Slum politics: Community leaders, everyday needs, and utopian aspirations in Recife, Brazil

Martijn Koster and Pieter A. de Vries

Abstract: This article envisages slum dwellers' politics in Recife, Brazil as a realm of possibility in which care and recognition are central. Community leaders are its main facilitators as articulators of slum dwellers' needs and aspirations. The article's notion of slum politics is an elaboration of Chatterjee's (2004) ideas on popular politics as a "politics of the governed." Yet the article critiques the governmentality perspective for its inability to envisage a politics of hope and possibility. It distinguishes among slum politics, governmental politics (projects and programs), and electoral politics (voting), which are entwined and interdependent, but different. Zooming in on a community leader's urban agriculture project, the article argues that this project, which from an outsiders' perspective may be considered non-viable, provided slum dwellers with possibilities to strive for community solidarity and personal recognition. Slum politics, the article concludes, is about claiming the right to be counted and recognized, and about the care for the other.

Keywords: Brazil, community leaders, governmentality, popular politics, slums (favelas)

Understanding slum politics

In this article we elaborate on the idea that slum dwellers engage in a kind of politics that opens up to a realm of possibility, outside the controlling practices of governmentality. Although their politics and its consequences are often of a seemingly ephemeral and provisional nature, due to the precarious circumstances of life in the slum, we argue that it is pivotal in creating a sense of community and catering to aspirations to be recognized as "full human beings" (Boff and Boff 1987: 8). Through an ethnographic case, we set out to show that slums can be the terrains of a politics of possibility. We depart from a tendency, present in popular media and much academic literature, to see slum dwellers as victims of a clientelist political system, impelled to sell their votes to manipulative politicians in return for favors. Within this view the slum is a domain of a populist politics with no space for reflection about the kinds of commu-

nities that slum dwellers would like to construct. In doing so, we also critique ways of theorizing about governmentality that provide little possibilities for imagining radically different worlds.

In the context of Brazil, a number of works (Gay 1994; Herkenhoff 1995; Magalhães 1998; Nielsen 2002; Pandolfi and Grynszpan 2003) is positive about the internal dynamics of slum politics while focusing on the capacity of local leaders to engage with the political system, and to reach outcomes that benefit the community as a whole, such as public works and social investment. Yet the basic assumption remains that slum dwellers engage in politics to take advantage of opportunities offered by the political system in return for votes and other forms of support. The problem with this assumption, we argue, is that it keeps to a middle- and upper-class point of view in which politics in the slum is narrowed down to slum dwellers' participation in governmental programs, responses to external interventions, involvement in political parties, and electoral campaigns, or clientelism.

Although the politics of slum dwellers is entwined with governmental and electoral politics and clientelism, we argue that it comprises much more, and cannot be understood according to the logics inherent in externalist—or scholastic (Auyero 2000; Bourdieu 1990)—conceptualizations. Slum politics is, as we show, about organizing life in a broad sense, ranging from family life, to making a living, to dreaming about the future. It contains a wider realm of practices than what is usually referred to as the political process with its specific and professional skills.

We contend that we need to look at the logics of slum politics from the perspectives of slum dwellers. The main protagonists of slum politics are local community leaders who articulate the needs and aspirations of other slum dwellers, while competing with each other for their support. We zoom in on Chão de Estrelas (henceforth Chão) in Recife, Northeastern Brazil, the slum where we conducted research.[1] By studying an urban agricultural project coordinated by a community leader in Chão, we elaborate on what slum politics is about. Before

doing so, we discuss the similarities between our notion of slum politics and what Chatterjee (2004) denominates "popular politics," and the distinction among slum politics, governmental politics, and electoral politics.

Popular politics and governmental politics

Chatterjee's *The politics of the governed* (2004) focuses on the politics of poor people, understood not as pre-political or backward but as a politics with its own parameters and logics. He argues that popular politics does "not necessarily presume any particular institutional form" although it is often "conditioned by the functions and activities of modern governmental systems that have now become part of the expected functions of government anywhere" (Chatterjee 2004: 3). Popular politics should be seen as "contrary mobilisations" that may have "transformative effects … among the supposedly unenlightened sections of the population," consisting of those who are not "proper members of civil society and are not regarded as such by the institutions of the state" but stand in a political relation with the state as "populations within the territorial jurisdiction of the state" (ibid.: 49, 38). In order to obtain resources from the government, the poor have to negotiate and apply pressure in the right places, which "would frequently mean the bending or stretching of rules, because existing procedures have historically worked to exclude or marginalize them" (ibid.: 66). "The poor … have expanded their freedoms by using means that are not available to them in civil society" (ibid.: 67). One of Chatterjee's examples is that of associations in squatter settlements that, according to state law, are illegal and do not officially exist. Chatterjee argues that this paralegality "is not some pathological condition of retarded modernity, but rather part of the very process of the historical constitution of modernity in most of the world" (ibid.: 75). Those who are not considered proper citizens cannot enter civil society, but they do enter political society: "the terrain of the het-

erogeneous social, where multiple and flexible policies [are] put into operation, producing multiple and strategic responses from population groups seeking to adapt to, cope with, or make use of these policies" (ibid.: 137).

