

A Comparative Study of Rio de Janeiro and Johannesburg: Urbanization and Social Class

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Abstract:

In the early twentieth century, two cities exhibited social unrest and social conflict. In Johannesburg, South Africa, the seeds for apartheid were sewn as an influx of workers came to nourish the country's mines. In Rio de Janeiro, the rise of a global economy fostered immigrant communities. This paper analyzes the causes of early twentieth century social unrest as a result of the urbanization of both of these cities, and compares and contrasts both spatial and economic factors. It also investigates the labor landscapes in both cities as a supplement to these changes.

The development of both Rio de Janeiro and Johannesburg at the turn of the twentieth century follows a dual path of social instability. At a moment when apartheid was beginning to solidify into a century long institution, a South African working class culture was developing. In Rio, the globalization of a newly transformed economy was exhibiting unstable patterns, worrying the already impoverished working class. Current scholarship places both cities in their own rights as polycentric cities undergoing urbanization through segregationist and cosmopolitan cultures. While scholars have thoroughly introduced each city's respective metropolitan culture, there is little in the way of an ethnographic comparison between the two. This paper attempts to connect space and geography through the rise of racially and economically induced characterizations. Social unrest in both cities manifested in the urbanization of each city as a driving force of culture. Beyond the reach of the elite upper strata, the rising urban poor and separated classes molded the cityscape, and built a platform on which social protests were enacted. For the cities, the architecture and

people determined the physical city, the strength of a cosmopolitan urban society, and the socio-political mobility of their respective inhabitants. Although separated by their geographic positions, both Johannesburg and Rio de Janeiro benefited from the changing urban and labor landscapes of the early twentieth century.

Rio de Janeiro emerged from the nineteenth century in a neo-colonial age as the establishment of the First Republic of Brazil deposed Emperor Dom Pedro II and instituted a new order of nominal democracy. The rise of the commercial city brought urbanization, increasing globalization, and social transformations to a population divided by wealth and poverty. As the capital of the Brazilian Republic, Rio extended its social strife and political tensions beyond its neighborhoods. Class division cut through cultural and economic policies, as the elite pursued commercial agendas, pushing for the increase of urban manufacturing, while poor wage workers demanded self-determination and improved labor laws.¹ It was a modernizing city within an agricultural nation, where

¹ Meade, 5

commercial interests were growing to replace the colonial order of the nineteenth century.²

As a much younger city, Johannesburg emerged from the clutches of colonialism as Rio de Janeiro sought to escape it. Johannesburg was founded in the late nineteenth century as gold and diamond minerals beckoned settlement and the establishment of a migrant system of labor. Electricity was quickly implemented due to mining businesses, prompting urbanization and early ethnic-regional exclusivity. Much like Rio, which thrived on the backbone of wage laborers and “freed” slaves, Johannesburg progressed as a center of labor. The town attempted to mimic the English—not the French as Rio sought—and emerged an African-European city, an industrialist with interest in the capitalization of people and land.³ As the city grew on immigrated labor, its racial divide blossomed, feeding a similar dialectic as did Rio. Modernization claimed the progress of the poor and socially subjugated classes while pursuing the agenda of the rich, and coloring the city with an economic divide.⁴ It was a dual nation with a dual class of citizens. Where Rio suffered an elitist oppressor, Johannesburg fell to its racial discriminator.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Rio experienced a steep population growth due to European immigration which coincided with the increase of freed slaves. Despite the abolition of slavery in 1888, many former slaves could not afford to abandon their positions. Instead, they remained as sharecroppers or debtors to their former rural plantation owners. There thus was a barrier between the country and its rural outskirts, where elite culture and European influence

stopped along a wall of debt and traditional agrarian values.⁵ Brazil’s increasing interest and position in the global market fostered a necessarily mutual relationship between the country and city, between production, agriculture, and industry. Since trade exports, and especially British capital interests, relied on the work of planters and coffee traders, the wealthy would visit the city in “urban residences” to absorb the imported European civilization, while the working poor failed to grasp even a marginally cosmopolitan lifestyle.⁶

The Brazilian bourgeoisie claimed France as their cultural archetype, modelling fashion and artistic endeavors for their belle époque, which lasted from 1894 to 1914.⁷ In 1902, Mayor Pereira Passos revitalized the city under infrastructural reforms, earning the name “the Tropical Haussmann.”⁸ Improving public transportation by creating new avenues and establishing ports, Pereira Passos sought to characterize the city as a modern, international capital. European dress styles were mandatory, en vogue. Newly erected architecture followed a strict Parisian ideal to symbolize the “model of a Europeanized bourgeois civility.”⁹ Working closely with Pereira Passos was the new president of the Brazilian republic, Rodrigues Alves (1902-1906), who initiated sanitation programs, public works, and careful socio-economic measures to aid urbanization.¹⁰

