

## Lanceiros Negros fighting for the right to housing: urban squatting at Porto Alegre - Brazil

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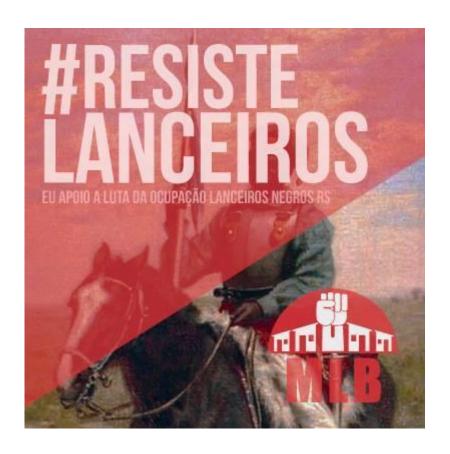
## Resumo:

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Palavras-chave: Occupation; Social Movements, Organizing

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## Lanceiros Negros fighting for the right to housing: urban squatting at Porto Alegre - Brazil

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Sub-theme 58: Organizational Practices of Social Movements: The Power of Organizing from Below

In here there is a bunch of crazy people, crazy for housing, who thinks it's not much, never had a cold night" (protest chant).

In this article, we present the Lanceiros Negros squatting fight and explore the theoretical possibilities of Henri Lefebvre's critique of everyday life, a privileged level for the comprehension (and shifting) of reality and (des)alienation.

Lanceiros Negros (Black Lancers) was the name of a military troop of black slaves recruited to fight in the Farrapos War (a reference to the tattered clothes used by the combatants as the war progressed), a conflict that started with the revolt of farmers from Rio Grande do Sul, the Southern state of Brazil, and national imperialist forces, mainly as a reaction to cattle taxation. The war lasted from 1835 to 1845 and had at its aims the independence from Brazil and the creation of a republican country where slavery would be abolished. The black slaves fought with the promise of liberation after the end of the conflict; it is estimated that half of the farrapo's forces were slaves. As the conflict marched to its end, with the closeness of an agreement, general David Canabarro sent the Lanceiros Negros almost unarmed to the front lines for a lethal combat known as Porongos Massacre. Later it became known that there was a previous arrangement between the commander of the imperialist army and this general. Their act was considered a betrayal since both did not want to free the slaves as promised. There were fears that it would result in an expressive amount of blacks militarized, armed and unsatisfied, with the risk of revolts and further conflicts. At that time, the slaves represented around 21% of the state's population. On the battle of November 14th, only 120 Lanceiros survived from over 1.000, some deeply wounded, all of whom continued to be salves in other parts of the country.







Figure 1. Farrapos War and Lanceiros Negros. (Wikipedia, 2016).

The Urban Squatting of Lanceiros Negros started on 14th of November 2015, the same day of the Porongos Battle, after months of planning. It was organized by a national social movement – the MLB (Movimento de Luta nos Bairros, Vilas e Favelas – Movement of Struggle in Neighborhoods and Shantytowns), created to struggle for urban reform as a medium to construct a

socialist society. According to them, "occupations educate people about the necessity of organized struggles, developing collective working spirit. Occupying is an act of rebellion, of confrontation with established order, of questioning the sacred private capitalist propriety. So, while living in decent houses is a privilege, occupying is an obligation" (MLB, *online*, 2016).

MLB leaders organized and prepared for three months around sixty families from three poor communities of the metropolitan region for the occupation, conducting weekly meetings in their neighborhoods. Some participants of the occupation lived in borrowed places, other in illegal housings in dangerous areas, or in rented shacks, most of them also not legal. Mr. Luiz is an example, an electrician that works on temporary contracts, making small repairs. He told us he lived in a very poor and dangerous community in a small one-bedroom precarious house owned by a violent man that charged nearly a minimum wage as rent. In case of delaying payment, he and his family were physically and morally threatened, what obliged Mr. Luiz to choose, in the lack of money, more than once, to pay the rent instead of buying food. Another participant of the occupation, Mrs Jussara, reminded us that many times the poor have to choose between eating or paying the rent to live in places forgotten by the State, dominated by the drug trafficking organizations, where kids are always in danger on the streets, exposed to violence and the temptations of a well-paid and maybe lethal job with the drug dealers.