Popular politics, in this view, takes place outside civil society and is a response to the state's incapacity to produce proper citizens. Chatterjee relies on the Foucauldian tradition of governmentality studies to argue that there is a huge gap between the "lofty political imaginary of popular sovereignty and the mundane administrative reality of governmentality" (2004: 36). Central to this latter concept are the practices by which government officials problematize the life conditions of subordinated populations to design specified forms of intervention. Governmentality, as the "mentality of governing," however, is not merely about management of populations, but also about the constitution of a realm of the social through "practices of problematization that build on knowledge production techniques such as categorization, classification, labeling, segmentation, etc." (Vries 2005: 98). Governmentality studies are good at highlighting the capacity of governmental actors to problematize and represent the life conditions of subordinated populations—the subjects of governmentality—in such a way that they are amenable to be improved (Li Murray 2007; Redfield 2005). Yet they tell us little about the ways in which these populations construct subjectivities by drawing on the slum as a specific way of life.

Chatterjee refines governmentality studies by arguing that governmentality in post-colonial societies did not follow the European path, conceiving the social as being composed of individual citizens with rights and obligations (and members of a national community), but as subjects sharing specific (pre-modern) characteristics. The reason for this is that techniques of government in post-colonial states relied on colonial ethnographic concepts such as "caste and religion" in India, "ethnic groups" in Southeast Asia and "tribes" in Africa, to which we may add the concepts of "native" and "slave" populations in the Americas. Thus, while Eu-

rope produced citizen-subjects, post-colonial societies produced "populations" that had to be governed according to policies defined largely by the interests of political economy.

After independence in most of the Third World the discourse of citizenship and democracy caught on and the educated came to see themselves as citizens, as being part of civil society. This was not the situation of the majority of the people, who, given their condition as "non-modern," were targeted as populations exhibiting popular needs. Governmental politics is a way of catering to these popular needs which, as Chatterjee asserts, in turn gives rise to the paralegality of popular politics. Concepts such as civil society, modernization, and human rights are discontinuous with the everyday reality of popular politics in post-colonial societies. In other words, there is a constitutive disjuncture between the intentions of enlightened elites to create rights-bearing citizens and the political realities of the post-colony. The point to be stressed, however, is that popular politics, being contemporaneous with governmental politics, is not less modern than citizenship politics. It differs only in being a politics of the poor.

But what does Chatterjee mean when asserting that popular politics is a politics of the poor, as against a politics of the educated or the enlightened? Chatterjee is not very explicit about this. The poor, in his view, remain an undefined category and popular politics a side effect of (post-)colonial governmentality, "a politics emerging out of the developmental policies of government aimed at specific population groups" that transgresses the strict boundaries of governmental policy (2004: 40). He defines political society as "a site of negotiation and contestation opened up by the activities of governmental agencies aimed at population groups" and "located in relation to the legal-political forms of the modern state itself" (ibid.: 74). Popular politics, in this view, follows different strategies ranging from accommodation to transgression, yet always remains a derivative kind of politics, as it needs to have an "engagement with the apparatus of governmentality" (ibid.: 64). In our view a different conceptualization of popu-

lar politics is required, one that emphasizes its purposefulness and utopian potential, in other words, a politics of possibility.

We propose to see popular politics as arising out of the diversity of life conditions, needs, desires, and modes of becoming of the poor. To that end, we define the poor as "all those inserted in the mechanism of social production without respect to rank or property, in all their diversity, animated by an open and plural production of subjectivity" (Hardt and Negri 2009: 45). This is not the common definition of the poor in terms of lack (of resources, access or possibilities), but one that foregrounds the heterogeneity of life experiences and their expression in defined subjectivities. Following Rancière (1999), we see the poor as those who are part of society but are excluded from its management. Politics, according to Rancière, comes into being when the part of society that has no properly defined place within it raises its voice and demands to be recognized. Popular politics in this view is not derivative but foundational of politics in general, and governmental politics in particular. Governmentality, then, can be redefined as consisting of an assemblage of technologies of rule whose ultimate function is that of masking the enlightened elite's incapacity to deal with the heterogeneous desires and demands of those who are excluded from the management of society (Vries 2007).

This enables us to expand Chatterjee's notion of popular politics by paying attention to the ways in which slum dwellers construct subjectivities, and thus modes of agency that are not simply restricted to making a living and taking advantage of governmental programs, or what would amount to a politics of survival. Governmental politics is about representing, managing, and governing populations, while slum politics is about claiming the right to be counted, to be recognized, and about the care for the other. The essence of slum politics, in short, is not accepting the terms of power that governmental politics imposes. This, we believe, points to a politics of possibility that runs against the programs and agendas of governmental elites. Next, we set out to show how slum politics can be

conceptualized from the perspective of poor people. We do this by turning the tables around and privileging the ontological horizon of slum politics.

Slum politics as a politics of possibility

Chatterjee has a clear political agenda as he wishes to convince non-governmental organizations (NGOs), political activists, and political theorists of the importance of focusing on how poor people's political aspirations and claims are shaped around common issues such as access to public services and basic livelihood conditions. It should be noted that governmental politics in his view encompasses a wide realm of interventions, including those of NGOs and international institutions such as the World Bank. Governmental politics, thus, gives rise to a vivid realm of popular political activity and Chatterjee's argument is that this should be a key terrain in the construction of effective practices of democratic representations. The challenge then would be to democratize governmental politics by drawing on notions derived from popular politics, instead of educating the populace to become modern citizens.

