"Spaces of Resistance": Power, Ideologies and Migrant Grassroots Organizing in the periphery of Lisbon

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In the last three decades Portugal has consolidated its position as a country of destination of major international influxes. These new populations have tended to concentrate in poor areas in the fringes of major cities. The formation of migrant slum neighbourhoods have produced new urbanization processes with unprecedented cultural difference, new forms of urban exclusion, and multiple points of tension and contestation. The spatial representations of these neighbourhoods have played an important role in the social construction of space. The migrant slum neighbourhood of Alto da Cova da Moura, in the city of Amadora, in the periphery of Lisbon, emerges as a heterotopia which as Foucault has argued, allows for the intersection in a single place of different spaces and locales which are incompatible amongst themselves but which "have a function in relation to the whole remaining space" (1986:25,27). Such conception of space implies a dialectic vision between social structures and spatial structures. In this sense, the structuring of space is understood as a social construction in which space and society intersect in a relational process in constant mutation. As Soja suggests (1993:26), such conceptualization points out to a notion of space as a "spatiality lived and socially constructed both concrete and abstract, the context of social practices". In the same line, Rob Shields (1991) argues that the notion of "social spatialization" is a useful tool to capture the ways in which the spatial processes emerge in relation to human and social development. For this author, social spatialization entails both a social imaginary as well as the direct intervention in the landscape. The social construction of space is thus understood as "a formation of both discursive and non-discursive elements, practices and processes" (1991:31). This idea of space is of particular importance to explore the relation between discourses, ideologies, subjectivities and the organization and construction of space. Discourses and ideologies on space are important factors for the social production of a place. That is, the ways in

which space is conceived and perceived shape to a large extent how people think, imagine, identify, act and organize the space. In this framework the institutional practices play a major role in the construction of social space. As Foucault (1984) argues "space is fundamental for the exercise of any type of power". The ways in which institutional power represents, marks, classifies and intervenes in a space, in other words the spatialization of power has profound implications for the social and spatial organization of the habitat.

In the migrant slum of Cova da Moura, dominant discourses have been challenged by grassroots local mobilizing which have attempted to produce new spatial meanings. This paper examines the changing nature of spatial discourses and the dynamics of grassroots organizing in migrant squatter settlement of Cova da Moura. The first part of the paper maps out the origins and development of the settlement, focussing on the emergence of migrant neighbourhood-based organizations. The second part explores how dominant official discourses and policies have produced, in the last three decades, an ideology of illegality and of ghettoization. The discourses of space are understood in relation to the concrete social and historical conditions in which they emerge. In the third part, special emphasis is given to the processes of negotiation, and resistance produced by local collective mobilization. It is argued that the ideologies of illegality and ghettoization have been a major driving force in shaping power relations and the nature of social action and collective consciousness. At broader level, the article draws on the case study of Cova da Moura to illustrate how grassroots mobilizing in slum neighbourhoods needs to be understood in the battleground of competing forces for the social production of space. This spatial politics constitutes the meeting place where domination meets resistance, where collective struggle become expressions of a greater awareness for the intersection of oppression, marginalization, exploitation and space.

The migrant squatter settlement of Alto da Cova da Moura

The migrant squatter settlement of Alto da Cova da Moura is situated on a small volcanic plateau in the periphery of Lisbon covering a total area of 16.3 ha with southern exposure and steep cliffs on the northern and eastern sides. The settlement is located approximately 15 Km from downtown Lisbon with easy access to public transportation (railways and buses) and to main highways and freeways crisscrossing in

its outskirts. Administratively, the settlement is located in the municipality of Amadora and it is under the jurisdiction of two parish councils Buraca and Damaia.

According to the official legislation, this neighbourhood has been classified as being "doubly illegal" (Municipality of Amadora, Cova da Moura Report, 1983). First, it resulted from the "invasion" of privately and state owned lands. Of the 16.3ha, 11.1ha are privately owned by a Portuguese family who flew to Brazil after the Portuguese Revolution in 1974 and the remaining land is the property of the Portuguese state. Secondly, the built environment is also illegal given that no licenses or building permits were ever issued. In legal terms, this neighbourhood does not fit either one of the two major categories of "urban illegality", namely "illegal neighbourhoods" resulting from the illegal construction in lots legally acquired by the home owners and "shanty neighbourhoods" resulting from the occupation of publicly owned property (Bill 804/76 and Bill 275/76).

The settlement dates from the 1940s. According to some older residents in neighbourhood the first shacks were built in the 1940's. The majority of the pioneer residents were internal rural migrants who subdivided the land in small orchard plots.