The occupied building is located in the middle of the historical center of Porto Alegre, belongs to the state government and has been empty for nearly a decade. In recent interviews, state representatives declared the existence, prior to the occupation, of a project to transfer some government departments to the building, reason why they are asking justice to evict the families. The fact is that no evidence was shown to prove the existence of this project, what can be questioned since it is estimated that the state has around 1.500 empty properties, while some Secretaries function on located buildings.



Figure 2. Lanceiros Negros Squatting. (Santos, 2016).

MLB chose strategically the place where the occupation is. According to one of its leaders, besides facilitating the access to most of the productive part of the city, making families life easier in terms of working, the crowded streets expose the cause to more people. Official data indicates that an average of over 400.000 people circulate every day in the city center (Prefeitura de Porto Alegre, 2015). It is interesting to see the reactions of the trespassers. Lanceiros Negros is on a corner in the middle of a small hill. It has some flags over the sides and residents of the occupation are always in the door securing the entrance. Everyday life downtown is always in a rush. People coming and going, passing by, most of the times running late somewhere. Many do not look up, moving on with their lives. One block away, an indigenous plays the flute on the sidewalk, trying to sell his CDs and his art. In the other corner, some people drink beers and eat at a bar in front of where ambulances from the countryside are parked waiting for people who came to the city for medical services. Some steps up on the street people enter and leave a notary office.

A lawyer who works in the same street as the building told us that in the beginning the curiosity motivated people to talk about the squatting. The more conservative expressed worries about the fact that the occupation was subverting

the order, bringing the scum to the neighborhood. This uncovers the existing contradictions and the potential conflicts of class struggle 'always present in essence, but hidden from the sight'. The movement interrupts the feeling of security, an important feature of everyday life, causing class prejudice reactions, reproducing the rage aimed towards the poor. For those, the residents of the occupation should be working their way up in life through meritocracy, as a consultant from the lawyer's building once said: "this squatting is an act of bums, probably paid by some political party". People who interpret the phenomenon in such a way, usually pass by without facing the people in the entrance, some cross the streets showing fear for the unknown.

At the same time, since the center is a mixed neighborhood, many others support the occupation, both morally and donating supplies. More than once, while talking to someone in the entrance hall, we witnessed people passing by the front gate and asking if everything was allright or if they were in need of something. Also, many supporters of the cause visit Lanceiros Negros on a regular basis. That causes a flux of different people around the area. Many times chats take place on the sidewalk in front of the building, on standing up circle or sitting on improvised boxes. This physical occupation of the corner is interesting because it interferes with the passers-by that cannot ignore the people living in that building. They walk fast, but get a glimpse of the movement, a glimpse of what they usually try to avoid. In the occupation Facebook profile is possible to confirm the support provided by a lot of neighbors. There are pictures of many who visit the occupation to take donations holding a poster saying: "I Support Lanceiros Negros Occupation". There is even an inside joke of the occupation leaders is that they sympathized with the occupation because, in fact, it brought more security for the surroundings, since police now is always around.





Figure 3. Neighbors manifesting support to the Lanceiros Negros cause. (Lanceiros Negros Facebook Page, 2016).

Since the dawn of 14<sup>th</sup> November 2015, the families living in the occupation built up an organization supported by volunteers and cause defenders. Everyday life tasks are divided in commissions with coordinators, one for food and cooking, one for cleaning, one for structure and another for security, assigning responsibilities that shift among occupiers on daily and weekly basis. All major decisions concerning non-operational duties are decided by the collective of occupiers in weekly assemblies, always mediated by a MLB local leader.