Chatterjee surely recognizes the potential of popular politics as a politics of possibility. Yet, as said, he does not explore this topic because of his privileging of governmental politics and his lack of attention for the heterogeneous life forms, desires, and diverse subjectivities of the poor. Alternatively, we argue that slum politics is based on the awareness of not being counted, of not being a part of society, of not being proper citizens. Still it would be wrong to see such awareness as expressing a desire to be part of civil society and to become a proper citizen. Following Hardt and Negri (2009), we can argue that what the poor share is not lack, but rather "the lacking of lack"; they are free from the notions of lack and deprivation that animate the workings of governmentality. In other words, the poor are free from the institutional foundations of civil society: property and the detailed apparatus of governmental rules to which citizens are

subjected. As such, slum politics is about producing subjectivities based on the recognition of being "the part of no part"; in other words, the part that has no defined place in society and that demands to be recognized as such. As Rancière (1999) puts it, politics comes into being when the "part of no part" manifests itself, hence exhibiting society's deep contradictions.

Thus, what at first sight may look like a negative state can be seen as a point of departure. Slum politics emerges from a certain freedom that offers possibilities for constructing a different kind of world. That is why issues of belonging, recognition, solidarity, and care are so central to its workings. Finally, it would be wrong to envisage slum politics in a reactive way, as a form of resistance or transgression, for this would mean accepting the primacy of governmentality in shaping the political terrain. This is the reason why slum politics, from the viewpoint of the enlightened, so often seems irrational and inconsequential.

Although slum politics inhabits a separate world from that of governmental politics the two, as argued, are intricately entwined. Slum politics comprises manifold practices that coincide with governmental politics or take place in its shadows. These practices include making use of state institutions and agencies, laying claim to social security and pensions, and participating in governmental and non-governmental programs with objectives that vary from improving infrastructure to enhancing security, and from supporting cultural expressions to building citizenship. As such, our view shows similarities to the "insurgent citizenship," described by Holston (2008), where marginalized groups—in Holston's study the working class in São Paulo—demand recognition. A difference, however, is that slum politics is not so much concerned with any institutionalized discourse of citizenship and rights, but creates its own spaces partly independent from dominant discourses.

It is apposite to compare our view on slum politics with the politics Das and Poole have in mind when they point at "alternative forms of economic and political action" which are instituted in the margins and simultaneously criticize and regenerate the system (2004: 19). They argue that the workings of the state become most apparent in the margins, where both its fundamental violence and its spectacular enjoyments and attractions are experienced. According to them, the state, as a locus of control, is reconstituted through both the fear of those who, living in the margins, experience state violence, and their creative ways of dealing with state institutions. We disagree with Das and Poole's notion of resistance as being functional to the workings of domination, next to being productive in creating new realities. In contrast to their view, in which the political order is perpetually being regenerated in the margins, our purpose is to show the potential of the margins as a realm of possibility. We recognize "that 'things could be otherwise' politically, based on the recognition that they are already 'otherwise' discursively" and empirically (Gibson-Graham 2005: 142).

Slum politics and electoral politics

Much of the critique leveled against slums as terrains of political corruption is concerned with electoral politics, when community leaders offer their services to party politicians as political brokers. Electoral politics, however, is also a spectacular politics, when politicians visit the slum, distribute T-shirts and other paraphernalia, make big promises, and hold rallies and festivities. Electoral politics drives around the promises of jobs, social services, and infrastructure, and making an extra income through campaigning.

The residents of Chão often drew on contradictory registers to conceive of electoral politics: it is lauded for its ability to provide prestige and access to resources and simultaneously criticized for its unreliable and selfish character (Goldman 2001). On the one hand, they were attracted by electoral politics' image of opulence and opportunities. On the other hand, they distrusted involvement in it, as it tends to marginalize community issues in favor of assuming and maintaining public positions and making money through political campaigning.

The term electoral politics, in the way we use it, comprises all practices that are in some way instrumental for getting votes, assuming or maintaining public positions, and making money as such. It corresponds to a certain extent with party politics, but is not limited to boundaries between, or competition within, parties. Although fundamentally different, electoral political practices partly overlap with slum politics. Elections can be seen as critical events in which this overlap increases. When politicians come to the slum with deals and promises, electoral politics penetrates into the realm of slum politics. The needs and aspirations expressed by slum dwellers find—at least a partial and temporal—fulfillment in material and social resources distributed through the channels of electoral politics. However, as these channels are short-lived and unreliable, nothing is guaranteed in the long term.

It is relevant to refer to Auyero's work (2000, 2001) on political brokers as problem solvers in what he calls "poor people's politics." Auyero explains the reproduction of Peronism as an ideology of the poor in Argentina in times in which the Peronist party had espoused neo-liberalism and dismantled welfare provisions. Rather than seeing clientelism as a natural outcome of governmental politics—the exchange of votes for aid—he pays attention to the role of political brokers in creating representations of Peronism within close networks of recipients of governmental aid. In his view, brokers articulate idioms to represent the needs and aspirations of slum dwellers by drawing on the political memory of Peronism. Auyero shows how such a politics of care and remembrance is manipulated for ideological reasons. The difference between Auyero's analysis and ours is that in our case community leaders are divided between their commitment to the slum and to political patrons. In other words, they participate in two entwined, yet different, kinds of politics: electoral politics and slum politics. Auyero does not make this distinction. Our view of poor people's politics is therefore more optimistic than his, as we see it as a politics of hope and possibility.

The slum and its leaders

Not all slum dwellers in Chão are equally engaged in slum politics. As we already suggested, the community leaders are its main facilitators and articulators. The term community leader in the urban context of Recife refers to a socially and politically active, well-known person from one of the many poor neighborhoods. The term is not applied to individuals appointed to particular functions, but to persons with particular life histories and characteristics. It is a severely fought for position, one for which a reputation has to be cultivated. Community leaders are known to make efforts for the community, do personal favors for people, and thoroughly know the community's history and current problems. Community leaders gather and circulate information, organize activities and attempt to improve the neighborhood. Especially the poorest, unemployed, residents of the community are attracted to their activities, as they have most time and hope for possible benefits. Community leaders have a social network that extends beyond borders of class or place and have a talent for maintaining their contacts (Koster 2009). The community leaders we studied in Recife differ from the prevalent image of the informal urban leader who is engaged in "the underworld," an image that suits many community leaders in Rio de Janeiro (Alvito 2001; Arias 2006; Goldstein 2003) and urban leaders in other parts of the world (e.g., Barker 2009).

