



PAPEL CRÍTICO 91

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Architectures of Hope: Infrastructural Citizenship and Class Mobility in Brazil's Public Housing

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Páginas: 362

Editorial: University of Michigan Press, 2022

Ciudad: Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (Argentina)

Hope was fundamental to mobilize the electorate in 2022 Brazilian presidential election. In recent-elected president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva campaign, catchphrases endorsed an expectation of care and nourishment to most poor and middle-class Brazilians². Amid such backdrop, Moisés Kopper's book, *Architectures of Hope: Infrastructural Citizenship and Class Mobility in Brazil's Public Housing*, provides us with analytical tools to examine what became one of Lula's Working Party's highest achievements in mobilizing hope: the public housing program *Minha Casa Minha Vida* (MCMV). By reflecting on the book's central concept of *material hope*, intimate ethnographic accounts reveal the fabrication of Porto Alegre's model MCMV project *Residencial Bento Gonçalves* (RBG).

In Kopper's investigation, hope works through a double temporality, related to how one's past of suffering metamorphoses into future aspirations, grounded on materiality that beholds symbiotic relationships with subjectivities. Thus, beyond the spheres of feelings,

¹ Funded by FNRS-FRESH at the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie des Mondes Contemporains (LAMC)/Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB)

² "I want to see hope again in the looks of our people"; "The hope is now Lula"; "There is Lula; our hope is reborn", "The shine [of Lula's star] will enlighten hope and with faith I go to a better future" are some examples of catchphrases. See, for example, in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSPDV60nGUQ>. Last access: 01/02/2023.

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hope is also the materialization of potentials and becomings. Such thought makes it possible to critically examine Brazil's recent past, starting from the political left with Lula (2002-2009) and Dilma (2010-2016) and its turn to the right since Temer's (2016-2017) *coup d'état* and its extreme expression with Bolsonaro (2018-2022). However, most importantly, it provides us with the wonder of what Brazil's future may uphold and how hope might be materialized in its individual, institutional, critical, deferred, perspective, and even negative forms.

The eligibility for MCMV's public housing program follows specific socioeconomic requirements, such as having an income lower than three minimum wages, with priority to single mothers, elderly people, and/or a family with members requiring special needs. Unfortunately, opportunities for public housing are always smaller than the number of received applications. This is a point stressed by the author, as it leads to the poor developing a new class sensorial related to struggles of being between the (previous) poor and the (future) rich. In the case of RBG, grassroots political activism played an important role in choosing who would become eligible for an apartment. In this context, Kopper showcases how technical requirements were not the only determinants of the applicants' eligibility. Codespa, the bottom-up activist association fighting for housing rights in Porto Alegre, was chosen by the municipality to select one-third of the beneficiaries for RBG's vacancies. Kopper sees, first, a process of infrastructural citizenship taking shape as Codespa organizes activities that engage future homeowners to build a model community. He mainly tracks everyday materialities, such as t-shirts, log lists, and slogans, and the technologies upholding the association's selection methodology. Secondly, Kopper follows what he calls *policy afterlives* by tracking beneficiaries as they actualized their homeownership dreams and by mapping new political and collective developments in RBG, the emergence of a middle-class sensorial and people's struggle to maintain themselves in their new position as consumer-citizens.

The book's form and organization are led by MCMV's housing logic. It first describes processes prior to moving to RBG through Codespa's mobilization, and then the policy's afterlife, when selected beneficiaries settled into their new homes. The book's main characters also follow MCMV's criteria: they are low-income people with priority given to single mothers, elderly people, and families with members with special needs. Kopper's book is filled with reflexive pills about his own positionality and how his presence has affected the research context. It turns explicit the care nurtured with his interlocutors and the commitment to re-tell their stories with empathy and respect, including those he has actively shared with while being there.