In this process of resistance and construction of the occupation, some are turning into social leaders themselves. Qeops, one of the MLB local leaders, told us the story about Jussara, a woman that used to speak soft, with low self-esteem, that turned into one of the strongest fighters in Lanceiros. He related that she was the one that caused an embarrassment to the mayor on a meeting arranged by the public defenders, stating firmly her rights and possibilities. She said: "I am living downtown now, my daughter is going to a decent school and we have access to a good health service, almost without cuing. Where I lived before, my daughter could not play in the streets because of the drug war violence. I don't want just a house I want a house where I can access the urban equipments and be a citizen".

No drugs and alcohol are allowed as a way to enhance struggle legitimacy and respect on supporters and enemies. There is also a time do turn off the lights

and to stop making noises, making living together easier. According to Qeops, this strategy guaranteed the sympathy of some neighbors and the respect of most, since the fear of the first impression slowly gave way to a peaceful coexistence. He reported an occasion when a fellow, father of five sons, all living there, drank alcohol and made a lot of noise after silence hours two times, annoying other families. In the next assembly occupiers had to decide if they were going to evict the man, choosing to forgive him because of his sons.

Food is served every day, counting on donations for the most common types of goods, what is a lot for families who did not have enough to feed everybody properly. The donations come from social organizations, syndicates and occupation supporters in general. Also, when cultural and political activities happen, the entering ticket is the donation of a kilo of food, what helps with the stock levels.



Figure 4. Lunch at Lanceiros Negros. (Lanceiros Negros facebook page, 2016).

There is a nursery, recently opened in a refurbished room, aimed to take care of the 12 small children living there. The idea was based on popular educations movements, and is the result of a partnership with students from the Federal University. Also there is an improvised gym where yoga and boxing classes happen; cultural activities, such as movies exhibitions, live music

presentations, theaters and art workshops; and political formation talks in the form of public forums and classes.



Figure 5. La Digna Rabia playing at Lanceiros Negros Squatting. (La Digna Rabia facebook page, 2016).

The dynamic of day by day at Lanceiros includes visitors circulating in the facilities, militants, students, political party's members, unionists and others interested in the occupation, such as researchers - we included. Walking around one will find children playing, people using old computers, groups chatting, people reading in a small library, a group watching an old tv in the lobby, exhibition of art created in the workshops and people cooking; while some come and go from their work. That way, slowly, an everyday life dynamic develops in the squatting.









Figure 6. Everyday life at Lanceiros Negros. (Lanceiros Negros Facebook Page, 2016).

It is important to notice that most of the occupiers are workers, many of them working in the informal economy as builders, electricians, housemaids, cleaners, baby sitters, and so on. Only a few have formal low paid jobs. Some occupation supporters are planning to start a services cooperative to offer Lanceiros Negros working force to people living in the neighborhood. This is something that impresses the public opinion, since common sense tend to a moral judgement of the occupiers as a group of bums and invaders.

As life goes on in the occupation, the state's government tries to take the building back using its legal powers. A first repossession suit was granted on November 25th, giving the families 72 hours to leave the occupation; otherwise, the police force would execute the eviction order; what did not happen then.

Afterwards, a new repossession suit was issued on December 2nd. Once again the mobilization of the families, social and political activists, helped to postpone the eviction. On 4<sup>th</sup> of December, the day when the repossession should occur, the regular pulse of the city center was interrupted. In this morning, people supporting the cause went downtown, gathering around a sound car playing Hip Hop. While some criticized the act, calling it a lack of respect, or an unoccupied student's movement, others enjoyed and stopped by to hear the music and the words of the discourses and songs of protest, calling for justice and resistance.





Figure 7. Lanceiros Negros support demonstration. (MLB RS Facebook Page, 2016).

