



# Perspectives on Violence, Neoliberalism, and Security in 21st Century Megacities

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Larkins EMR, *The Spectacular Favela: Violence in Modern Brazil*, University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, 2015; 256 pp.: 9780520282773, \$29.95

Amar P, *The Security Archipelago: Human-Security States, Sexuality Politics, and the End of Neoliberalism*, Duke University Press Books: Durham, NC, 2013; 328 pp.: 978-0822353980, \$29.95

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## Introduction

The two excellent books I discuss in this essay offer an apparent paradox. They present significantly overlapping empirical material, yet provide widely divergent—at times, seemingly contradictory—analyses. Yet, considered together, the two studies help us to think through violence and governance in the urban Global South in new ways.

Erika Robb Larkins's meticulously researched and described ethnography of Rio de Janeiro's vast *favela*, Rocinha, shows us how, in recent years, violence has been deployed and commoditized by and for many actors in the management of the city's violence and inequality. Larkins presents a longstanding dynamic of exclusion and exploitation that has taken new commoditized and neoliberal forms in a Rio de Janeiro of internationally marketed "*favela* tours" (p. 5); megaevents, such as the World Cup and Olympics; and state-led "pacification", which she describes as "a spatial fix for new iterations of neoliberal capital driven by the Olympics and the promise of Brazilian modernity" (p. 156).

Larkins's tightly focused ethnography describes the neoliberal intensification of extant exclusion. Paul Amar's innovative study of Rio de Janeiro and Cairo, instead, gives us a wide angle analysis of "new forms of rule" that Amar sees as emerging in certain "hotspots" (p. 16) in the "geopolitical belt that we used to call the semiperiphery" (p. 30). Through an analysis of a tangle of Global South (as well as Global North) actors, discourses, and logics, Amar describes new "human security regimes" (p. 41) which attempt to join the protection of the morality and heritage of the nation with "its economic integration into globalization" (p. 97). In Amar's analysis, Global North models

of neoliberalism have lost the dominance they possessed in the latter part of the 20th century. “Neoliberal market legitimations and consumerist ideologies have gradually lost their power to prop up militarized forms of governance in rapidly changing regions of the Global South” (p. 6), he argues.

Larkins’s book is focused only on Rio de Janeiro, and Amar’s, on both Rio and Cairo, and the books are very different in method and depth of focus, which undoubtedly accounts for some of the differences in their analyses. But Larkins paints an intensification of neoliberal modes of exclusion shaped through consumerism, while Amar argues for just the opposite. Yet, the two analyses manage to synthesize nicely, providing an incomplete but suggestive picture of how policing, inequality, violence, and governance are transforming in important sites of the urban Global South.

### ***The Spectacular Favela***

*The Spectacular Favela* is based on ethnographic research in Rocinha, Brazil’s largest *favela* (usually translated into English as “slum” or “shantytown”). Situated in Rio’s affluent south zone, of verdant hills, crystal blue—if polluted—beaches, and jarring inequality between the rich and middle classes on the “asphalt”—as locals express it—and the poor in those hills, Rocinha portrays exactly what most foreigners think of when they imagine the geography of inequality in that famously unequal city.

But Larkins, who lived in Rocinha, and bases the book on fieldwork carried out between 2007 and 2014, takes us beyond the familiar clichés of the asphalt and the hills in the “marvelous city” to provide a classically detailed ethnographic portrait of Rocinha. Larkins elaborates everyday life in the *favela* and its integration into both the broader city and a set of globally circulating narratives about violence and poverty. We get intimate accounts of drug dealers (and learn about their forms of political control, legitimation, and struggles with the state); everyday residents of many different classes and social positions; how poverty and violence in Rio is represented in Brazilian and international media; and about *favela* tourists—including those seeking a “wild urban adventure” and those “focused on social justice in alleged solidarity with the poor” (p. 119)—and their relation with locals. Despite common representations, the sprawling *favela* itself has a strong class system, with “stigmatized” and “more affluent neighborhoods” (p. 198), locally poor and rich. Yet, as Larkins shows, all of Rocinha’s residents, including the “vast majority of the residents who chose not to engage with crime” (p. 122), and who provide labor to the wider city, face exclusion with respect to the residents of the “asphalt” and the police.

The heart of this book is in the ethnography. Anyone interested in detailed analysis of inequality, urban violence, and *favela* life in Rio should read this book. Additionally, it is well written and accessible to undergraduates and would be of interest to graduate students. But Larkins also makes some important arguments.

At the core of these arguments is her analysis of “spectacle” (p. 5), which serves a wide variety of analytical purposes. Both traffickers and police (before and after the official police “pacification” of the *favela* in 2011) engage in “spectacular violence” (p. 39), relying also on increasingly routinized forms of “exception” (p. 165) to maintain control. Tour guides, tourists, and popular culture representation of the *favela* consume

violence as commodified “spectacle”, which, she argues, itself serves to produce that structural violence. It is this use of spectacle that is most counterintuitive. Borrowing from the Comaroffs’ *Ethnicity Inc.* (2009), Larkins coins “Favela Inc.” and argues that:

By linking the production of favela violence to its commodification, I have demonstrated how the media are implicated in the ongoing production and commodification of war [...] Mediation and consumption of violence must be considered not as offshoots or outgrowths of conflict but as integral parts of structural aggression and violence itself. War cannot be separated from its representation and consumption, on TV or in ethnography.