The first part is an extended introduction that summarized the book by describing the research interlocutors and the central concepts deployed to achieve the proposed theoretical aspirations. Part II is about "Infrastructural Citizenship", a "form of social membership in urban housing and infrastructure that emerges out of technomoral interactions between materials, socio-technical procedures, and subjectivities" (p. 127). It tracks the poor's pursuit of crafting a model community when leaving peri-urban informal settlements to live in an urban condominium. Chapter one, "The Making of a Model Community," tackles how Codespa managed to mobilize individual hopes and transform them into collective paths for future expectations among beneficiaries and state and market actors. Chapter two, "The Machine of Worthiness," is about Codespa's use of materialities (banners, t-shirts, food baskets...) as artifacts of participation, and technologies (such as computerized log lists that track participation in meetings) as indexers of applicant's worthiness. In this techno-moral

process, institutional technologies mingle with the moral criteria of Codespa's leaders, the latter pushing for technical discourses that enacted MCMV's requirements to perform a language of transparency and merit. The third chapter, "Waiting and Hoping", attends to people's public testimonies of precariousness. Through the endorsement of Codespa's leaders and state and market representatives, these testimonies generate a surplus of worthiness that motivates the future beneficiaries and Codespa members to transform their waiting time into an active form of hope. The fourth and last chapter of Part II, "Cartographies of Well-Being," is an intimate report about Dona Hilda, whose life story has been mobilized by Codespa's leaders as a model to be mirrored by other members in attempts to transform individual hopes into a collective and institutional form of hope. This is how the pursuit of infrastructural citizenship, according to Kopper, led to new forms of differentiation among the poor: "In Brazil's post-neoliberalism, differences in political subjectivity were morally grounded in the antithetical images of those 'deserving' of aid and those 'undeserving' of public resources." (p. 296).

The book's third part, "Middle-Class Sensorial", analyzes hope's modulations when beneficiaries transit from being peri-urban poor to becoming middle-class consumer-citizens living in condominiums. Chapter five, "Topographies of Consumption", traces how beneficiaries' ideals of the good life are made to fit into the (material) practicalities of well-being, generating a form of critical hope. In other words, when becoming consumer-citizens, budgets must be managed and hope must be calculated to avoid its disintegration into deferred hope. The sixth chapter, "Democracies of Hope," tracks gossip and rumors amid the emergence of new democratic organizations, where hopes circulate to rearrange the materiality and sociality of the condominium's architecture. These new configurations, as when residents withdrew to their nuclear families when embracing consumption, are defined as *private democracies*. "Infrastructuring Class" is Part III's last chapter. Here, the condominium's surveillance and security systems are analyzed as material inscriptions upon which the now consumer-citizens safeguard their hopes and aspirations, reinforcing the differentiation between themselves and non-selected Codespa members.

The conclusion is a fresh look at the book's content based on acknowledging its main concepts and theoretical framework. Kopper proposes that technomoral differentiation emerging from the poor "may offer elements to help grasp the political polarization that persists in Brazilian society to this date" (p. 303). Though the turn to private democracies has avoided negative hope, "the forcible undoing of hopes that can no longer be grounded" (p. 303), it affected individuals that had been denied access to housing and those who have been disillusioned with politics. In this sense, the way that Kopper mapped hope's architecture when circulating in a context of material infrastructure, as is MCMV, can provide insight into how the low-income population came to support far-right politics in Brazil's recent history. However, it can also shed light on the construction of more inclusive and socially just successful stories, such as *RBG*.

From one chapter to another, specific methodologies are highlighted, proving their value in the construction of Kopper's research. Besides participant observation, ethnography's main path for investigation, the author has deployed oral histories to register personal trajectories, quantitative surveys for comparative purposes over time, and audiovisual tools to improve his relationship and data collection. In Chapter 1, it is Kopper's camera that allows him to navigate with his research interlocutors to a previously failed MCMV project in Porto Alegre. The invitation by Codespa members to visit these failed projects and record their

mistakes was intended to be presented during Codespa's meetings to the participants and pinpoint what was necessary for their collectivity to build a model community. Doing so would prepare them to deal with their new way of life after moving to the condominium. Chapter 4 is an intimate and in-depth perspective of Dona Hilda, the 95 years-old model character of *RBG*. It follows her storytelling and discourses to ground the theoretical debate about ordinary life and affect theory in such a materially charged context. Finally, in chapter 6, quantitative surveys "assess residents' socioeconomic status and political and cultural dispositions across time" (p. 249). The survey, for example, showed how vocabularies used by beneficiaries to describe their current socioeconomic situation had transformed since living in the condominium, moving away from left-leaning terms such as 'worker' and 'popular class' towards 'middle-class.' Such data allowed the author to conclude in the following chapter (7) that the middle-class sensorial is processual and must be understood at once as an objective reality, language, and material experience. In other words, history, language, and experience are what reshape the city's topography and the infrastructures that mediate practices and class narratives.