But the threatening only gave a real break after 50 students invaded CEUACA, an old student house for low income Federal University students, closed and abandoned for over 2 years. Besides demanding the reopening of the facilities, they required an audience with the Secretary of Justice and Human Rights to dialogue about the Lanceiros Negros occupation. After the meeting, the repossession suit was officially temporarily suspended.



Figure 8. Police force at CEUACA occupation. (Trezzi, 2016).





Figure 9. Students protesting at CEUACA. (Sul21, 2016).

After this episode, half year went on without new threats from justice or the State. Only on April 27<sup>th</sup> a new repossession suit was published without any alternatives or a real attempt to negotiate. It was close to the beginning of the winter, a cold and rainy season in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, with average temperatures reaching below 10 celsius degrees somedays. The most emblematic night of Lanceiros Negros fight was about to come.

It was five in the afternoon of a regular cold and windy Monday at downtown Porto Alegre. A banker's unionist that works as a lawyer in the same block as the occupation overheard in a library close by that police forces went there at midday to warn them about an operation of reintegration that would take place that night, and that they would close the access all the streets nearby after working hours. He went to Lanceiros and told the story to the leaders that quickly spread news through social networks, calling supporters of the cause to join in a resistance movement. Some activists came before police action started, but around eight pm no one else could enter the building and if someone left could not go inside anymore, since police forces blocked all the street traffic both to people and cars. Two workers from the occupation could not reach their families and had to stay out behind a barricade set by the police.

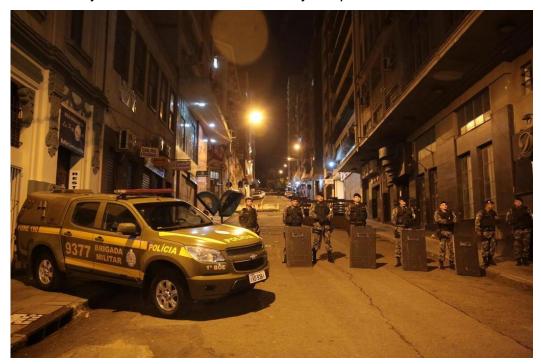


Figure 10. Police Forces blocking access to Lanceiros Negros. (Clicrbs, 2016).



Figure 11. Supporters in a night vigil for Lanceiros Negros resistance. (Juliano Verardi, 2016).

It was a tense and long night. Around 100 police men and 50 supporters stayed up waiting in the cold small hours. The supporters, composed by activist journalists, students, MLB leaders, politicians, militants from other social movements, lawyers and many other cause sympathizers, took turns using the megaphone to express their side of the story and to keep up the motivation of the occupiers' resistance. Meanwhile, police forces studied the invasion, waiting for the justice signal to start the process. Close to six in the morning, when a type of electric saw was ready to put the door down, the lawyers managed to suspend the reintegration suit. The high court judge on duty decided it on urgency based on an eminent risk of social conflicts, especially considering the physical integrity of the children living in the building.

When the news spread in the occupation, Lanceiros and supporters started a celebration. The unexpected happy end contrasted with the tension lived by the families inside the building. According to reports from a mother who lives there: "night was very tense. Horror. We were holding the children in our lap, they were afraid. In fact, we were afraid, but we had a victory. We were nervous because we thought they would come here and beat even the children, since we would not leave easily" (GOMES, *online*, 2016).

Following this description, we will share some theoretical insights, based on the propositions of Henri Lefebvre.

The city center of Porto Alegre has the characteristic of being a scenario for the absolute majority of social struggles that take place in the city. However, most of them are usually ephemera (such as political and artistic demonstrations or temporary occupation of the streets and other public spaces). Besides that, the city center has other buildings occupied – for example, the Saraí Squatting, where 20 families have lived in the last two years; or the Utopia e Luta building, a former squatting now legally occupied. What makes the Lanceiros Negros a special case is the fact that it is located at the heart of a business area. It creates, as it was presented before, a transitory space in which social conflicts are made explicit and everyday life is politicized.