In Chão, the concept of community leader was frequently subject to dispute. Slum dwellers quarreled about who was a good community leader and leaders blamed each other for not meeting the necessary requirements. Community leaders often assume formal positions. They are presidents of local grassroots organizations, representatives in local consultative bodies, or spokespersons of social movements (Assies 1999; Silva 2000; Fontes 1999; Herkenhoff 1995; Nielsen 2002; Pandolfi and Grynszpan 2003; Queiroz 1999). Chão has many community organizations, including a Residents' Association, a Residents' Union, a Health Group, a Mothers'

Club, NGOs that work with cultural expression or environmentalism, and a squatter council. However, the social basis of community leaders does not lie in formal organizations, but in the complex sets of social relations and cultural representations that constitute life in slums. Thus we focus our attention on the practices of individual community leaders and other slum dwellers.

Chão has nine community leaders who are recognized as such by slum dwellers, three women and six men. The older leaders rely on claims of many achievements in the community, while younger ones put on a spurt to establish their reputation. Each leader has a particular operational style and specific thematic interests: environmental degradation, waste collection, food aid, health, income generation, motherhood, amusement, youth, security, and other issues deemed important in the slum. Some leaders dedicate their time to the execution of governmental projects in the neighborhood, while others set out to realize projects they designed with fellow slum dwellers, like the urban agriculture project that we come to present. Some activities involve direct material benefits (food, money) while others are centered on remembering the past and pondering about the future. Relations among community leaders are characterized by competition and cooperation, as they strive to establish a niche for themselves within the community. Becoming a community leader depends on the capacity to develop a reputation as a good community representative and to establish a wide network of contacts with governmental agencies and politicians. In fact, presuming to have links to important people is central in their performance. None of the leaders is rigidly devoted to any particular party. Among community leaders there is envy and criticism about opportunistic behavior and unwillingness to share information. Yet they also establish alliances with each other in order to gain certain positions (like in the squatter council), or to show that they are, as a group, the legitimate community representatives.

Their thematic specialization does not only distinguish the leaders from one another, but also enables them to establish valuable connections around specific issues with politicians and officials of different public bodies, NGO workers, and private entrepreneurs. Such connections offer them personal advantages critical for their survival. These vary from monthly salaries, to stipends for attending meetings and joining governmental programs, to food aid or materials. In return, community leaders provide practical and political forms of support to these "outsiders" such as organizing workshops or events, coordinating implementation of a health or cultural project, or participating in a political campaign. In the slum, they are recognized as "a gate to the offices." Fellow slum dwellers come to them in order to ask for guidance in the labyrinthine bureaucracy and for favors that leaders can possibly derive from their contacts.

It would be wrong to assume that community leaders only exist for the need of governmental agencies to create reliable interlocutors within the slum. It is rather the other way round. The slum produces an array of leaders who come to represent a variety of aspirations and needs, thus standing for the slum's internal diversity. Community leaders are sought by governmental and non-governmental agencies and politicians, not only because they provide a link to the slum, but because they have a vision about its problems and provide a type of knowledge about the slum that is not available to governmental politics. The envy and criticism among community leaders is not so much about the monopolization of connections with outsiders, but emerges from the continuous necessity to compete for the support of slum dwellers.

Community leaders are put in a dilemma, when articulating slum dwellers' needs and aspirations, while establishing relations of mutual dependence with resourceful outsiders. On the one hand, they must maintain a reputation of independence and commitment to the locality; on the other hand, they are dependent on outsiders in order to make a living. This entails

problems of accountability because in the eyes of their fellow slum dwellers they ought to work for the community and not for themselves. As such, they are divided between "unconditional love" for the community and personal gain.

In the realm of governmental politics, community leaders are commonly treated as a synecdoche for their neighborhood. This is related to their position as an important bridge between their community and the world outside the slum and the formal positions they often assume.

In the realm of electoral politics, community leaders are treated as political brokers. A common complaint among leftist academics is that slum dwellers' politics relies on patron-client relationships in which assumed leaders offer their services to political patrons in return for financial benefits. In this view, the project of democratization and the development of civil society institutions are hampered by the persistence of a political culture characterized by clientelistic dependency, opportunism, and authoritarianism (Baiocchi 2003). Within this view, the language of community leadership is one of ideological mystification as such leaders falsely project themselves as community representatives, while being paid to serve external political interests. Such views fail to see that slum politics exhibits a logic of its own that cannot be grasped by the language of citizenship and nation-state making. This is not to say that slum dwellers do not have their political imaginaries, but these do not coincide with those of the "enlightened classes." Notions such as community solidarity, social justice, and the striving for recognition resonate much more with slum dwellers' life worlds than abstract concepts such as democracy and civil society. Community leaders play an important role in articulating such political imaginaries, while showing their capacity to represent slum dwellers' needs and aspirations vis-à-vis outsiders.

