near the roadside and lived under a tarpaulin for the first few months before building a make-shift structure from salvaged materials. She remembers how they dealt with flooding, sickness, snakes, mud, bugs and frogs; she was forced to bath her baby in an old popcorn cart. Once most of the residents had built shacks, they started to construct a residents' association building. One of the founding residents, Catalina,

described how they built it through *mutirão* (an indigenous word describing collective mobilisation without hierarchy). They contributed time and what little resources they had. These routine interactions and moments facilitated social bonds, a common sense of purpose and place-based belonging.

After a year of slow progress, a group of local men who 'took care' of the area was invited by a resident to help. The *donos* ('bosses'; now known as militia leaders) gained legitimacy in the community by participating in the *mutirão*, offering help, resources and money. This increased the pace of construction, and it shifted organising power out of the residents' hands. The men assumed leadership roles and became authority figures. They became vigilantes and claimed to protect residents from the threat of DTO violence; according to Catalina, 'they had our best interests at heart'. She recalls how one man, Wellington, also a policeman, used to stay up all night and patrol the community. The first two presidents of the newly formed residents' association were close friends of Wellington; they maintained close relationships with him and relied on him as a patron and sponsor. However, over time, Wellington and the other *donos* left the neighbourhood to go elsewhere as they struggled to finance their operations.

This opened up a space for Pamela to be elected president in 2012; which would have been an improbable outcome for a woman if the *donos* had still directly controlled the community. Having been one of the first to arrive at the *ocupação*, Pamela felt particularly connected to the community and had been especially invested in its social life. She explained how no one else showed the initiative, so she stepped in.

Pamela was left to her own devices to run the residents' association while her husband and the other men in the community were

out at work. However, in the months after her election, a friend of hers and former resident of SC, Lucas, came to her and told her that she could count on him for any support she needed. Lucas worked part-time in a nearby car plant and was also a member of a local militia group. Having grown up in the community, Lucas was much more familiar with the residents than Wellington ever was. Pamela described him as a 'true friend'. 'He's one of the good guys', she told me, before explaining that he *really* cares about the residents. 'One of the reasons', she says, 'is that his father lives next door.' These close, friendly and trusting relationships between residents and militias are common due to shared histories, memories and experiences.

Militias are not typically confined to one community; they can be dispersed through networks. Lucas lives in a middle-class housing development some 500 m down the road. From his home, Lucas coordinates with the other members via WhatsApp. There are no headquarters or offices, and they form 'contracts' with different communities through personal connections. When Lucas's group made a deal with Pamela, the residents welcomed it. Many had felt abandoned since Wellington left. However, there was a sense that protection provided by Wellington had been somehow different. Most residents believed that Wellington had not done it for personal gain. Angela suggested, 'When [he] was around, everything was safer than it is now, there weren't any criminals because he kept everything in order.'

Lucas and his militia wanted to capitalise on the social housing development, *Minha Casa Minha Vida* (MCMV), being built next to SC. After families moved into MCMV, SC residents felt more insecure. Many of the MCMV residents were from low-income or unemployed families, and most had come from dispersed communities across the city,

because of landslides, flooding or forced evictions due to Olympic constructions. Although complaints from SC residents revolved around disruptions to services, utilities and commerce in the area (i.e., pressures on transport, education or healthcare), tensions were aggravated by mentions of ‘criminals’. Even though many residents from SC arrived at the *ocupação* with only the clothes on their backs, there was an effort by SC residents to distance themselves from MCMV residents. SC residents regularly referred to ‘those types of people’ and spoke of frequent criminal, disorderly and violent behaviour inside MCMV, highlighting atmospheres of fear and suspicion.

Pamela claimed that since MCMV had been built, there had been higher incidents of assault, rape and prostitution in the area than before. She explained: ‘When I go in to MCMV, I feel like I’m stepping out of this world and into another. It seems like I go into a capsule and that at any moment some harm will come to me. I don’t like going in there.’ These imaginaries, where MCMV is portrayed as a criminal’s paradise, are laden with discrimination that legitimises Lucas’s militia.