When it comes to conceptual language, the first impression is a challenging one. At several moments, Kopper unifies complex words to form terms that accumulate their complicatedness and/or generate new ones, such as "affective topographies" (p. 193), "dual temporalities of historical/political/economic/spatial transformation *and* human becoming" (p. 282) and "techno-financial-housing crisis" (p. 291). However, as the book progresses and we get used to his linguistic precision, his organizational skills emerge in didactical ways, noticeably through the availability of extremely instructive tables and graphics that translate intricacy into apprenticeship. In addition, each chapter's conclusion summarizes its main thoughts and concepts to be introduced in practical ways in the next one, building up a chain of conceptual events.

In attempts to summarize such conceptual chain, *RBG's* story begins with *individual hope* and its collective mobilization into *institutional hope* for the pursuit of an ideal of the good life. For institutionalizing hope has a material grounding which includes the artifacts and technologies that keep people hoping and justify their time of waiting. This process is based on a *machine of worthiness* that ranks beneficiaries according to their merit, although it tacitly includes moral criteria that are also materially grounded. Pursuing infrastructural citizenship and crafting a model community establishes a *collective meritocracy*, which enacts a differentiation between the "deserving poor" and the "undeserving poor." This separation, evidently, is moral: not all poor would be prepared to live in a condominium, as it requires specific skillsets and practices, such as a collective consciousness, a secure monthly income to pay for all kinds of bills, not throwing cigarettes through the window, and to keep the patio clean. It is necessary to realize that the latter is not an extension of the house anymore, as in their previous informal peri-urban settlements.

The conceptual chain continues after the settlement in the new apartments towards the development of a *middle-class sensorial*. Beneficiaries included in low-income markets become *consumer-citizens*, and their hopes are activated and mobilized by the collective infrastructure of the condominium instead of Codespa's political mobilization. To avoid disillusion and *negative hope*, many adapted their hope to their budget (*critical hope*); others had to postpone their ideals of well-being to preserve it (*deferred hope*); and some projected hope into the future generation (*prospective hope*). The withdrawal to *private democracies* was a protective strategy from *negative hope*, and it pointed to how upward social mobility

was intertwined with the development of a middle-class sensorial - that is, "a moving set of images through which first-time homeowners conceptualize physical belonging and socioeconomic mobility within the city" (p. 23).

Throughout this conceptual chain, the circulation of hope is always materially grounded. In other words, it is *material* hope, a life-altering possibility that highlights the "entanglements of grassroots and post-neoliberal institutional politics, the pursuit of value through marketed infrastructures, and the projection of life into enduring futures" (p.36). As Kopper proposes, material hope's double temporality allows for ethnographies of the future that draw

"from past structures of opportunity and desire but continually reorient[s] these targets to project them into sustainable futures. As people interact with the materialities of participation and consumption, they transition from and seek to overcome conventional class hierarchies to create unforeseen paths toward the future." (p. 298)

Material hope's framework, therefore, seems useful to understand bottom-up and grassroots movements and their afterlife in post-neoliberal contexts. For example, in my ethnographic field site in the Brazilian Amazon, bottom-up indigenous associations work with the conservation of socio-biodiversity and the protection of their territory. Concrete actions come with infrastructural improvements, such as enhancing flour houses [casas de farinha] and agroforestry systems to counter deforestation and increase the production of regional food. Hope is mobilized to form a model community, albeit its material infrastructure is wooden houses combined with fruit trees and medicinal herbs, flour houses with access to rivers, as well as with the constant circulation of gasoline and snuff-tobacco. Associations mediate access to partnerships, while indigenous people become, similarly to Kopper's case, 'beneficiaries' of NGO projects or of the Brazilian state. Internally, these associations' function by another kind of "machine of worthiness", with log lists tracking its members' participation and the payment of their monthly fees. To refer to technomorality, this "machine" seems central to materialize hoped-for ideals by determining which community merits to be included as project beneficiaries, while triggering a chain of events that might culminate with categorical differentiations. However, which criteria determine this machine that selects a community to become a beneficiary? It seems that the framework offered by *material hope* allows to investigate how abstract ideas become concrete configurations of the good life throughout distinct settings. Hope and its material contingency will provide comparative context to comprehend how collectives of hoping individuals differentiate themselves from whom they were by becoming whom they hope to be, especially in times of materially limited resources.