After the Revolution of 1974, political liberalization, social turmoil, and housing shortages contributed to the proliferation and consolidation of illegal neighbourhoods all over the country, especially in the metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Porto. This situation was further aggravated by the massive repatriation of Portuguese residing in the ex-colonies, new influxes of refugees fleeing the civil wars and hunger in Angola and Mozambique and new African labour migration flows to Portugal (Pires and Saint-Maurice 1989).

By mid-1974, were already living in the neighbourhood several Capeverdean families who had appropriated some of the land for themselves, their extended families and friends. For these, Cova da Moura offered an opportunity for homeownership, geographic proximity to work and city living and some social mobility. Family and neighbourhood networks proved to be crucial in the first period of adaptation to the new country. Access to housing opportunities, jobs, schools and public services, in general, were obtained, in most cases, not by institutional channels but rather through extended family ties and by a complex network of contacts spreading throughout Portugal, and to other European countries namely Spain, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States of America. These first Capeverdean migrants constituted the basis of a chain migratory process which has lasted until the present.

Between 1977 and 1987 the population of Cova da Moura boomed from 600 to 3000 residents.[i] Massive influxes of Capeverdean migrants and Portuguese returnees settled in the neighbourhood occupying the lots still available for home construction. By the mid-1980's Cova da Moura became the largest migrant enclave in Portugal with a highly ethnically heterogeneous population. According to municipal estimates, fifty-five percent of the total population were Capeverdean migrants, 8% came from Angola, 5% were Portuguese from the metropolitan area of Lisbon and the remaining 32% were internal migrants from the northern and central regions of Portugal.[ii]

In the last decade, new influxes of undocumented migrants from Mozambique, Zaire, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Eastern Europe have accentuated the ethnic heterogeneity of the population. According to local organizations, the total population residing in the neighbourhood is approximately 6000[iii]. However, no one knows exactly how many people reside in Cova da Moura. Overnight construction, multiple occupancy, the presence of an increasing number of undocumented migrants and high geographical mobility among the residents are major factors accounting for the difficulty in obtaining reliable estimates.

If political turmoil, social exclusion, displacement and lack of economic opportunities have pushed African migrant workers into residential segregation, these, like their Portuguese neighbours in the settlement pursued the pleasures of communal bonding and social networking, grappled with political and social issues of their country of origin and worked diligently to improve their life chances in the new setting. Cova da Moura was not a simple dormitory for a disenfranchised migrant labour force. Rather, the production of this neighbourhood entailed a process of transformation of a place into a space as "the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities"(de Certeau 1984:117), which extended beyond the geographic boundaries of the neighbourhood. In fact, the production and reproduction of Cova da Moura defied systematically the imposed spatial-temporal boundaries of marginality and illegality. Extended family and social networks with other migrant settlements and with the countries of origin, working opportunities at a national and international levels and membership in multiple associations (eg. sports, leisure) and institutions (trade unions and churches) contributed to the production of a world view and collective identity that transgressed the apparently isolated and bounded "illegal" community of Cova da Moura.

From the late 1970s to mid 1980s the residents of Cova da Moura established local neighbourhood-based organizations. In 1978, a group constituted by Portuguese returnees, Capeverdean and Angolan residents founded the Residents' Commission of the Neighbourhood of Alto da Cova da Moura. Three years later the same group founded the Sports and Leisure Club. In response to the commission's pressures and due to a lack of municipal power to implement a local urban rehabilitation plan, the municipality legitimated the residents' organization and tacitly empowered them as the planners, the architects, the engineers and the policemen of the settlement.

In 1984, the Cultural Association of Moínho da Juventude was also established, catering to the needs of local youth and neighbourhood women. Right from its early beginnings, Moinho da Juventude engaged deliberately in a politics of representation that attempted to develop an alternative base of political power within the neighbourhood. For the association's leaders, the complicity between the residents' commission and the local authorities was highly criticized. In their opinion, the commission's activities failed to address the real needs of the neighbourhood residents specially its youth. Keeping aloof from local politics was perceived as a means to maintain their autonomy.[iv] Instead national and international contacts, partnerships and alliances were privileged strategies allowing for new forms of collective action and social intervention.

As it will be discussed, these organizations played a crucial role in the creation of new social and political spaces where state policies were negotiated and contested.

Spatial Discourses -- Illegality and Guettoization

The first official survey conducted in Cova da Moura dates from 1983. In it the neighbourhood is described as a *sui generis* example of illegal occupation of land in the metropolitan area of Lisbon (Survey/Report on Cova da Moura, Municipality of Amadora, 1983). According to the survey, and contrary to the other twenty-four slum neighbourhoods existing at the time in the municipality, Cova da Moura was established through a process of "invasion" of private and state owned lands. In addition to this illegal occupation, all its building stock is also illegal.