The militia is insurance against a collision of cultural symbols, beliefs, modes of interaction, ideologies and values between different ‘worlds’. As well as protecting against direct and physical forms of violence, the militia divides, keeps separate and protects. Despite the fear that residents have about militias themselves, they continue to be socially legitimised within the context of a greater fear of DTOs. According to popular justifications supporting the militias, if the resident from SC is on the ‘right’ side of this divide, a *cidadão do bem* (‘good citizen’), they have nothing to fear. But some of the militia’s authority derives from the fact they lurk in the shadows and are not visible, even to the knowledgeable eye. Lucas, for example, reassures Pamela that they are stepping

up security with undercover lookouts and panoptic-style surveillance, serving as a cautionary reminder that ‘absence’ can actually be a sign of presence.

Some of Pamela’s ‘successes’ are in her understanding of how fear and insecurity can shape behaviour and shore-up power. When I arrived one afternoon at Pamela’s house, she looked flustered and upset. She told me her son, Antonio, who had left home several years prior, had broken into her house, stolen money and ransacked it.

Later that week, Lucas walked into the residents’ association when I was interviewing Pamela and he asked her about that situation:

**Lucas:** And Antonio?

**Pamela:** What can I do...? You should go over there! I’m so annoyed. How can we arrange it so we can give him... you know... a scare? [laughs].

**Lucas:** We can fix *anything*. The thing is that you can’t regret it afterwards. You just have to be sure.

**Pamela:** Ah, but it’s my personal life...

**Lucas:** I know. So, you can’t regret it.

**Pamela:** I’m kidding, I’m not gonna do *that*.

**Lucas:** We can do anything; the thing is to be sure.

**Pamela:** Nah, I’m messing.

**Lucas:** Just like Ana... Her husband beat her. She called us. I asked if she was sure. She was.

By discussing violence as a way of dealing with social conflict, tension and regaining control, Pamela, as community leader, resident and mother, demonstrates how she endorses, contributes to, and participates in muscular (and masculine) regimes of control and local sovereignty decisions about who can live and who can die. However, practices are not determined by Pamela, or even by

Lucas. If her relationship with Lucas and the militia is to be productive and she is to secure resources for the community from him, Pamela must work within the militia's rules of the game, and the structures determined by the political settlement.

In the months after Lucas's militia began providing security, he introduced Pamela to Luis, a local politician. At the time, the roof of the residents' association building had been damaged by storms and Luis offered to pay for it, if Pamela supported him politically. She did. Pamela explained:

[Luis] gave us presents for the children, meat for barbecues, gas for residents, he can feed a family if they can't afford food or pay for a burial... It's easier for him because he's a militiaman. He's everything within reach. He gets what he wants. His brother-in-law is the militia boss. So, the grocery basket and gas come from them. Shops can't sell gas because of them.

Although Pamela and the residents of SC had gained improved access to resources, services and goods through these relations, there was a trade-off: Pamela was expected to electioneer and the residents were expected to vote for him.

Luis had run in municipal and state elections. In 2014, Pamela delivered hundreds of votes for him, but, although 'he didn't get elected, it could have been the difference between his election, or not', she tells me. With her ability to generate votes, Pamela is aware of her organising power and uses it to negotiate and bargain with different militia actors and politicians for the best deal. During 2017, she deliberated at length about who to make the next electoral pact with, reluctant to be forced into a decision and wanting to take her time: 'I'm going to take a stroll, look over some proposals and I'll see if they're any better', she told Lucas as I sat there, as he tried to convince her to do a deal with another of his politician friends

for the upcoming elections (Luis was not standing this time). Despite Pamela and Lucas's friendship, the informal and trust-based nature of their relationship was intertwined with business-like rigour and professionalism.