The community of Chão de Estrelas

Recife has traditionally been the destination of large flows of migrants from the arid areas of the Brazilian Northeast (Cowell 1975; de Melo 1978). Many settled down near the banks of the Beberibe River, in makeshift houses, on the current municipal border between Recife and Olinda. These illegal settlements disrupted the river flow. As a result flooding became a common occurrence causing trouble to the slums but also to the surrounding middle-class neighborhoods. Until the 1980s the only possible solution envisaged by the then military government was cleansing the area from slums through large-scale evictions, but all efforts in this direction were met with stubborn resistance. After a long period of struggle and negotiation, in which slum dwellers, opposition politicians, militant activists, and those active in Ecclesiastic Base Communities participated, the government conceded to the demand of establishing a resettlement and housing program for slum dwellers, not far from the river banks. As such Chão originated in 1981 (Cabral 2004). However, this solution did not last long; soon the riverside was again populated by very poor people. In 1987 another resettlement program took place after which poor riverside dwellers were again resettled. Every cleansing of the river banks has been followed by new illegal occupations. Between 2007 and 2011, people were resettled in the area as part of a large World Bank-funded slum upgrading program (Koster and Nuijten 2012). In effect, governmental programs have served as attractors for the extremely poor and have actually led to the expansion of Chão by resettling and housing slum dwellers from the riversides to contiguous areas.

It is important to note that Chão has grown into a socially and economically diverse settlement. Some of the houses built to compensate the evicted riverside dwellers have been sold to lower middle-class newcomers. Chão has benefited from government-funded sanitation, drainage, electrification, and road building programs, and it falls under the legal protection of a special program for non-legal settlements. Different NGOs have programs or offices in the neighborhood, some centered on activities of local residents, others implemented from the outside, one even from abroad. Next, the many

different religious congregations, varying from Catholics, to all kinds of Pentecostals, to African-Brazilian cults like Umbanda, contribute to the social diversity of this slum.

The Beberibe River banks have always been home to the extremely poor, part of whom hoped to benefit from future resettlement programs. This "slum within the slum" is not only seen as an environmental hazard but also as a source of criminality and violence as drug traffickers use the place because of its difficult accessibility for the police. In this regard, Chão resembles many other slums along the rivers in the estuary of Recife.

Also, all community leaders of Chão have been involved in negotiating with governmental programs on behalf of the riverside dwellers. Under the current administration of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party; PT), any kind of political mobilization in slums is strongly feared, as it could have adverse electoral repercussions. For the municipality, community leaders have been important interlocutors, dealing with problems for which a violent and authoritarian resolution was not considered desirable. This, in fact, is a good example of the entwining and interdependence of governmental, electoral, and slum politics.

Introducing Ovídio

A protagonist in the struggle against the governments' efforts to expel the slum dwellers from the area was Ovídio, the central character in the ensuing case study. His central role in these struggles converted him into one of the historical leaders of the area. He is credited for being the founder of Chão and played a central role in the development of its current infrastructure. One of the blocks in the community has been named after him.

We came to know Ovídio through Inácio,[2] a mutual friend who had been involved in the basic struggles of the community. Inácio, a middle-class, leftist politician, and ex-councilor, had maintained a cordial relation with Ovídio over the years. According to Inácio, Ovídio had been

closely involved in the struggle against the dictatorship in Recife. Ovídio, he told us, had, like him, been an important local communist cadre. Due to financial problems, however, he had later acquiesced in becoming a broker for an important politician on the center-right. For our friend, this trajectory was emblematic for what he saw as the corruption of the popular movement after the recognition of its demands for land and basic services. In his view, sheer poverty had obliged Ovídio to sell his services as a broker, thus becoming part of the traditional Brazilian patron-client system. Furthermore, Ovídio more and more refrained from activist politics. According to Inácio, this had to do with the fact that Ovídio had noticed that his chances of still making a career in this field were limited. Moreover, Ovídio had become exhausted of being manipulated by politicians who did not deliver. Furthermore, he had to contend with new aspirants to the position of community leader, who had been quite successful in ensuring the support of political patrons. Disillusioned by governmental and electoral politics he had taken refuge in environmentalism and became attracted to evangelism, so much so that he became an aspirant pastor. Ovídio distanced himself from participatory state programs and did not aspire to any position in consultative bodies.

Although Inácio's was a plausible explanation for Ovídio's reluctance to play a central role in electoral politics at the moment, we found that things were more complex. In fact, Ovídio still was, as always, involved in politics, yet this politics was a different one from what Inácio had in mind. Ovídio was engaged in slum politics with an emphasis on environmental issues, solidarity, and income generation.

Inácio introduced us to Ovídio, a short, dark-skinned man with a limp and a soft voice, at his home. Ovídio offered us a tour through the settlement in order to show us the results of his struggles. He recounted history, while we passed the community bakery, the football field, the cultural center, the community center and the bridge over the river, all projects in which he had been involved. He showed us a severely de-

graded physical environment with completely overcrowded river and canal banks where houses covered and impaired the flow of the heavily polluted water.

Ovídio took us to the health clinic, another project he had promoted. Here, he told us about the struggle for rights and services. He also narrated about his contacts with important politicians, his candidacy for the city council and the federal senate, the part of the community that carried his name and the various people who had interviewed him. He explained that being a leader was his vocation. The lack of modesty in this frail, soft-spoken man who then walked with a stick, was striking. In recent years he had become involved in ecological projects, such as waste recycling, urban agriculture, and all kinds of consciousness raising about the environment. The NGO that he started many years before—and represented mainly on his own— made a move toward environmentalism in its projects. Ovídio told us that he experienced environmentalism as much more inspiring than electoral or governmental politics.

