


## MONEY AND POWER IN "CITY OF GOD": STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND ITS SOCIAL DYNAMICS

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the representations of money and power in the novel *City of God*, by Paulo Lins, and how these elements structure social relations and violence in the favela. Through a narrative marked by omnipresent violence, Lins exposes the consequences of social inequality in Brazil, highlighting how money and power shape the dynamics of residents' lives. The study addresses how the pursuit of money is not limited to meeting basic needs, but extends to a quest for status and respect, while power is often exercised violently. The analysis is also based on sociological and psychological theories, such as those of Freud, which help to understand violence as a response to social exclusion and material deprivation. The article reflects on the implications of these issues for society and academia, suggesting that understanding these dynamics can guide public policies focused on social inclusion and reducing urban marginalization. Despite its contributions, the study has limitations, such as the thematic restriction on money and power, suggesting that future studies expand this analysis to other themes, such as race and gender, and explore comparisons with other urban realities.

**Keywords:** City of God. Violence. Social inequality. Slum. Power. Exclusion.

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## INTRODUCTION

The novel *City of God*, by Paulo Lins, published in 1997, is one of the most important works of contemporary Brazilian literature, as it brutally and realistically addresses the social dynamics and living conditions in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Through a multifaceted narrative, Lins builds a universe marked by an almost omnipresent violence, which permeates not only the daily lives of the characters, but also their aspirations and choices. The author portrays a scenario where money and power function as driving forces, regulating interpersonal relationships and determining the destinies of those who inhabit the periphery.

The work does not limit itself to describing poverty and violence in a superficial way. On the contrary, Lins goes further, offering an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms that perpetuate social exclusion and marginalization. The author interweaves the stories of different characters, each with their own trajectory marked by losses, fears, and desires, creating a narrative that reflects the complexities of life in the favela. Money, in this context, is not only a material need, but a symbol of power and status, while power, in turn, manifests itself not only in a political or economic way, but above all in a violent and oppressive way.

One of the most fascinating aspects of *City of God* is the way Lins uses violence as a lens to examine the consequences of structural inequality in Brazil. Violence, both physical and symbolic, emerges as a direct response to the deprivation and injustice that shape the lives of the characters. Access to money and power, in this scenario, not only represents the possibility of escaping the subhuman conditions of the favela, but also becomes a means of survival and social ascension within an environment that offers few options.

In this sense, Paulo Lins' novel leads us to question how the pursuit of money and power, in a context of extreme poverty, affects not only individual behavior, but also broader social dynamics. How do these factors contribute to the perpetuation of cycles of violence and exclusion? To what extent do the lack of opportunities and marginalization transform the inhabitants of the favelas themselves into agents of violence that often seems to be the only possible way out?

This article aims to explore these central questions throughout the narrative of *City of God*, with a specific focus on representations of money and power. Through the analysis of specific excerpts from the work and the use of sociological and psychological theories, such as those of Freud and Alba Zaluar, the study seeks to understand how these two elements structure life in the favela and shape the interactions between the characters. In addition, the research intends to reflect on the implications of these representations for Brazilian



society, pointing to the deep roots of inequality and urban violence, themes that remain extremely relevant in the contemporary debate. Thus, Lins' novel reveals itself to be a powerful social critique and a relentless portrait of a Brazil where the abyss between "having" and "being" continues to generate conflicts and tragedies.

### THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN: MONEY AND POWER IN "CITY OF GOD"

Published in 1997, the debut novel by the writer from Rio de Janeiro, Paulo Lins, narrates at a frenetic pace the plurality of border cultures generated by growing social differences. However, it should be noted that the work outlines, purely and simply, the human conditions given over to vulnerability and incredulity – implacable to the underground universe of what we know and/or understand as "favela".

Under the sign of the frightening and still feared "effect of reality", Lins weaves with cinematographic skill, a narrative full of sordidness, tragedies and violence – physical, symbolic, psychological and social.

Endless are the themes that could be developed from the reading of the novel – especially when, at times, either due to lack of scientific objectivity, or instinct, we let ourselves be carried away by the memorable clippings of the film directed by Fernando Meireles.