That year, Luis mobilised his local supporters to endorse selected politicians and encourage vote transfers. In a Facebook post, he wrote: 'Good morning my friends! The big day is arriving! A day of change and renovation. I count on the help of all of you', with a photo of himself photoshopped next to Leonardo Piccianni, a candidate for Federal Congress and the son of a well-known political titan in Rio de Janeiro, revealing a direct interaction with political settlements on urban and national levels. Whilst these public declarations are easy to locate, the bargaining processes involving rent-exchanges are more difficult to pin down. Financial connections between Luis and politicians in state and federal parliaments have been noted. Regional Electoral Courts' records from 2014 show that Leonardo contributed R\$44,612 to Luis's campaign. In that same campaign, the Electoral Commission also discovered fraud involving undeclared campaign materials between Luis and Leonardo. Whilst this is not conclusive, it demonstrates opaque economic and political connections between local-level political (and militia-linked) personalities and broad base, mainstream, national level political elites with influence in the political settlement.

In spite of this, Pamela and Lucas expressed strong views to me about 'corruption' and slush funds. During the time of this research in April 2017, news stories about the arrests of Jorge Piccianni (Leonardo's father and President of Rio de Janeiro State's Legislative Assembly) and Sérgio Cabral (the former Governor of Rio de Janeiro) in the major anti-corruption probe, *Lava Jato* (Car Wash), were all over the

news. Lucas and Pamela described them as 'rich crooks'. However, in that same conversation (and failing to register the irony) Lucas lamented how *Lava Jato* had made 'doing [local] politics' more difficult for him. He commented how 'politics is in such a bad way', because of this investigation and said, '[the politicians] are now scared of being investigated so they won't do any deals anymore'. This is one of the reasons, they told me, that Luis decided not to run as a candidate in the 2018 elections.

Whilst, at the local level, practices straddling legal and illegal spheres are understood as a form of survival and licit entrepreneurialism, at the national level they are depicted as criminality and corruption. This analysis reveals how ideas (about the ethics of rent-seeking) can sit in tension with one another and be framed differently in different spaces to obscure the power relations underpinning them. There are inherent tensions in brokerage practices that 'go-with-the-grain', which are boxed-in by the needs and demands of populations.

The next section examines an alternative brokerage approach before a discussion section brings together a more substantive analysis.

### **Floresta da Campinha: Going against the grain**

Marcela was born into a community in a remote region of Uganda in the 1950s. Her mother knew well the violence her daughter would face as a young woman in their tribe, so she escaped with her when she was a child. They travelled to South Sudan and through Sub-Saharan Africa before crossing the Atlantic to Mexico and travelling overland to Brazil. Seven years after leaving Uganda, they arrived in Rio de Janeiro.

In 1996, when Marcela was in her 30s, single, a domestic worker and living with her three children, her neighbour told her about

an *ocupação* that had been planned by the *donos*, specifically for women, children and the elderly. On that planned night, Marcela joined 50 or so women to cut through the barbed wired fence along the roadside. Burning tyres for light, they beat down the forest through the night. Marcela told me how motivated she had been by the energy and optimism of the women. However, other accounts suggest Marcela's recollections were romanticised, perhaps as she was trying to block out that the *donos* had organised and coordinated the invasion for the women.

There were always tensions between the women and the *donos*. The women felt disrespected by the *donos*, who used to sit on the street corner opposite the site as the women built the association building. They drank beer and criticised the women's work. Once the women had finished building the association hut, the *donos* then used the building for their own private meetings, barbecues and parties and erected iron railings and padlocked the entrance.

Many of the residents saw Marcela as the natural leader of the community and asked her to put herself forward for president. She was shy at the prospect as she did not think she was qualified. 'I had no proposals and not even an administrative team to help me with the duties', she told me. Eventually, though, she was persuaded and put herself forward. She wrote a manifesto for creating 'radical change'. She read it aloud during one of the residents' meetings, pledging to help build a community 'where good people live surrounded by goodness in the greenness of nature, and where the whole neighbourhood will be healthy, educated, cultured and where the elderly and children will have their place in this space'. Even though one of the *donos* stood and assumed he would win, Marcela won by a landslide.

