

FROM #VIDASNASFAVELASIMPORTAM TO #NÓSPORNÓS: PERIPHERAL YOUTH AT THE CENTER OF THE DEBATE ON DRUG POLICY^{1,2}

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1 INTRODUCTION: AT GUNPOINT

The war on drugs directly affects our daily lives. For us, it means closed schools, changes in the routine, fear of leaving home, and extreme concern for our and our family's well-being. On behalf of this war, the state justifies a series of rights violations against us, young people from the favelas and peripheries. But this war is not ours. We did not declare war on drugs. We did not decide that some drugs would be considered legal and others illegal. But we die because of them.

Movimentos

In Brazil, the policy of war on drug disproportionately affects the peripheral areas of urban centers. It is nothing new that *favelas* are seen by Brazilian society as territories of precariousness and deprivation, chaotic and violent, that need to be controlled and repressed. In recent decades, the “trafficker” imagery, directly associated with the already stigmatized image of the peripheries, has come to represent the country's number one enemy in the popular imagination, further accentuating the repressive character of public policies that reach the *favelas* territories.

The Brazilian state looks at *favelas* and peripheries at gunpoint. Regarding drug policy, the overriding strategy governments adopt is confrontation and war. The tactics to fight the illegal drug market are well known: frequent police raids, with unrestricted use of heavy weaponry and the declared goal of dismantling criminal organizations and seizing illegal substances. Placed on the front lines, residents of the peripheries are exposed to daily violence resulting from “anti-drug” operations and territorial disputes over controlling the illegal market. In this context, their fundamental rights are systematically violated: classes are canceled, workers are afraid to leave their homes, stores and public facilities close their doors. And, the worst: hundreds of lives, most of them of young black men, are lost.

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The collective *Movimentos* was created to debate alternatives to the current war on drugs policy from the perspective of those most affected: the youth from *favelas* and peripheries. Based on a hybrid institutional model, the collective was conceived by young activists, communicators, and artists from different *favelas* of the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro (região metropolitana do Rio de Janeiro – RMRJ), with the support of the Cesec of Universidade Cândido Mendes (Ucam). Since its creation, *Movimentos*' objective has been twofold: to bring the debate on drug policy into Brazilian *favelas* and peripheries and to bring the voices, faces, and bodies of *favelas* and peripheries to the center of the discussion already happening in other spaces.

This article aims to outline the set of circumstances behind the creation of *Movimentos*; the collective's experience in building new understandings of drug policy from the perspective of *favelas* and peripheries; and the principles that we believe should guide the search for fair and effective policies in combating racism and inequalities that fuel the war on drugs.

2 WAR ON DRUGS, WAR ON FAVELAS

In recent years, the debate on drug policy in Brazil has undergone important changes, albeit modest. Two movements stand out in the recent history of the anti-prohibitionist position: the articulation between political leaders and world-renowned personas led by former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, which culminates in the creation of the Global Commission on Drug Policy and the release of the documentary *Quebrando o tabu*, in 2011; and the mobilization of medical marijuana patients and their families in the fight for the regulation of access to proper medication, a process well portrayed in the film *Ilegal*, of 2014.

Undoubtedly, these movements have been crucial in moving the debate forward and giving impetus to drug policy changes. In January 2015, the Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency (Agência Nacional de Vigilância Sanitária – Anvisa) removed cannabidiol, the active principle in marijuana, from the list of prohibited substances, a crucial obstacle to importing *cannabis*-derived medicines. In August of the same year, the Supreme Court (Supremo Tribunal Federal – STF) began to discuss decriminalizing drug possession for personal use. Especially concerning medical marijuana, important advances have been made since then, starting with granting habeas corpus so that thirteen families may plant and produce the *cannabis* oil for therapeutic purposes and Anvisa's registration permit for the first *cannabis*-based medicine. More recently, Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fundação Oswaldo Cruz – Fiocruz) announced a research plan to produce *cannabis* for medicinal use.

However, despite this timidly encouraging scenario, regarding the war on drugs and its impacts on the poor and peripheral population, we are witnessing a setback. The latest data released by the *Brazilian Yearbook of Public Security* show that Brazil reached the mark of 60 thousand deaths in 2016. In the country with the highest absolute number of homicides worldwide, the highest rate of violent deaths is concentrated in the 21-year-old age group (Cerqueira et al., 2017). Between 2005 and 2015, the homicide rate among young people aged 15 to 29 increased by 17% – this means that in this same period, 318,000 young people were murdered in the country (op. cit.). Although we cannot estimate how many of those deaths are related to drugs, many are due to violence caused by the militarization of the fight against *drug trafficking*.