In 1922, the International Exhibit of the Centenary of Brazil’s Independence was celebrated with the building of illustrious halls and pavilions. Beatriz Jaguaribe, a contemporary Brazilian scholar, describes the grandiose and imported architectural styles as a “feral illumination, [the] novelties and imposing buildings deemed to be both a

² Jaguaribe, 17

³ Nutall, 38

⁴ Nutall, 46

⁵ Meade, 19.

⁶ Meade, 22

⁷ Meade, 23

⁸ Meade, 24

⁹ Jaguaribe, 17

¹⁰ Needell, 86

‘Bazaar of Marvels’ and the ‘Antechamber of Paradise.’”¹¹ Rio served to highlight Brazilian progress and prosperity, merging its still tangible neo-colonialism with a tropical modernity. Tourists arriving in the city could purchase postcards that displayed national monuments and the scenes of passing trolley cars, loaded with passengers on a day trip through the city’s welcoming avenues. Old buildings reminiscent of colonial wealth were replaced with sprawling walkways and lavish monuments to praise the new republic.¹² The ornamentation of Rio’s imitative landscape was evident in attempts to preserve the French opulence; photographer Carlos Bippus captured the luminescent International Exhibit in 1922, illuminating the nocturnal sweeping lights of the pavilions that held nearly three million people from various European countries, and even Japan.¹³

The development of Johannesburg followed a less opulent and illustrious path, though equally as rapid as the Brazilian capital. Population soon rose after the Mineral Revolution of the 1860’s, prompting the need for housing areas and marketplaces to satisfy the growing commercialism of the mining city. Labor gathered workers across Africa to put to work in mines, but other immigrants from India, China, Britain, and other European countries came to satisfy industrial demands. The markets thus became open places for immigrant communities to interact in and accordingly, for urbanization to occur.

As in Rio, the streets became central urban paths; horse-drawn trams careened down public squares and marketplaces, surrounded by banks and various commercial endeavors. A market square in Johannesburg in 1900 was a crowded space, encased by the English, neo-

gothic architecture and various shops. Patrons and merchants alike would scatter among the lively square, as wagons crisscrossed wares. As the foundations for apartheid began quite early in the city, there was little physical separation as Africans, Asians, and whites inadvertently mingled among the large spaces afforded by the city. As an initially smaller city than Rio, with tempting wage levels, Johannesburg could foster many of the poor by employing a large workforce to supplant many demanded domestic services such as cooking, cleaning, and washing. Prostitution naturally became a by-product of the population rise in response to these services. In 1903, about twenty-two percent of the Rand’s population were women.¹⁴ As with other sparse ‘commodities,’ women were in demand and could profit from fulfilling sexual services.

Prostitution in Rio was an open and almost begrudgingly accepted vice along with vagrancy and gambling. Propositions were common in respectable districts and were expected in barely hidden, brothel-lined streets.¹⁵ Both Rio and Johannesburg exhibited a racism evident in prostitution—darker skinned Brazilian women and African women were in the lower class of prostitutes, while French women were desired in Rio, and ‘imported’ white European women were favored in Johannesburg.¹⁶ Both cities harbored gambling and alcohol as solutions to the dreary lifestyles of the overworked and the impoverished. In Johannesburg, boredom and a search for pleasure outside of the dangerous mines created a culture of drinking that officials attempted to control. Leisure activities were regulated by a government “concerned that leisure time for the working class...was constructive and healthy.”¹⁷ Entertainment in

¹¹ Jaguaribe, 22

¹² Jaguaribe, 53

¹³ “Centenario Da Independencia Do Brasil.”

¹⁴ Callinicos, 12

¹⁵ Meade, 38

¹⁶ Callinicos, 42

¹⁷ Kallaway, 38

Rio was readily available for the wealthy. In the richer and spacious south, efficient trolley lines, sewage systems, and electricity exemplified Rio's attempt at tropical modernity while in the north, more crowded streets were dark and damp, subject to disease and corrosive poverty.¹⁸ Companies and districts were in cohorts, building along lines of wealth rather than need. Cafés and restaurants modeled after the styles of boêmios were exorbitantly French, "a tropical contingent of the avant-garde."¹⁹ The Carioca elite, the Brazilian flaneurs, consciously emulated Paris as the highest form of modern intellectual and artistic progress—but one afforded by willful disregard of poverty.