In the weeks after, the *donos'* power seeped away and the women reclaimed

important spaces, such as the residents' association building. Strong social bonds developed between the women. However, these bonds were not always epiphenomena of encouraging, positive experiences. Some of the most unifying experiences the women shared were the tragic murders and disappearances of their sons. Understanding the full consequences of these deaths, beyond statistics, means we must also pay attention to the indirect, and overlooked effects of domination and control over the mothers and their bodies.

Maria, Marcela's neighbour and friend, asked if I had ever imagined what it would be like to lose a child or how it felt to not be able to bury my child. I replied that, of course, I could not begin to. Maria's son had been murdered in a 'microwave' – a torture and killing technique where a victim is put in the centre of a stack of tyres and burnt alive. Her voice cracked as she explained it. She shared experiences of other mothers in Campinha with me too, demonstrating solidarity with mothers who had had similar experiences. 'We've got fifteen or so mothers here who have lost their sons, who've had their sons killed, and whose sons have disappeared... They killed Marcela's just over there', she said, as she pointed to a small hatch across the street. It was Marcela's bar.

The day before it happened, residents had been enjoying a birthday party on the residents' association terrace, barbecuing and drinking beer. Around midnight Joaquim, Marcela's son, arrived. Half an hour later Maria had noticed two cars parked with their full beams glaring in the direction of the residents' association. Commenting how strange it was, the women decided it was time to call it a night. The next morning, Joaquim left early for work and Marcela went into the town centre. When Joaquim had arrived home for lunch, he sat in his mother's kitchen and ate the meal she had left out for him. As he was eating, two cars

pulled up outside the house and eight men poured out. They blocked off the street entrances and told everyone in the street to go inside their houses. They forced their way into Marcela's home and told Joaquim to get up. Marcela's neighbour heard Joaquim shout, 'No man, not here! If you want to kill me, then not here...! Take me somewhere else, please!' The gunmen yelled at him, 'Get down! Lie on the floor and you're going to die!' After several loud shots the gunmen left. Neighbours ran into the house and found Joaquim's dismembered body. Maria recalled graphic details, as if they had been etched in her mind. 'His brains, the soles of his feet, his thighs... Every fucking piece of him came out. You saw inside his head', she recounted. The neighbours rang Marcela immediately. 'Where are you, Marcela? You must come back! They've just killed your son!'

Though no one can say with absolute certainty, the women are confident the gunmen were militiamen. But no one was ever arrested for Joaquim's murder and none of this was reported in a newspaper, or to police.

Experiences of death and violence shape everyday life. For most of the women in FC, the space where they live shapes and controls multiple aspects of their lives and everyday practice. These spaces are deeply gendered in the way they affect the women. Not only for mothers who have lost their sons to the militias, but also for everyday life for many women without sons. Women employed in domestic work typically leave home early and return late at night in the darkness. Irene shapes her daily routine around these fears. She used to take two extra buses to get to work in order to avoid walking down the road on her own at night, adding three hours onto her daily commute. She tells me that once she arrives in the community, she feels safe. The women expressed more fear of the night than of the day, and these fears shape

their daily rhythms. However, these fears are not necessarily to do with darkness, but with the patriarchal power and masculine regimes of coercion and domination exerting control over female bodies.

Stories about death and violence are continuously narrated as if an endless replay and analysis of events can help residents deal with and make sense of the arbitrary nature of violence. But the retelling of violence also reinforces fear, insecurity and tumult. It fuels a cycle in which fear is negated and reproduced simultaneously, and in which violence is counteracted, but also amplified. The stories of the women tend to gravitate towards a well-known killing site; yet, their stories are diffuse, diverse and without any notable protagonist or geographical centre; they are dispersed through the frontier. Campinha Road can be understood as an intersection of the frontier where old and new orders juxtapose against one another, embedded through complex and layered histories of violence.