Ovídio's practices reflected contradictions that are telling of the dilemmas of a community leader. He could be viewed in different ways. First, like Inácio saw him, as a historical social activist leader, who had become corrupted by a patron-client culture. Second, as a savvy, manipulative, and opportunistic broker, adept in negotiating with political patrons and in adopting the latest rhetoric in order to gain access to funds, a common vision among local leftist politicians. Finally, we could characterize him as an idealist, a religious convert who pursues political and economic alternatives for the slum informed by a worldview in which ecology, solidarity, and social justice are central.

All three explanations, we argue, are both right and wrong. Ovídio is a historical leader who at some point played an important role in a powerful popular movement, but later in his life chose the intimate culture of evangelism, a religious worldview that provided him with new ways of relating to the community. He is also a broker in the service of a political patron, though ambivalent toward the latter's program

and making electoral choices that his patron does not favor. In fact, he would not conceal his lack of commitment to the latter and, after the events covered in this article, finally left him. Last, his idealism is not devoid of practical sense in that the pursuit of his ideals does not impede him to enlarge his social network and thus his capacity to gain access to information, material benefits, and prestige.

Ovídio's operational style and thematic interest

Ovídio was addressed by his fellow slum dwellers with both respect and great familiarity. He was a leader, but was not elevated above the masses. People called at him on the street asking whether he already had solved some problem while others smiled when he passed in a hurry or made jokes about his agitation or his small stature. Ovídio laughed with them, giving expression to his performance of being "first among equals." Despite familiarity and jokes, everybody considered Ovídio a leader. His efforts for the slum might be criticized, but never denied. As one slum dweller stated: "Ovídio is a relic here in the community. Because he is a rare person. He has plans. … He looks at this [community] as if it were his own country."

From early morning until late night, Ovídio was busy, traveling through the city for personal encounters, group meetings, and all kinds of manifestations. He was always "running after something" (*correndo atrás*) or "in the struggle" (*na luta*). Ovídio knew the needs of his fellow slum dwellers – and many of these were his own. He had a talent for maintaining relationships through being friendly, funny, and providing small favors to people, varying from advice in official procedures to paying for products or services needed for community events. He was very creative and constantly invented new ideas that would benefit those around him, like setting up a team of salaried street sweepers or organizing professionalizing courses. His capacity of combining bad news with good news was remarkable, as every time that he had to ac-

count for a failure, he came up with another plan that refilled those present with enthusiasm.

Ovídio made a living through his activities: he received small stipends in money or kind from people he worked with. Furthermore, he received a small fixed salary from the politician for whom he had agreed to work. Although Ovídio never discussed these compensations in public, it was no secret to his fellow slum dwellers who sometimes accused him of letting his own income prevail over community interests.

The history of Chão was pivotal in Ovídio's performance. He often reproduced this history, during innumerable meetings, in a manner that underscored his important role. Sometimes he told a story himself, but many times he invited another person to do so, saying "I am curious whether you still remember about …" and then reminded them of some episode in the past, giving way to lively discussions filled with shared nostalgia. Doing so, Ovídio enacted rituals of memory by which knowledge of community history could be constructed and rehearsed with old and new residents. Through these rituals, both successful and failed projects—also those that did not have any visible results anymore—became critical landmarks in the community's shared history. Ovídio also had his personal archive—folders with newspaper cuttings, photographs, and piled papers—on the history of the community and the popular movement. He kept this record as a tangible proof of his achievements.

Working with environmentalism, Ovídio created an ideology of an ecologically sound future with a strong social emphasis. He wanted to work on a better environment and emphasized the care that people ought to have for nature and each other. "Unity, sincerity, solidarity and fraternity," he said, were the key concepts of his projects. His ideology had a religious aspect in the idea of people taking care of the world as stewards of God's creation.

Ovídio, who was a *crente* (Protestant), had a social network which comprised *crentes,* Catholics, activists from black movements, conformists, and communists, despite the disagreement and sometimes even conflicts that these groups had with each other (Burdick 1998). His friendships among Catholics included those whom he knew from his engagement in Ecclesiastic Base Communities. He did not abstain from inviting an Afro-dance group to one of his ceremonies, although this was abhorred by most *crentes* present, who associated Afro-culture with the work of the devil. His activities in the past with the community radio are telling for Ovídio's stance in life: he proudly recapitulated this episode, reminiscing that every social group in the neighborhood—Catholics, *crentes,* followers of Afro-Brazilian cults, youth, elderly—had one hour of broadcasting time.

Furthermore, Ovídio's network, which he had construed over many years of engagement in social movements and other political struggles, extended throughout the whole city and crosscut all layers of society, as he maintained convivial relationships with politicians, officials, journalists, university professors, and company directors. These persons made time for him when he visited them, listened to his ideas, and engaged in his projects. Ovídio had become a well-known figure in the city of Recife, recognized by both upper class politicians and slum dwellers. Throughout his career he displayed a remarkable sense of independence, not tied to any political party.

Ovídio's urban agriculture project

This case study presents a community urban agriculture project (*horta comunitária*) coordinated by Ovídio. It displays how slum politics is different from, but overlaps with, governmental and electoral politics. The project centered on themes of environmentalism, income generation, and being a united community. Although in the end the project was not viable, due to the precarious and provisional circumstances in which it had to take shape, we show how through this project Ovídio set out to articulate and consolidate the needs and aspirations of fellow slum dwellers. Furthermore, Ovídio's quest for resources, for which he turned to officials from governmental programs, NGO workers, and

politicians, shows how Ovídio gave shape to a kind of practical inconclusiveness, as his attempts did not translate into concrete resources. This inconclusiveness, besides emphasizing the importance of intangible resources and utopian aspirations next to material resources, articulated a conclusive attempt to put Chão on the map and (re-)establish potentially useful connections with people outside the slum.