Lefebvre (2003) identified three types of space: (1) isotopies – identical spaces that can be compared, quantified and mapped, spaces of order and rationality; (2) heterotopies – ambiguous spaces, both excluded and interwoven; and (3) utopies – non-places, spaces of consciousness, imagined spaces that contain the promise of liberation and transcendence. When the movement of May 1968 took Quartier Latin, in Paris, Lefebvre (1969, p, 118) wrote: "[...] the utopian locality came to assume an extraordinary presence". The power of the streets has the force to shake up societies, or at least to produce or to make institutional crisis visible. It is an effective power, even if transitory". However,

When the process of dis-alienation through unfettered speech, street activities and spontaneous disorder – when this dis-alienation process ebbed, the order of everyday existence reorganized itself in its down-to-earth solidity. This disruption of the social order come to be viewed as disruption of everyday existence; the restoration of everyday existence supports the restoration of social order (Lefebvre, 1969, p. 89).

In support to the restoration of everyday existence, institutional apparatus recourse to their Manichean mythology – evil against good, disorder against order, something we can appreciate when we hear the comments full of prejudice

and the effort of the State Government to evict the occupiers. During and after the reintegration dawn previously described official and conservative press voices vociferated against Lanceiros Negros, calling them invaders, bums, and other diminishing qualifiers. In a time marked by a growing distance between the institutional levels and the daily lives, the downtown squatter is a constant reminder of the persistence of poverty and class difference, usually pushed away from the everyday life of the middle and upper classes, located at far suburban areas; also indicates that basic problems are still there and that the State and its bureaucracy have not been able to deal with them.

Despite that, we believe that the existence of the squatter and its visibility, as well as the public interventions around it, produces transient utopic spaces. Lefebvre (2014, p. 116) alerts that the contemporary revolutionary praxis is a utopia that "stimulates action by achieving itself through a succession of approximations". What Lanceiros Negros is proposing is a sort of revolutionary everyday life transitory synthesis between needs (housing), private (possibility to live and intervention on other people's lives) and public (the State building). In this sense, Lefebvre (1975, p. 191-192) anticipated that a strategy for the left would be to "use the class struggle in the space". It means that the creation of a different society and its possibility has to face the question of producing new forms of socially produced spaces that are currently blocked by the relations of property and production. Lanceiros Negros and other similar urban squatting defy these notions, promoting a qualitative leap circumscribed in specific spots, creating a transitory passage from "domination to appropriation and the primacy of use over exchange value". At the heart of the real, Lanceiros stretch the realm of possibilities, fighting against establishment and opening a gap in the neoliberal ideology everyday life order.

We understand ideology as expressed by Lukács (2012), for whom ideology is ideological precisely because it has a function and produces concrete effects on real processes. So, the neoliberal ideology is an ideology with functions related to the historical development of capitalism in its actual stage, organizing social relations in all its dimensions around the market and its instrumental rationality, based on efficiency, calculation and competitiveness. In terms of ideology and everyday life, Lefebvre (2014, p. 116) understands that "men have no knowledge of their own lives: they see them and act them out via ideological

themes and ethical values. In particular, they have an inadequate knowledge of their own needs and their own fundamental attitudes; they express the badly; they delude themselves [...] and yet it is their lives, and their consciousness of life" (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 116). For him, only someone informed by the dialectics is able to "join together the lived and the real, formal structure and its content". Thus, we have here a main contradiction that emerges from the depths of everyday life, ideology is at the same time conservation and repetition but also liberation and possibilities, interpreting, refracting, reflecting, producing, adding, and transposing its own existence.