The violated and affected bodies of the women are politicised ones. The practice of violence, therefore, reinforces the structural conditions that lead to endless cycles of imitation and representation. As victims and narrators of violent practice, residents are directly involved in producing spaces of fear. This links locally imagined forms of social order and subordination, simultaneously reinforcing the positionality of those in positions of power and discriminating against victims in positions of weakness. After countless stories of discreet and deeply troubling episodes of assassination, rape and torture, the meaning of space evolved over time.

The experiences of violence, death and fear profoundly shaped the political subjectivities of the women. They developed strategies to deal with the discourses, cultures and ideas that manifested through spatial practices and narratives. One of the most blatant strategies was practised by Maria, who

marched into the favela where her son was executed and demanded the return of his body so she could bury him and mourn his death. Provoked by death, trauma and loss and forced into confrontation with a militia, Maria's experience seems to have stimulated a spatial praxis unique to her experience as a black, marginalised woman. Whilst militias and the repressive politics surrounding them dominate culturally, exploit economically and dispossess territory violently by controlling a subjugated body, there continue to be forms of agency, and residents still have capabilities to challenge and contest the political structures that shape their lives.

Experiences of violence and death resulting from a particular regime of power can stimulate social struggle and lead to activism and radicalisation that attempt to occupy, deploy and create alternative spatialities. 'Africa is very different from here. Here the women dominate', Marcela told me.

By recognising their agency, the women tried to attend to the survival needs of the community, rather than coalescing around and appeasing militia structures of control and domination. Militias have attempted to 'take over' FC on several occasions. Each time they made an offer, Marcela politely refused. 'She knows how to talk their language. She's good with that', Maria told me. 'Oh, maybe not right now, we don't need it, perhaps in the future...', she says, paraphrasing Marcela. The militias respect Marcela and the work she does. This suggests power does not necessarily rest only with the means of violence, but it is also about organisational power, the means to mobilise support from populations, and social energy.

Marcela's daughter, Denise, runs daily youth clubs in the residents' association. A banner hanging outside reads: 'WELCOME TO EVERYONE! THE AGROECOLOGY YOUTH CLUB OF CAMPINHA'. Denise invited me into a meeting with teenagers

from MCMV. As I walked in, I noticed brightly coloured paintings with images of dancers, students and children reading and flying kites, from different races, backgrounds, genders and ages. Denise explained that the youth club was a project funded by the Municipal Secretary of Social Development (MSSD) and managed by the Social Assistance Reference Centre (CRAS). Posters and placards hung on the walls, and they politicised issues of malnutrition and food poverty. On the table at one end of the room, one of the 'snack packs' supplied for the teenagers by CRAS, consisting of sugary snacks and plastic cartons with sweet drinks, had been deconstructed with labels highlighting sugar, trans-fat content and non-recyclable packaging.

That afternoon, Denise invited Daniela, a local NGO activist, to lead a discussion on 'environmental racism'. The content of the discussions, with a focus on violence, militias and structural racism, surprised me at first because the façade of the residents' association made it look as though it was a non-politicised space for children. Beyond the links with food politics, there were few signs of activism. Denise explained how their situation made these conversations common. Even though it was a state-funded programme with a state-designed curriculum, Denise and the teenagers critically engaged with it, questioning the curriculum, the food supplies and the decision making of those in CRAS and MSSD.

Denise showed me their community garden with its fresh, organic acerola, herbs, spices and fruits. The teenagers treated the garden as a safe meeting place where they could relax, socialise and discuss their experiences with the women, while planting, repotting and weeding. The ways they tended the garden and interacted with one another highlighted the generative role of the garden, bringing together individuals and communities in new, politicised and collectivised

modes of production. The teenagers took seedlings home to their families, which had effects of generating discussions and politicising family members.