The idea of the project—carried out under the banner of Ovídio's NGO—was to grow vegetables and fruits in order to provide participants with a cheap and healthy contribution to their daily diet. In this spirit of solidarity, the surplus crops would be sold to neighbors at lower-than-market prices. In addition, economic advancement was also intended as the project would produce and use its own organic compost and sell the surplus. Initially, profit was to be used to buy necessary materials, but in the long term the project was meant to generate a viable income for its participants. Finally, Ovídio claimed that he had arranged support from public bodies in the form of *cestas básicas*—basic food packages that on many occasions were handed out to the poor.

Beyond the material needs of food produce and income, Ovídio had far-reaching, we could even say utopian, visions for the project. According to him, the work, carried out on collective plots adjacent to individual ones, would enhance the spirit of solidarity. Furthermore, he argued that the project would show others what people of the slum were up to and anticipated a rosy future if the project succeeded. He also contended that the project would benefit the environment, because "plants produce clean air in a polluted city." In Ovídio's view, the care of plants would set an example for the care of nature and human beings for one another more generally.

At its peak, fourteen slum dwellers participated in the new project. Some joined all of the meetings, workshops, and agricultural activities, while others remained more on the sidelines, like one man who in practice only looked after the dog that guarded a collective plot. Some already grew vegetables next to their houses when they joined, while most of the older people remembered agricultural activities from their rural past.

Participants joined the project with different needs and aspirations. In part, these were of a material character, like food production, an income, and *cestas básicas*. In addition, Ovídio granted small favors to some, like selling eggs of one to visiting officials, or giving out small sums he had obtained from sales of manure samples. A few participants were only in it for the money and the *cestas básicas*. When it soon became clear that the project could not provide for these needs in the short term, they quit. While some left, others joined.

Besides such material needs, a range of diverse aspirations motivated people to join. Participants mentioned aspirations of an intangible and sometimes utopian character, like "doing something for the community" by selling vegetables at low prices to poorer neighbors. They reflected on issues of solidarity, social change, a love of nature expressed through caring for plants, and environmental ideologies. Others emphasized the importance of educating people. Some, who had knowledge of agriculture, took the opportunity to be recognized as capable craftsmen. A young woman who participated wanted to become a community leader herself and set out to learn from Ovídio. A man who was mentally challenged was invited by Ovídio to join and greatly enjoyed the appreciation he received for his work on the project. A final motive to join, for some, was loyalty to Ovídio, built on gratefulness and admiration for his past achievements.

Ovídio was the undisputed leader of the project, which was referred to as "Ovídio's project." He took decisions alone, visited outsiders on his own, and only informed the other participants as he pleased or when they demanded explanations. They mostly consented to Ovídio's coordination of the project. They even encouraged him to articulate and consolidate their needs and aspirations and use his connections to outsiders for the sake of the project. Simultaneously, the project had its conflicts and participants had diverging needs and aspirations.

Some wanted to make money quickly by making and selling compost, while others wanted to set up a long-term, environmentally sound community project. Participants frequently accused Ovídio of unaccountability and negligence in keeping them posted.

Because material resources are scarce in a slum, Ovídio employed his connections with people from the outside for things like seeds, tools, and money. He established and maintained connections around his thematic interest, as most of the people he turned to were interested in environmentalism and in urban agriculture in particular. Ovídio related to the realm of governmental politics as he tried to link up with existing governmental programs on different levels. He registered his project in an urban agriculture program of the Governmental Agrarian Research Institute. He also called in the assistance of the federal Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) program through people he knew from the municipal department of Economic Development. Other connections included the municipal plant nursery, the municipal departments of Environmental Issues, Health and Education and officials from a regional program of the Federal Ministry of Agricultural Development. He also maintained contacts with individuals from different NGOs that dealt with urban agriculture, environmentalism, and recycling.

Ovídio acquired gardening tools from Fome Zero, tubs from an NGO and, within the slum, two collective plots on the terrains of the Residents' Association and the local health post. He managed to sell compost to the Municipal Department of Environmental Issues—although rumors had it that they never paid, a district office of the Health Department and an army base. In addition, the Health Department handed out *cestas básicas* to the participants as Christmas presents.

Apart from this material help, most of the promised assistance was of an intangible nature. Moreover, the majority of Ovídio's negotiations resulted in promises without substantial gains. At the time, production only took place in some individual plots, while the soil of the collective plot, even after the participants had cleaned and ploughed it, appeared too poor and remained unused. However, Ovídio's concerns, as we will show, were not so much with acquiring tangible resources.

We followed Ovídio's search for another material resource: construction material for walling a collective plot in order to avoid theft of crops or tools. Ovídio received help from Inácio, who then worked in a regional program of the Federal Department of Agrarian Development. He pointed Ovídio to a load of plaster blocks for constructing the wall. These blocks were in the stores of CONAB (Companhia Nacional de Abastecimento), the National Supply Company, where Inácio knew people. Ovídio went to the CONAB headquarters, where he looked for a high-level official who was mentioned to him by Inácio. Entering her office, Ovídio did not introduce himself, but asked her: "Do you know Inácio? Do you remember what he has told you?" She remembered and listened with interest to Ovídio. She instructed a subordinate to show him the plaster blocks. Back in the office, the subordinate realized that he had not measured the blocks, so he could not calculate how many Ovídio would need. The official jotted down the perimeter of the plot and the height of the wall, and commanded the subordinate to measure and calculate everything later. She promised to phone Ovídio the next day and have the plaster delivered to Chão by truck.