Nonetheless, the war on drugs does not affect young people homogeneously: today, black young people are more likely to be murdered than non-black young people in Brazil. Of every hundred

people murdered in the country, 71 are black (Cerqueira et al., 2017). The data shows that, instead of improving, this situation has worsened: over the past decade, the homicide rate among the black population has increased by 18%, while the same rate among people of other races and ethnicities has decreased by 12% (op. cit.). The war on drugs cost falls disproportionately on young black men, the majority of whom are male.

Looking at the number of homicides is just one way of understanding the impact of the *war on drugs* on society. When we consider incarceration rates, the picture of violence and inequality remains the same. Brazil has the third largest prison population in the world, with drug trafficking being the most recurrent cause of arrests. Since the new Drug Law (Law No. 11.343, of 2006), the number of people arrested for trafficking has increased by 339% (D'Agostino, 2015). As in the case of homicides, black people suffer more impact than the rest of the population: although black persons represent just over 53% of Brazilian society, 64% of people arrested in the country are black (Brasil, 2016).

Where has the war on drugs been battled? Although drugs circulate all over the city, only the *favelas* and the peripheries feel the violent impacts of combating the illegal market of these substances. Recent data released by the Public Defender's Office of the State of Rio de Janeiro show that most of the arrests in flagrante delicto for drug trafficking happen on the outskirts of the metropolitan region (Haber, 2018). In Complexo da Maré, a group of favelas located in the North of the city of Rio de Janeiro, 41 police operations were carried out in 2017; on average, one operation every nine days (Redes da Maré, 2017). That same year, armed clashes killed 42 people in Maré and left 57 others injured. In total, there were 45 days without any activities in the regional healthcare units and 35 days of classes suspended.

What happened in Complexo da Maré in 2017 is not the exception, but the rule: similar data were collected by *Coletivo Papo Reto* for the Complexo do Alemão, also in the North region.⁶ On the same trend, statistics systematized by Cesec's Intervention Observatory show that the recent intervention decreed by the federal government in public security in the state of Rio de Janeiro invests primarily in police operations in *favelas* and peripheries, with a record number of deaths.⁷ No wonder, in recent years, the hashtag *#vidanasfavelasimportam* (*#livesinfavelasmatter*) has become popular on social media. It aims to give visibility to the violations committed in the daily context of militarization in peripheries for the "fight against drugs".

All this shows that the impacts of the war on drugs fall on society selectively and unequally. Although drugs are illegal for everyone, we choose to arrest and kill young black people and residents of the *favelas* and peripheries. The root of this problem lies in the very same way we build our drug policies: betting on the repression of retail trafficking and on the violence against the poor, black and peripheral population as a way to deal with the use of these substances.

For this reason, we need to debate further the consequences of the war on drugs in peripheries and *favelas*. But, even more importantly, we need to make way for those who suffer the most from the impacts of the war on drugs to take the lead in the debate on changes in drug policies, becoming their protagonists.

6. The collective's institutional website, available at: <<https://goo.gl/eJfq6F>>. Accessed on: Nov. 19, 2018.

7. Available at: <<https://goo.gl/kGfulS>>. Accessed on: Nov. 19, 2018.

3 FROM #VIDASNASFAVELASIMPORTAM TO #NÓSPORNÓS

Movimentos originated from the need to create spaces in which the perspective of the youth from the *favelas* and peripheries about drug policy would be placed in the foreground. With this goal in mind, in May 2016, Cesec brought together ten young people from the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Salvador to participate in a three-day training workshop on drug policy in Rio de Janeiro.

Since then, the group has met periodically to build tools and think activities on drug policy from the perspective of *favelas* and peripheries.

In the first two years of its existence, the collective participated in debates, seminars, and TV and radio programs; taught classes and workshops on the topic in public and private schools, community courses of preparation for university, and social projects; promoted educational and cultural events with collectives and organized groups of *favelas*; and conducted qualitative research with 30 young leaders from different *favelas* in the city of Rio de Janeiro to know what they think about the topic. In addition, the group created a manual called *Movimentos: drogas, juventude e favela* (Movimentos, 2017). Designed and built in collaboration, the publication brings together the main data and information on drug policy in plain language, aiming at helping to introduce this debate in schools, collectives, and social projects inside and outside the *favelas*.

In late 2017, *Movimentos* organized a three-day immersion with young people from *favelas* and peripheries across Brazil to begin building a national peripheral youth agenda on drug policy. Therefore, the 1st *Movimente-se* was born, a meeting of peripheral youth to discuss drug policy, which brought together 25 young people from ten states who work in collectives, institutions, and community initiatives on the topics of human rights, public security, racism, and youth. From this meeting, 21 proposals were systematized in six areas: i) empowerment of peripheral youth; ii) media democratization; iii) public participation; iv) investment in education and culture; v) strengthening harm reduction; and vi) policing supervision.