The group have also been active participants in the Carioca Urban Agriculture Network (CAU), which has allowed them to sell their produce at organic, community markets across the city. I attended markets with the group at the State University of Rio de Janeiro where I saw how the teenagers interacted with customers and stall owners from diverse communities. They compared experiences of urban agriculture and urban frontier life.

On the one hand, these activities helped to open up the possibilities for the teenagers to reimagine their region and stretch their imaginations about their own identities. One of the teenagers, Marco, put himself forward and was selected to host a national television series about the importance of nutrition and healthy eating. He told me that the CAU helped him to develop his knowledge of nutrition and build his self-confidence to allow him to pursue new, previously unthinkable ventures.

On the other hand, these activities have broad, 'bottom up' political effects, helping to shape and contribute towards debates about urban land policy, food sovereignty and violence in marginal spaces. By sharing experiences and establishing common codes and practices, instruments of struggle emerge, and new meanings can be pinned on urban development, such as the right to survive and alternative uses of land.

Participation of the youths from Campinha in the CAU demonstrates how alternative modes of production can be successful, even if only partially. Through fairs, selling directly to households and through public programmes such as the National Schools Feeding Program and the Food Acquisition Program, CAU have sold more than 33 tons of organic, urban-grown

products. By publishing a *Popular Articulation Plan*, CAU has increased political pressure which has slowed down, and even prevented urban planning policies that allow construction on land in the WZ (e.g., Municipal Decree 37958). By occupying space, disputing urban planning and reclaiming control over land, these activities have helped to shape a narrative on urban space and set new parameters within the political settlement, as they relate to land policy.

This section has demonstrated how the women (and teenagers) of FC have identified their agency as political and spatial subjects; they have engaged in the construction of an imagined and utopian community through their own, reclaimed version of *mutirão*. Their everyday acts of resistance and claims to urban space establish non-violent political practices in which new significations are assigned to space, bodies and gender. Identifying these practices reveals how they have asserted agency to 'deal with' the politics of space and challenge narratives of oppression. Instead, they are imagining (and, perhaps, realising) alternative futures.

### **Discussion: Social brokerage in urban frontiers**

Residents of these two communities live under a shadow of violence and have a consequential hope for survival. However, variations in the cases demonstrate how different ideas of hope and imagined futures can be intertwined with the ways that territory, security and politics are enacted, performed and understood. All individuals from these communities depend in some way on coercive militia rule. These dependencies vary, however, from direct ones where residents rely on militias to access resources, to more indirect ones, that may appear to have an absence of militia, but actually the militia is

lingering in the background ready to pounce at any moment.

Dependencies are shaped, in part, by the different ways that individuals and collectives muddle through and respond to the complex challenges of urban frontier life. Although responses in the communities are never homogenous, the different outcomes are shaped by the sum of collective experiences. In SC, whilst most residents 'bought in' to the othering of their MCMV neighbours, many of the residents in FC 'saw through' this and empathised with their neighbours. A local politics of fear – or of hope – can shape meanings and subjectivities surrounding violence. For SC residents, holding onto hope of a more secure, prosperous future – through militias – helps them to escape from the threat of DTOs. However, this involves a trade-off: everyday practices of place-making in SC correspond to dominant discourses on urban violence, even though this politically limits their imagined futures, precisely because it is prescriptive.

FC revealed some different (and unexpected) findings as they relate to the ability of residents to reimagine and reinvent their futures through challenging conditions. Drawing on their own experiences, the women of FC were able to disarm MCMV othering and reject the justifications for militias, who claimed to want to 'protect' and manage their community. Legitimacy is fundamental for coercive rule to succeed in the long-term because violent actors need to shore-up rents and territory to maintain competitiveness and holding power. Without legitimacy, militias rely only on pure raw, despotic force to dominate and territorialise. But this is not sustainable. To be successful brokers, militias must fall into the grain of norms, ideas and beliefs to appease the collective experiences of residents and be seen to support and 'deal with' violent exclusions and vulnerabilities of emotions and fears. At the same time, they must fit within the

structures and parameters of the political settlement. When they do not, there is mismatch which typically leads to rejection.