It is within this framework of "illegality" that the settlement has been represented as a judicial and an administrative problem for both city planners and municipal authorities. Judicially, the "double illegal character" of the neighbourhood posed a major problem

to the potential process of urban legalization given that the legislation existent at the time was not applicable to those situations of invasion of private property. Administratively, for local state authorities Cova da Moura was primarily a housing problem reflected in urban chaos, precarious dwellings and inadequate basic infrastructures (water, electricity, garbage collection sewage, etc.). The reports elaborated by the municipality or under its auspices were most revealing of a perception of the neighbourhood in terms of spatial segregation and poverty -- a problem of "governmentality."[v] That is, the local government acknowledged right from the early stages of the settlement the need to intervene and to improve the living conditions of its populations. Yet, according to city planners lack of administrative capacity and the existence of a "piecemeal legislation" seriously hampered local state intervention in the neighbourhood (Survey/Report on Cova da Moura, Municipality of Amadora, 1983). In this report and in subsequent reports, the official discourse on the illegal status of the neighbourhood residents was not produced along ethnic or racial lines. Rather, the different ethnic migrant populations were represented as a homogeneous population living in the cracks and fringes of legality.

The last report elaborated in 1987 ("Legalização" de Alguns Quarteirões da Cova da Moura, 1987) focussed on the attitudes of residents towards what was defined as "their situation of illegality". According to this report, the majority of the population interviewed "were conscious" of their illegality and were also willing to "cooperate" in the resolution of the problem. Willingness to cooperate with city council authorities and to invest in a potential urban renewal plan were seen as important resources for the implementation of urban rehabilitation measures. However, for those who were not fully aware of the depth and scope of their illegality, the report recommended that the municipality should make them "aware" of their illegal status. Here, the appeal for the inscription of a "consciousness of illegality" in the hearts of the residents epitomizes the official production of the residents of Cova da Moura as "illegal subjects". Municipal efforts to make residents internalize a sense of illegality encouraged them to "assimilate the transgression of the laws" (Foucault 1979) reducing their subjectivities to a judicial problem.

During the 1990s, media representations of migrant settlements as ghettos and "black youths" as criminal" reflected a linear association between race, crime, poverty and space. The media representations of Cova da Moura tended to reinforce these overall images of migrant populations. The neighborhood was also portrayed as a "ghetto

which does not relate to the rest of Buraca (*Público,* May 19, 1991) or " as a degraded zone with serious social problems" (*Jornal da Região*, February 19, 1998) or even in a more "positive" note" as one of the best organized ghettos in Amadora" (*Público*, May 18, 1992).

The social spatialization of the migrant "black ghetto" as opposed to "mainstream" society has permeated dominant discourses on Cova da Moura. By the late 1990s, these representations were set in an idiom that articulated explicitly race, violence and space. For municipal authorities the slums were largely responsible for criminality and violence in Amadora (*Notícias da Amadora*, May 24, 1997). It is precisely against these hegemonic identity categories that the residents of Cova da Moura have struggled to produce alternative forms of social and spatial representations.

Grassroots Organizing and New Spatial Meanings

Right from its early beginnings the founding members of the neighbourhood residents' commission challenged the disabling features of an identity politics that fixed residents and the community in hegemonic representations of illegality. For them, the neighbourhood could hardly be envisaged in terms of a "judicial and administrative problem." Instead, the settlement and development of Cova da Moura was framed in terms of a social problem, which required state intervention. The struggles to disrupt official representations which reduced all neighbourhood residents to illegal, lawless and marginal beings are well illustrated in an item published under the heading "War against transgressors to discipline construction—an illegal neighbourhood searches for legality" (*Portugal Hoje*, January 26, 1982:3). In this article, Cova da Moura is depicted as a "model illegal neighbourhood" which "has assumed their illegal origins" and struggles for legalization. Central to these struggles is the residents' organization efforts "to free the neighbourhood from the illegal stigma and to create the conditions for urban renewal" (*ibid*:4). The article further reveals the tensions and the conflicts between the residents' organization and the municipal authorities regarding the construction of basic infrastructure. Also, the absence of an urban policy and strict control by local authorities are seen by the residents' commission as major handicaps to the potential legalization of the settlement. For the residents' association the stigma of illegality could be overcome only through discipline and tight law enforcement. Yet,

according to the item the law was "silent" and the local authorities were "passive and made no attempts to "discourage the abuse and anarchy that certain citizens have provoked through unplanned building construction" (*ibid*:3)

The nature of the struggles depicted in the press are important, for the media has functioned as a space in which the residents' commission has aired their grievances, local state policies (or their absence) were contested and where local tensions were negotiated. Throughout the years the members of the residents' commission were very keen to access the local and national mass media. For them, the media was perceived as an instrument for the symbolic representation of the commission' s struggles with local state government as well as a powerful space for claims-making.