As both cities began evolving, new media of protest arose that simultaneously fulfilled the desires of a cosmopolitan elite and offered a voice for the dissenting misfortunate. French importation of culture manifested into Rio's Rua do Ouvidor, an echo of Parisian arcades in its collection of shops and theatres.²⁰ Films were at first a novelty, a method by which citizens could access the world as if they were on a "global journey."²¹ After film popularity increased, cinematic productions from Rio followed along with the rise of electricity, contributed to a vibrant film culture that celebrated and protested many aspects of the "modern" city. Maite Conde suggests that because of Rio's obsession with physical worldliness, an attempt to thrust itself into modernity, it blossomed into a great "word city." The proliferation of displays in photographs, postcards, magazines, and of course films, highlighted its new image, or protested its façade.²² The introduction of films into South Africa followed the same course,

importing French and English films into theatres across Johannesburg. One film magazine article from 1912 assures readers that films arriving in London take only a week to reach Johannesburg, and are shown twice a day to an eager audience.²³ It notes however, that no films were produced in South Africa, unlike in the domestic Brazilian film industry. In early twentieth century Johannesburg, the film industry remained an imported one, offering little means for the African voice to be heard; instead, dancing and street music were taken up as protest. Jazz and African hymns blended to create a uniquely African culture in response to the oppressive urban environment.²⁴ Johannesburg nightclubs offered an escape from the confining passbook laws and white oppression that wore at daily life.

As Johannesburg existed as a physically fluid social cesspool, out of urban necessity where whites, blacks, and other immigrants interacted, Rio's extravagant city reforms relegated the poor and the wealthy to separate avenues. On the periphery of the city were favelas, the slums and shadow towns rejected by the luminescence of Rio's tropical citadel. Along the hills of downtown Rio, the favelas expanded as neglected urban poor and rural peasants joined the settlement.²⁵ Similar space in Johannesburg separated living areas for whites and blacks, as many townships were created outside of the city and were the only spaces available for blacks to purchase freehold land.²⁶ Johannesburg still maintained an interactive and impoverished public space, lacking the same infrastructure and sanitation afforded to the brighter metropolis of Rio, and that which did not as easily separate people physically.

¹⁸ Meade, 80

¹⁹ Needell, 90

²⁰ Conde, 190

²¹ Conde, 193

²² Conde, 196

²³ "South Africa's Picture Shows"

²⁴ Coplan, 140

²⁵ Jaguaribe, 175

²⁶ Kallaway, 35

In Johannesburg, discrimination was establishing its foothold while Rio began transforming into a social mine of protest. Abolition had transformed Rio's social strata into an environment ripe for reform—as the city explored an international identity, an organic neo-colonial dialectic developed. More than doubling its population from 1890 to 1920, Rio crowded people of different languages and cultures into a city on the verge of erupting into riots.²⁷ Whereas in Johannesburg, immigrants created the foundation for the capital economy, Rio's immigrants contributed to a well-established export market. In both cities, however, white immigrants lived in superiority to blacks, earning higher wages and living in better conditions beyond that of the freed slaves in Rio, and Africans in Johannesburg. For both cities, the situation was endemic to labor disputes. Rio's economic situation was unbalanced, troubling the poor with taxes. A lack of the Republic's economic control also meant higher prices and unstable wages, leading to protests and strikes. Johannesburg's increasing ethnic repression pushed demonstrators to protest, but were swiftly crushed by police forces. Rio's environment, the push for modernity and urban technology, was used by demonstrators who took advantage of the new streets to protest. Unwittingly, Rio, in its attempts to become the South American Paris, inherited the European city's history of social instability and proclivity for violence.

The environments of both Rio de Janeiro and Johannesburg were filled with social tensions in the early twentieth century. For Rio it was a natural result of economic unrest and in Johannesburg, the mining economy and culture created racial dissent and repression. Yet, both cities still displayed a spectacle about

them, with lively cultures that bred out of an immigrant base. The Mineral Revolution in Johannesburg, however, did not create the desperate Europeanisation that Rio's urbanization did, thus creating a less visual culture. The creation of public space, in the marketplaces of Johannesburg, and the avenues of Rio, fostered a natural modernity that heralded a cosmopolitan framework. Beyond the elite culture of Rio's cariocas and the white power of Johannesburg, the working classes of Africans and Brazilians managed to impact the development of the city across riots and strikes. For both, the portrait of social classes furthered their evolution into the global stage, and thrust a conflicting social landscape upon their physical boundaries.

²⁷ Meade, 49

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