(p. 166)

Her weaving together of an analysis of inequality, violence, commodity, spectacle, popular culture, crime, the state, and tourism with the people of Rocinha’s everyday lives is one of the book’s greatest strengths and leaves me convinced. But clearer analytic separation between material violence, structural violence, and violence as spectacle would have made the analysis of those linkages stronger. She writes: “[m]edia discourses surrounding the favela are not only *about* the violence imagined to take place there, but are forms of violence *in and of themselves*” (p. 85). Larkins clearly shows how spectacle leads to political control and how it is intertwined with violence. But, while the production and consumption of violence are intertwined, they are not identical, and a clearer willingness to make an analytical separation between them might have helped Larkins clarify her persuasive analysis of their linkages. Still, this is a superb book, and an exemplary piece of ethnographic research. It will likely, and rightly, long be read by students and scholars.

### ***The Security Archipelago***

The ethnography is central to *The Spectacular Favela* and it clearly feeds Larkins’s analysis; the opposite is true in *The Security Archipelago*. And, as with Larkins’s “spectacle”, the title of Amar’s book gives us a key word that provides a clue. Amar relies on what he calls an “archipelago method”, drawing on diverse sources and dispersed sites (p. 243), to tie together an analysis of violence and politics in the two vastly different megacities of Cairo and Rio de Janeiro.

Relying on a reading of an extraordinary array of material of different types—news reports, scholarly and government documents, legal reports, architectural analysis, interviews and conversations—Amar shows how a “new grammar of power and legitimacy” is emerging in “semiperipheral” cities (p. 5). Larkins’s book describes a reconfiguration of neoliberalism shaping violence and inequality in Brazil. For Amar, neoliberalism has run out of gas. This new logic, the “human-security governance regime”, is emerging as a negotiation between:

four intersecting logics of securitization: moralistic (rooted in culture and values based on evangelical Christian and Islamic piety discourses); juridical-personal (focused on rights, privatized property, and minority identity); workerist (orbiting around new or revived

notions of collective and social security and postconsumer notions of participation and citizenship); and paramilitary (a masculinist, police-centered, territorially possessive logic of enforcement).

(p. 6)

These logics take different forms in Rio and Cairo, frequently clashing with each other. For example, Amar depicts conflicts between pious religious logics and juridical human rights logics in both cities. But Amar persuasively shows that there is more than neoliberalism at work in shaping an emerging constellation of forces in these two cities.

If this seems abstract, it is. For Larkins, the abstractions emerge clearly from the ethnographic analysis of people's lives; in Amar's book, the abstractions often seem to be the agents. "These two tendencies, sexual rights and cultural autonomy, once two aspects of the same set of social-justice and entitlement claims, would start to become polarized antagonists" (p. 48), he writes, in a deployment of abstraction-as-actor of a sort that runs throughout the book. This book is at its best when the abstractions are shown to be clearly rooted in the discourses and actions of people and institutions—such as Amar's fascinating analysis (pp. 65–98) of 11 September attack hijacker Mohamed Atta's "urban cultural-security plans for Cairo", and how they contrasted "with those of local community groups and nonpurist popular religious expressions" (p. 33).

It is Amar's broad and abstract focus that allows him to identify key similarities between security regimes in early 21st-century Rio de Janeiro and Cairo. In both cities, 2011 marked a moment of new kind of urban militarization. In Cairo, the resignation of neoliberal authoritarian Hosni Mubarak amid mass-uprisings (p. 2) opened the space for groups focused on protection and moralization to consolidate their power. In Rio, the same year marked the expansion of the strategy of pacification policing (begun in 2008), "a bold new humanitarian-intervention type approach to urban social control" (p. 8). In both cases, Amar convincingly shows how contradictory logics of collective protection and preservation, fashioning themselves as standing in opposition to the sexualized "perversions of globalization" (p. 6), are coming to structure governance and violence in places where individualized logics of consumer capitalism did so in a previous era. Just as importantly, Amar argues that while this "human-security governance regime" (p. 6) draws on Global North discourses, it is something emerging from conflicts and logics with roots in the Global South itself.

*The Security Archipelago* is a well-written book. Despite its abstraction and theoretical ambition, it is not difficult to read and would make an excellent course book for advanced undergraduates or graduate students. Bringing together insights from feminism, critical security studies, anthropology, and a vast body of scholars and sources, it is a unique book that makes a novel and important argument that will likely continue to inform debates over security, sexuality, violence, and neoliberalism for many years to come.

### ***The Spectacular Archipelago***

As with the famous misquote about reports of Mark Twain's death, reports of neoliberalism's demise are often greatly exaggerated. At the time of writing this essay, figures

pushing impeachment of Brazil's Worker's Party president, Dilma Rousseff, as well as an intensification of neoliberal policy, seek support in Washington (Greenwald et al., 2016), while Egypt's president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, follows through with "economic reforms" that have won a "message of confidence" from the International Monetary Fund (Saleh, 2015). Neoliberal logics of commoditization and privatization—propped up by carceral force and international capital—may show fissures, but they are far from dead. Through these two superb studies, we can see how neoliberalism has restructured itself in Rio de Janeiro, and how it also stands challenged by "human security"-focused groups of both the political left and right, in Rio de Janeiro and Cairo.

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