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Signal Cities: violence, respectability and materiality in Brazilian urban governance

Latin American cities are known for their plural urban orders - state, criminal and religious normativities are at the centre of our urban governance. However, the contemporary radicalisation of difference between those who materialise these regimes of power in everyday life has the effect of profoundly fragmenting our urban world. While this plural governance has been widely studied in terms of legitimacy, violence and reciprocity. I argue that there is a gap in this literature with regard to the accumulation of resources and the materiality of these arrangements. I therefore propose a theoretical metaphor - of 'Signals' - for understanding plural orders in Latin American cities. In sum, each of these orders spreads out like a Signal through which subjects can navigate situationally. Based on a long-term ethnography in São Paulo (2018-2024) and a digital ethnography in Rio de Janeiro (2021-2023), I propose that these Signals have four main characteristics: i) violence (or the ability to dictate life and death); ii) accumulation of resources (money, goods, markets); iii) respectability (shared moralised notions); iv) materiality (infrastructures and objects). Analytically, I suggest, first, that the infrastructures and technopolitical devices that operate in the interstices between the legal and the illegal, the formal and the informal, are important tools for understanding the political effects of this plurality in the shaping of urban space; and, second, that the interaction between these orders - clashes or symbioses - gives rise to different security paradigms that are fundamental to understanding contemporary Brazilian urban conflict.