The proposals formulated by the participants of 1st *Movimente-se* make it clear that when the protagonists of the debate change, the priorities also change. One of the first lessons learned in the first two years of *Movimentos* was that talking about drug policy with and from the perspective of *favelas* and peripheries means addressing broader and more complex issues, which include: the difficult access to quality public services for those who make problematic use of drugs; the absence of public policies for youth in peripheries; the challenges of communicating the need for changes in drug policy in a context of media concentration on the hands of a few and influential outlets; the need to rethink the role of the police in Brazilian society and their performance in *favelas* and peripheries, among many other issues.

In addition, we have also learned that it is impossible to discuss drug policy without discussing racism, criminalization of poverty, and inequality as central and structuring issues, since they are phenomena that go hand in hand with the war on drugs in a reciprocal movement. Although social movements have always been an essential part of the anti-prohibitionist position in recent years, we can verify that several initiatives focused on racial and gender debate within the field of drug policy were created, such as the Black Initiative for a New Drug Policy (Iniciativa Negra por uma Nova Política de Drogas – INNPD) and the National Network of Feminist Antiprohibitionists (Rede Nacional de Feministas Antiproibicionistas – Renfa). The process of creation and consolidation of *Movimentos* is part of a context of broadening the participation of collectives and grassroots

organizations in the debate on drug policy from an intersectional perspective, which understands the discussion on multiple inequalities as crucial for thinking about new drug policies.

For this reason, *Movimentos* believes that for changes in drug policies to bring positive impacts to the lives of residents of favelas and peripheries, it is necessary to go beyond the discussion on decriminalization and regulation. We need to think of alternative models that ensure the inclusion and participation of populations historically marginalized and directly impacted by the war on drugs; that strengthen services and effective public policies in peripheries; that provide opportunities and perspectives for youth in *favelas* and peripheries; and that repair the material, physical and psychological damage of decades of failed policies.

Current examples show us that drug policy reforms alone do not account for a whole conjuncture of inequalities and violence of a social and racial nature related to the war on drugs. In the United States, where nine states have already legalized the marijuana market, the experiences of regulation have not always brought changes into the lives of people most impacted by the war on drugs. This is the case in the State of Washington, where restrictions on people who have already been convicted of drug-related crimes to participate in the legal trade have led to the part of the population directly impacted by prohibition being excluded from the legalization process (Rough, 2017). The market, now legalized, changes hands: from the poor youth, mostly black and Latino, involved in the underground market, to young entrepreneurs, generally white, who have never had to get their hands dirty. No wonder, in California – the latest United States state to approve the regulation of the marijuana market – discussions about reparation policies for the social and racial impacts of prohibition have become central, pulled, above all, by social movements aware of the problems of previous experiences.

These examples make it clear that for drug policy reforms to bring positive effects to *favelas* and peripheries, a conscious and determined effort must be made to build models that directly address inequalities. And we, from *Movimentos*, believe that, for this to happen, we need to put the *favelas* and the peripheries at the center of the debate as protagonists. The peripheral youth is active, engaged, connected, and informed and circulates through different city spaces. Investing in young leaders from *favelas* and peripheries is the best strategy we have at hand to build alternatives to the current drug policy that would actually bring positive impact to those who suffer most from the war on drugs.

It is #nóspornós (#usbyourselves): “nothing about us without our participation.”

4 CONCLUSION: FAVELA IS POWER

The war on drugs directly affects the daily lives of *favelas* and peripheries. On behalf of the “fight against drugs,” governments justify a series of rights violations against their residents and especially against their youth. However, amid a scenario of inequality, racism, and violence, *favelas* and peripheries continue to innovate and survive with a lot of creativity and intelligence. Every day, new tools are created, and new solutions are thought to account for a context of no policies and the intensive presence of a violent state.

The peripheries are the center, not the margin. It is the core that teems with solutions and keeps cities alive and working. Therefore, they have to be at the center of processes that discuss change. Supposing that we want new drug policies that break historical social relations based on

racism, inequality, and violence, we need to make room for *favelas* and peripheries to take the lead in this discussion.

Based on our research conducted with 30 young leaders from favelas in the city of Rio de Janeiro, we systematized six indications that can help guide the debate on drug policy made in and from the peripheries.⁸ They are: i) the logic of war that permeates current drug policies needs to be at the center of the debate; ii) to talk about drug policy, we need to address the racism, inequality, and criminalization of poverty that are at its core; iii) we need to build innovative ways to talk about drugs with *favelas*; iv) the debate on drug policy in *favelas* and peripheries must go beyond decriminalization and legalization; v) religions and other spaces of spirituality should be included in the debate, rather than relegated; and vi) youth can and should be a key player in this process.

This article aimed to show that the youth from *favelas* and peripheries are organized and prepared to occupy this debate. Fortunately, *Movimentos* is one initiative among many created by young people from Brazilian *favelas* and peripheries who flourish day after day with a thirst for transformation.

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