The thousands that come and go on a daily basis, packing the historical center during working hours, are just living their lives. Lanceiros Negros is an interruption, maybe a small one in a fast paced routine, but is not possible to ignore a utopian space positioned in the middle of a walk between home and the office or the office and a shopping place. Even for a few seconds, neoliberal ideology has to yield, making people face the fact that not everybody plays the same game as they do. By interfering with everyday life flow and defying the notion of property, a fundamental capitalist canon, the squatting creates a social space guided by an ideology from outside of everyday life rush, stating that the right to live is the only real fundamental principle.

About the strategy of transitory occupation of public spaces, Holm and Kahn (2010, p. 655), based on the analysis of Berlin's squatting history, conclude that "leftist movements today are again taking up urban restructuring as a theme". We cannot compare the trajectory of this type of social movement in Europe, since it is a widely used tactic there since the 1970's, but it seems that recent emergence of interest in the housing and urban conflicts share common grounds. These movements were all created in the context of the popular counterstrike against globalization in the 1990's, or against neoliberalism politics effects on people's everyday life. In this sense, similarities are clear. According to Orlando Jr., an MLB leader, in Brazil "is in course what we call a new round of marketization of the cities, a growing elite focus of Brazilian metropolis associated to the diffusion of a certain neoliberal entrepreneurship governance and the strengthening of certain power urban coalitions that sustains this same project." (Barroso, *online*, 2014).

The reflections of Harvey (2011), related to the Occupy Wall Street movement, also help understanding the significance of these moments: "[...] the collective power of bodies in public spaces is still the most effective instrument of opposition when all other means of access are blocked [...] it is bodies on the street and in the squares not the babble of sentiments on twitter or Facebook that really matter". Žižek (2011), reflecting on the same movement made the following considerations: "The art of politics is to insist on a particular demand that while thoroughly "realistic" also disturbs the very core of the hegemonic ideology, i.e. which, while definitely feasible and legitimate, is de facto impossible [...]".

Back to Lefebvre (2014, p. 338), let's develop on the notion of everyday life, used so many times. According to him,

[...] it is in everyday life and starting from everyday life that genuine creations are achieved, those creations which produce the human and which men produce as part of the process of becoming human: works of creativity. These superior activities are born from seeds contained in everyday practice. From the moment groups or individuals are able and obliged to plan ahead, to organize their time and to use whatever means they have at their disposal, reason is formed in social practice.

It is clear that people living their everyday life in the occupation of Lanceiros Negros was obliged to plan ahead and to organize this risky event because of the concrete impossibility of living their everyday life. At the same time, as we described, a very important part of the occupation is precisely the organization of everyday life – a kind of safe place amidst so much uncertainty.



Figure 12. Christmas at Lanceiros Negros. (MLB Rio Grande do Sul Facebook Page, 2016).

It is in everyday life that the realization of new possibilities happens; that the inherent contradictions find their solutions by means of the praxis and the consequent concretization of genuine creations. Part of this process overflows its boundaries and invades the established order, disturbing their forms and contours. Events – understood as transitory activities, as movements between continuity and discontinuity – that express tactics and strategies of social forces – break up the routine of alienation of those involved and, at least, disturb the alienation of those merely touched by them. Revolution, in this terms, is not confined to the transformation of economic or political, i.e. relations of production and institutional, "but could and must extend as far as everyday life, as far as actual "desalination", creating a way of living, a style – in other word, a civilization" (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 691-692). Emphasis here is put in the ground level, in the construction of new possibilities from below, from social organization.

We think that this kind of approach can support a better understanding of events such as the one presented here, going beyond the usual approach to address Social Movements in Organization Studies, which has been largely influenced by theories constructed to analyze business organizations and tends to reproduce the structural bias that still prevails in the field. The contribution of

Lefebvre also helps to look at struggles that take place in the urban space following the recommendations of Miller and Nicholls (2013). According to them, we should look at social movements in the urban society, instead of urban social movements (Harvey, 2012), in order to amplify our perspective when we study struggles that happen within the urban space, that could even be directed to an urban demand (such as housing), but that go beyond these features and contribute to the politicization of everyday life, including the life of those not directly involved.

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