On our way back, Ovídio started to fantasize happily about the joy of building the wall with fellow slum dwellers and sharing a good meal afterward. However, the official never called, Ovídio never called her, and the blocks never arrived. Unlike us, we admit, Ovídio did not seem to be worried about the resources that he had failed to acquire. Apparently, his concerns were with other issues. A few days later we learned that he had, over the past month, expressed his need for a truck to different people at various institutions, such as the Governmental Agrarian Research Institute, the Municipality, and an army base where he sold compost. He did not manage to arrange for a truck, but visited all of these places and talked to many people about his project.

Furthermore, electoral politics had played a role too. Inácio, who had recently changed his party affiliations from the communists to the PT, wanted to show that he could arrange a large constituency. He tried to cajole Ovídio into the PT by granting him favors for his project. He pointed him to the plaster blocks at CONAB, which was at the time in the hands of the PT. Through Inácio, Ovídio also came to know the president of the Recife department of the PT, with whom he negotiated about other resources for the community. In the municipal elections that followed, Ovídio did some campaign work for a PT candidate councilor whom Inácio introduced to him, but eventually supported a candidate from another party.

By searching for material and intangible resources—whether they were acquired or not—Ovídio was connecting himself and his fellow slum dwellers to influential people and putting Chão on the map, drawing the attention of officials and politicians to its existence. He created possibilities for the future through establishing potentially useful connections. Think only of the search for a truck that he expressed in different locations: he managed to inform many different people about the slum and gained recognition for the activities of himself and his fellow slum dwellers.

After some time, the project petered out. Although, ultimately, it did not generate viable sources of income, largely due to the poor and precarious circumstances of life in the slum, it had temporarily provided participants with a project that catered to their needs and aspirations, as they elaborated on solidarity and its limits, worked for a better environment, pondered on social change, established—through Ovídio—connections with influential outsiders and were recognized as good craftsmen and valuable participants. The project had provided the slum dwellers with possibilities to envisage and hope for a better life in the slum.

From the outside, the project can be seen as part of a long historical record of "non-viable" projects. However, viewed from the perspective of slum politics, it was an important event in enhancing slum dwellers' capacity to aspire for a better life. From this perspective, through the project a sense of community was reproduced and people had been recognized for who they really were.

As such, slum politics, centered on needs and aspirations of slum dwellers, is different from governmental and electoral politics, which are based on needs and desires external to the slum. The needs articulated in slum politics are partly material, but also include symbolic and utopian elements that call upon values of community solidarity and social justice.

Conclusion: The utopian potential of a politics from the margins

In this article we showed how slum politics is both entwined with and fundamentally different from governmental and electoral politics. Slum politics has its own time horizon. Where governmental politics is tied to the time of projects and programs, and electoral politics to the time of electoral campaigns and administrative periods, slum politics is tied to the time of the slum and its needs and aspirations.

As Davis (2006) argues, slums stand for novel forms of mal-urbanization, which create spaces that are marginal to global capitalism. Slums are also the targets of populist politicians and fundamentalist political movements. And yet, as the case of Chão shows, slums may also be spaces of hope, where languages of needs are present in which people learn to desire a different kind of future. As such, slum politics can be seen as a politics of possibility.

Given the fact that slums are assuming an increasingly larger place on this planet—in absolute and relative terms (Davis 2006; UN-Habitat 2003)—the need to understand slum politics becomes urgent. When a soon-to-be majority of the world's population experiences life and politics in ways that differ from dominant views and theorizations on their life and politics, we need to open up new possibilities for conceptualizing what is happening in slums, departing from any homogenizing discourse

and moving into a new discursive space of diversity (Gibson-Graham 2005).

This resonates with what Appadurai calls "governmentality from below" (2001: 34), which, like slum politics, builds upon and provides space to express the aspirations of slum dwellers. Yet where Appadurai sees this in globalized attempts to influence and democratize policies, we emphasize slum politics' local and fragmented workings, as a "site and spur of becoming, the opening for politics" (Gibson-Graham 2005: 132), which provides people with a language for envisaging a better life.

We must understand slum politics not only as a derivative of governmental politics, as does Chatterjee (2004), but as based on its own internal needs and aspirations. Here is a "need to contribute to a different politics of representation" (Escobar 2001:158) which, as we have shown, must depart from dystopic representations of slum life in order to find opportunities to make ways thinkable that were formerly unthinkable, muted, and disavowed. In such a politics of representation, slums, rather than as spaces of exclusion and abjection, could be imagined as places of hope.

Acknowledgements

Martijn Koster is researcher and lecturer at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. He carried out research on community leaders, politics, and slum upgrading in Recife, Brazil, and on urban renewal and youth in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Currently he is conducting research on citizenship and urban renewal in social housing areas in Utrecht, the Netherlands.
E-mail: m.koster@uu.nl

Pieter A. de Vries is senior researcher and lecturer at Wageningen University, the Netherlands. He has conducted research in Costa Rica (on colonization and rural development projects), Mexico (on caciques), Peru (on indigenous communities) and Polynesia (on the socio-medical consequences of the nuclear tests on island populations). Currently he is interested in processes of inclusion and exclusion in urban slums.
E-mail: pieter.devries@wur.nl

Notes

1. Martijn Koster has conducted twenty-one months of fieldwork in Chão between 2003 and 2009 and lived eighteen months in the slum. Pieter de Vries has visited the slum several times for shorter periods.
2. Pseudonym.

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