However, for the commission's directors the mass media was not the only mechanism to further their demands. Political partisanship was perceived as the most important vehicle to access a multiplicity of resources which would not otherwise be available. In fact, the leaders of the organization had a clear understanding of local state's functioning and of the importance of party clientelism in structuring local power relations (Ruivo, 1990). In response to these structural constraints, the commission developed a set of strategies and tactics intended to capitalize on the opportunities provided by the local environment. The political trajectory of the most prominent leader of the association attests to the increasing importance of political allegiance in order to acquire crucial forms of social and political capital. According to him, his affiliation in the socialist party was a "pay-off" to the Mayor of Oeiras who recognized the residents' commission interests, legitimizing its informal power.

For Cova da Moura's residents their neighborhood is not a "ghetto where marginals are caged in."[vi] Rather it is imagined as an open space crossed by many narratives and subjectivities. The struggle against the public image of Cova da Moura as a "ghetto" is well illustrated in this resident's words, "People say that this is a ghetto and that no one comes in not even the police. That's a lie. People living outside come here everyday to get their cars repaired or their shoes done, or to sell fish or clothes. Even policemen get their bikes repaired here. What about the thousands of workers who live here and go to work every morning to build bridges and highways. What about our comings and going to other European countries?"[vii]

Implicit in this message is the struggle to inscribe the margins in the centre and thereby to overcome the ideological opposition between margins and centre. By so doing, residents attempt to open-up the field of signification and representation. This counter-

politics of marginalization brings into play new narratives of daily experiences, which can hardly be envisaged as the result of a bounded marginalized life. Ultimately, the production of a novel form of intelligibility defies dominant discourses on Cova da Moura and on its residents as the convenient marginals easily locatable in the slum, in the margins of an imaginary centre.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have proposed an analysis in which dominant discourses on Cova Moura intersect with grassroots mobilizing and their struggle for the production of new spatial meanings. Through the different phases of development of this neighbourhood one could identify the emergence of two main institutional discourses anchored on different but complementary ideological matrices. The first one is an ideology of illegality which has produced a spatial map of signification based on a juridical status and which has been used to identify and categorize the residents of this neigbourhood. The second one, an ideology of guetoization has emerged as political and mass media constructions which have produced new spatial representations. In these, the articulation between illegality, criminality and space comes to the fore as an insidious form of categorization and social regulation. Furthermore, interlocking discourses on immigration, violence, poverty and space have created social realities which have had profound consequences for residents' life chances.

Local collective mobilizing have challenged these spatial ideologies of marginalization through the production of new images and meanings. The refusal to accept dominant categorizations has implied the resignification of the neighbourhood as a space which is neither socially isolated nor disconnected from the rest of society. On the contrary, local discourses have stressed the multiple ways in which Cova da Moura is inscribed in a larger urban context made up by multiple trajectories, life experiences and mobility. The history of this neighbourhood is also the history of the spatialization of power and of its resistance. In this sense, grassroots mobilizing in slum neighbourhoods becomes inscribed in battleground of power relations, tensions and conflicts over the social construction of space. It becomes important to explore the ways in which these struggles structure space as well as the consciousness of residents, shaping their experience of places and,ultimately, of themselves.

At broader level, the article draws on the case study of Cova da Moura to illustrate how grassroots mobilizing in slum neighbourhoods needs to be understood in the battleground of competing forces for the social production of space. This spatial politics constitutes the meeting place where domination meets resistance, where collective struggle become expressions of   a greater awareness for the intersection of oppression, marginalization, exploitation and space.

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[i] According to information provided by the Residents' Association, this figure grossly underestimates the total population in the neighbourhood. Given that houses were (and still are) constructed overnight and given the constant new flows of migrants, it is close to impossible to know exactly how many people resided (and reside) in the neighbourhood

[ii] In the municipal official survey (1983) no special category was established for Portuguese returnees. Instead, this were included amongst the overall category of "Portuguese".

[iii] Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude, Activities Reports 1994-1998. The last official survey conducted in Cova da Moura dates from 1987. It was estimated that the total population residing in the neighbourhood was approximately 5000 people. According to The Residents' Association a figure as high as 10.000 is a more accurate estimate of the total population living presently in the neighbourhood.

[iv] Personal interview with Godlieve Meersschaert, founding director of the Cultural Association Moinho da Juventude.

[v] Here I draw on Foucault´s later notion of governmentality not as a "disciplinary power" but rather as a form of power aiming at the welfare of the population, the improvement of its conditions, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, etc. See Foucault, M 1991 "Governmentality" trans. by Colin Gordon, rep. *Foucault Effects. Studies of Governmentality*, ed. By Graham Burchill et al., London:Harvester Wheatsheaf.

[vi]   Personal interview with a neigbourhood rapper, March, 1998, Alto da Cova da Moura.

[vii]   Personal interview with a neighbourhood resident, January, 1998, Alto da Cova da Moura.