This brief essay, however, focused on modest reflections on the symbolic representations of two "key elements" that permeate the cruel world of *City of God*: "money" and "power".

It is not a question of associating crime and violence with the sociological issues of money and power. Let us leave these relations for another time. The objective here is much simpler and less pretentious: to observe and reflect on some notions and experiences of the characters of the favela "City of God" in relation to money and power.

Starting with the money. In an environment marked by trafficking, the recurrent use of drugs and narcotics, misery, violence and subhuman conditions – highlighted, sometimes in minute and often painful details; sometimes in Homeric descriptions – the "other side of the coin" is quite exalted.

While submerged in this (under)world of hills and misery, the characters, in general, glimpse the luxuries, perks and the best conditions of a universe "beyond the favela" – a glimpse of this, reinforced by the narrator and which can be analyzed in the first paragraphs of the novel, in which, when describing the recommendations of the character Busca-Pé, the narrator himself blurts out, with irony and crudeness: "I was unhappy and I didn't know



it. He resigned himself in his silence to the fact that the rich go abroad to make waves, while the poor go to the ditch, to jail, to the whore who gave birth to him. (LINS, 2002, p. 12)".

"Going abroad to make waves" permeates any doubts about what is already socially "established": this is a condition of the rich – as well as many other conditions pre-established by the scathing class and social stratifications – and it is the very language used by Paulo Lins that corroborates the delimitation between the favela and the "beyond-favela", because the rich go "to" and the poor go "to".

At the end of the day, the look "at the other", the observation of what is supposedly demarcated and far from the reach of the resident of the Cidade de Deus favela are recurrent inferences in Lins' narrative and, therefore, springs that propel the situations in which money – a word repeated several times in the book – and power are deliberately involved.

In the place where the children "hated the night, because there was still no electrical network" (LINS, 2002, p. 19), the desire to kill becomes inherent to the hatred arising from the power of the other, or in general terms, the "having" directly influences the "being" and the "being": "He felt like killing all those white people, who had telephones, car, refrigerator, ate good food, didn't live in a shack without water and without a toilet [...] (LINS, 2002, p. 23)".

In this way, it is possible to believe that if the conditions of existence were more favorable to those who live in the "City of God" favela – as to those who live in any favela, the idea of the stranger/foreigner – that is, of the one who does not experience the suffering and difficulties of those who live in the favela – would not be immediately equated with the idea of enemy, And hatred would not turn into such brutal acts of violence.

Any signs of (in)difference, of risk of non-satisfaction, of non-recognition can lead back to the experience of primordial helplessness and to the dark and tenebrous alleys of violence against the other that threatens us – and this is how the characters of *City of God* seem to be: threatened and suffocated by the suffering and pain of not having the minimum conditions of existence that the "beyond-favela" has.

Under these conditions, the desire for the primordial (to have food, light, basic sanitation, among others) seems, however, to trigger, in Paulo Lins' book, a desire for what is beyond what is supposedly necessary, or, in a concise way, the seduction by money and power – which is established and related not only to the universe of the "beyond-favela", but also permeates all previously demarcated relations and hierarchies within the City of God itself: Many characters, for example, aspire to be the owners of drug shops, to make a lot



of money from the sale of drugs, to be well dressed, to be respected and/or feared within the favela.

The "other", then, becomes not only the one who is outside the universe of *City of God*, "the stranger", "the different", but also anyone who craves the power and money that exist contradictorily in this environment of poverty and misery that we understand as favela.

The possibility of creating life projects, the right to belong to a group, to have dignified conditions for survival, to have fulfillment at work or to be able to make work a means to earn money and fulfill other dreams are situations seen in *City of God* as utopian, in other words, "out of reality" of those who were born and raised within the favela.