Different outcomes depend on the ability of communities to articulate themselves collectively through needs-based demands, and social brokers are central to this. However, the complex histories and spatialities that make up the community are not always embraced in full – or understood with sufficient nuance – by the social broker. To what extent they do depends on the agency of that broker, how much their own ideas and norms, and their relationships with other residents align, and how they ‘match up’, or not, with other residents and with militias. That said, community leadership is not straightforward, and social brokerage seems to work best when the broker maintains a degree of opaqueness; they are Janus-headed characters functioning as gatekeepers and go-betweens for different types of power, meaning they need to hold back information. The social broker can, therefore, be fundamental for shaping local politics and influencing ideas and beliefs of residents. This means that different types of holding power can emerge through the ability of social brokerage to stimulate social energy, public action and mobilisation (both spontaneous and organised).

At the same time, it is important not to idealise social brokerage and overplay the capacity of communities to ‘resist’ and reject coercive rule: all residents in these communities continue to live within a broader system of violence-based rules, regulations and expectations. The murders of the sons of the women of FC are testament to the danger implicit in social brokerage and leadership when coercive rules are challenged with everyday practice.

## Conclusions

In this article, I have examined how different communities of the urban margins deal with

living under coercive systems of militia rule. I have understood local politics and everyday life as brokered relations and situated them within urban political processes.

By focusing on frontier brokerage dynamics, below and beyond ‘criminal’ interpretations of marginal spaces, and by situating them in the interstices between contrasting worlds, this paper shows that social brokerage in urban frontiers has the potential to produce radically different outcomes and futures contingent on agency, experience, ideas, values and cultures. These dynamics are bi-directional. Acts of place-making (especially anti-hegemonic, place-based activism) can guide social brokers; but the parameters set by political settlements can limit possibilities for place-based imaginaries and lock social brokers into dominant urban social relations.

This paper supports the idea that urban frontiers are sites of experimentation where new forms of politics and modes of governance are tested out. Whilst these experiments may facilitate the reproduction of hegemonic power structures, they can also produce alternative, insurgent forms of resistance, anti-politics and new, radical forms of politics. Alternative and non-violent modes of production are possible and can be (partially) successful when incubated and preserved. In other words, culturally specific, geographically contingent and historically shaped political and social dynamics (which manifest through everyday place-making, acts of resistance and discourses on fear and violence) matter as they guide social brokers to question, or collaborate with, broader networks of power and/or resistance. This is because it is here, in the urban frontier, where the rules of the game are least clear.

Pathologies of the margins, therefore, are less a consequence of state ‘weakness’ and ‘absence’, and more how a variety of social and political orders – underpinned by different agency, ideas and beliefs – contest one

another in a frontier process and go with or against the grain (or somewhere in between) of the political settlement. Importantly, marginal political activities have the potential to push-back against coercive systems of rule and test out alternatives for a more equitable, less violent future of state and society relations.

When social brokerage dynamics are successfully redirecting flows, processing claims, managing conflicts and jumping scales, then there may be intriguing research insights available for urban analysts and policy-makers. If social brokers can curb some expressions of coercion and influence elites to accommodate local structures to maintain relevance, legitimacy and power, it means they are acting as entry points and gate-keepers to local spaces, helping to determine which structures succeed and which do not.

An unstable mix of old and new institutions, forms of order and understandings about the relationship between state and society can lead to unexpected outcomes. There are hopes for alternative futures in urban margins that retain radical dimensions, which do not have to be repressive, but can, instead, be transformative and mobilising. If marginal socialities, politics and economies have developmental effects beyond the margins, we need to reimagine urban development and state structures *with* the margins, and not just in relation to them.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank those residents of the WZ of Rio de Janeiro with whom I conducted this research. My thanks also go to Ellen van Holstein, Jonathan Goodhand and Tucker Landesman for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful feedback.

### Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### ORCID iD

Nicholas Pope  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0019-5931>

### References

- Anwar NH (2014) Urban transformations: Brokers, collaborative governance and community building in Karachi's periphery. *South Asian History and Culture* 5(1): 75–92.
- Araujo M and Cortado TJ (2020) A Zona Oeste do Rio de Janeiro, fronteira dos estudos urbanos? *Dilemas – Revista de Estudos de Conflito e Controle Social* 13(1): 7–30.
- Bhan G (2019) Notes on a Southern urban practice. *Environment and Urbanization* 31(2): 639–654.
- Boege V, Brown MA and Clements KP (2009) Hybrid political orders, not fragile states. *Peace Review* 21(1): 13–21.
- Brenner N, Marcuse P and Mayer M (eds) (2012) *Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Caldeira TP (2000) *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- De Wit J and Berner E (2009) Progressive patronage? Municipalities, NGOs, CBOs and the limits to slum dwellers' empowerment. *Development and Change* 40(5): 927–947.
- Gay R (1999) The broker and the thief: A parable (reflections on popular politics in Brazil). *Luso-Brazilian Review* 36(1): 49–70.
- Goodfellow T (2018) Seeing political settlements through the city: A framework for comparative analysis of urban transformation. *Development and Change* 49(1): 199–222.
- Hansen TB and Stepputat F (2006) Sovereignty revisited. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35: 295–315.
- Harvey D (2006) *Spaces of Global Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Holston J (2009) Insurgent citizenship in an era of global urban peripheries. *City & Society* 21(2): 245–267.
- James D (2011) The return of the broker: Consensus, hierarchy, and choice in South African land reform. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17(2): 318–338.

- Khan M (2010) Political settlements and the governance of growth-enhancing institutions. Unpublished Working Paper. Available at: <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/id/eprint/9968> (accessed 14 March 2022).
- Lindquist J (2015) *Anthropology of Brokers and Brokerage*. *International Encyclopaedia of Social and Behavioral Science*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp. 870–874.
- McGregor J and Chatiza K (2019) Frontiers of urban control: Lawlessness on the city edge and forms of clientalist statecraft in Zimbabwe. *Antipode* 51(5): 1554–1580.
- Massey DB (1994) *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Meehan P and Goodhand J (2018) Spatialising political settlements. *Accord* 4: 14–19.
- Melgaço L and Prouse C (eds) (2017) *Milton Santos: A Pioneer in Critical Geography from the Global South*, vol. 11. London: Springer.
- Migdal JS (2001) *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mitlin D (2020) The politics of shelter: Understanding outcomes in three African cities. ESID Working Paper No 145. Manchester: Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre, The University of Manchester. Available at: [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3661561](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3661561) (accessed 14 March 2022).
- Pope N (2022) Militias going rogue: Social dilemmas and coercive brokerage in Rio de Janeiro's urban frontier. *Journal of International Development*. Epub ahead of print 9 February 2022. DOI: 10.1002/jid.3636.
- Rasmussen MB and Lund C (2018) Reconfiguring frontier spaces: The territorialization of resource control. *World Development* 101: 388–399.
- Sanin FG (2019) *Clientelistic Warfare: Paramilitaries and the State in Colombia (1982–2007)*. Lausanne, Switzerland: Peter Lang.
- Schultze-Kraft M (2017) Understanding organised violence and crime in political settlements: Oil wars, petro-criminality and amnesty in the Niger delta. *Journal of International Development* 29(5): 613–627.
- Sivaramakrishnan K (2019) Framing essay: Assembling frontier urbanizations. In: Cons J and Eilenberg M (eds) *Frontier Assemblages: The Emergent Politics of Resource Frontiers in Asia*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 131–137.
- Ventura Z (1994) *Cidade partida*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
- Walther OJ (2015) Business, brokers and borders: The structure of West African trade networks. *The Journal of Development Studies* 51(5): 603–620.