And if what is implicit has failed, or has become insufficient, there is a risk of the re-establishment of the law "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" – or of apathy, of disaffection, of unhealthy suffering that exacerbates what is proper to the pain of existing. Once again, "having" in front of "being", advocating violence:

In the past, the residents commented in amazement, only the miserable compelled by their misfortunes became bandits. Now everything is different, even the most well-off in the favela, the young students from stable families, whose parents were well employed, did not drink, did not beat their wives, had no commitment to crime, fell into the fascination of war. They warred for trivial reasons: kites, marbles, girlfriend disputes. The areas dominated by the gangs became real forts, soldiers' headquarters, whose access was given to very few; Those who ignored this fact were exposed to public humiliation, to ridicule for living in areas of this or that enemy or for being friends with a gangster who was also an enemy. The war thus made proportions greater, the original motive no longer meant anything. (LINS, 2002, p. 350).

Freud, in his article "Future of an Illusion", when discussing wars, draws attention to aspects of this issue, stating that:

It is to be supposed that the abandoned classes will envy the privileges of the favored classes and will do everything possible to free themselves from the special increase of privation that weighs on them [emphasis added]. If they fail to do so, lasting discontent will arise in the corresponding civilization that may lead to dangerous rebellions. But when a civilization cannot prevent the satisfaction of a certain number of its participants from being premised on the oppression of others, perhaps of the majority—and so it is all civilizations today—it is understandable that they themselves support with their labor, but whose goods participate very little. (FREUD, 1996, p. 13).

The intolerance to the slightest sign of worthlessness, exclusion and suffering is revealed in the depressions, in the sufferings of the body, in the increasing scenes of violence that the narrator coldly describes and in the compulsive search for immediate ways out – violence, for example – that aim to help the anguished characters of *City of God* to better endure this malaise in relation to the money and power belonging to others – or at least to live with it.



As this coexistence is not presented in Lins' narrative as peaceful, there is the other side of the coin, unleashed as a vast field for the use of drugs, for trafficking and, mainly, for the perverse and cold practices of physical and symbolic violence – all ruled by money and power.

Thus, money and power, in that environment of the Cidade de Deus favela, are emphasized, not only as a function of a tragic social reality, but also by the violent affirmation of force over the body and life of the other – hence the deaths, murders and rapes for "banal reasons".

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of *City of God*, focused on representations of money and power, reveals how these forces structure not only social relations within the favela, but also the way residents deal with exclusion and violence. Paulo Lins' novel offers an incisive critique of the consequences of structural inequality and how this reality is experienced by the marginalized layers of society. By discussing the impact of money and power on the favela, the study reinforces the need to understand violence not as an isolated individual choice, but as a product of extreme conditions of deprivation and lack of opportunities.

The results of this work have important implications for both society and academia. For society, reflection on the relationship between inequality and violence can contribute to the formulation of more effective public policies that prioritize social inclusion and the fight against urban marginalization. Understanding that violence is largely shaped by the dynamics of money and power in the favela can help in the creation of initiatives that offer real alternatives for social and economic ascension, reducing the attraction to drug trafficking and violence as a means of survival.

For academia, the study of Paulo Lins' novel can open new avenues of investigation into the intersections between literature, sociology and psychology. The work works not only as a fictional portrait, but as an analytical tool to explore the Brazilian social reality. The study of urban violence, for example, can be deepened in the light of the work, highlighting the importance of cultural representations in the formation of the social imaginary and in the understanding of the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization.

However, it is important to highlight the limitations of this research. The narrow focus on the analysis of *City of God* and the choice to study only two key elements – money and power – limit the scope of the discussion. Paulo Lins' work offers a wide range of other themes, such as race, identity, and gender issues, which were not explored in detail in this study. In addition, the research is predominantly based on the perspective of the favela as



an isolated space, without delving into how these dynamics relate to the broader urban context and the interaction between favelas and other regions of the city.

It is recommended that future studies expand this analysis, incorporating other thematic elements and theoretical perspectives that can enrich the understanding of social dynamics in favelas. Comparative studies between different literary works or even between different favelas can offer valuable insights into how money and power operate in diverse contexts of exclusion. In addition, interdisciplinary investigations, which unite literature with urban studies, can generate new approaches for the development of fairer and more inclusive public policies.

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