

Quick-fix as innovation? Thoughts from Brazil

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- ethnographic post; a maintainer's tale -

“I have no idea of what you’re talking about.” He paused and I got worried. “*Gambiarra* is an electrical wire with four or five outputs, that’s *gambiarra*. Those other things you’re bringing up are improvisations, palliative remedies, quick fixes...” (Interview with Senhor Silva, Complexo do Alemão, 08.15.2015)

As a student and researcher in anthropology, I’ve been interested in vernacular forms of technological improvisation – things like *gambiarra* in Brazil or *jugaad* in India. Admittedly, resourceful repurposing happens everywhere. And yet, these practices can be recognized and valued in very different ways depending on a number of circumstances, from their institutional framing to the functions they achieve, or the expectations about their authors’ abilities and the materials involved. With the help of Senhor Silva I confirmed the obvious – that, in the Brazilian poor self-built peripheries known as *favelas*, resources are so scarce and property and labor relationships are so precarious that improvisation becomes a very significant part of daily-life. But I also learned that the values of *gambiarra* are not limited to poverty and necessity. There are many other reasons to perform it, including: having too much or not enough time; the lack of access to certain materials or the relative abundance of others; the delays in the arrival of state and private infrastructure; the specificity or urgency of a problem; even humor and play, *zoeira*; and the pleasure in being inventive. All these unfold into complicated semantic maps about what it means to improvise with materials in Senhor Silva’s neighborhood.

Senhor Silva has worked as a construction worker for more than forty years. He is an expert in *gambiarra*, distinguishing with nuance between many different notions I had never heard before. *Gatos*, he explained, are the electrical, TV, and internet connections made by residents. Apparently informal, these form, in fact, sophisticated distribution networks organized according to a complex zoning system. *Gambiarra*, in its turn, is a sort of *gato* subcategory, a technique used to turn one electrical supply wire into several. None of these practices is necessarily improvised. For true improvisation, I would have to look into “palliatives” – including *quebra-galhos* and *gatilhos* – the crown jewel of ingenuity and “the true secret of the construction business.”

When something unexpected goes wrong, when you have a job to finish and something breaks or is missing and time is short and resources as well, you make a palliative. “Palliatives are anything that you make provisionally, in that very moment.” Nobody needs to know you did it. With the sense of humor that often characterizes the subject, Senhor Silva shared with me some of his stories. There was that time when his car’s water deposit broke and he fixed it with a PET

bottle. And that other time when he forgot his fork and ended up eating his lunch with a spoon made from a plastic bucket. And the other one when he fixed the bottom of a cistern with a table top. When Senhora Alva's pipe broke, he saved the day with a joint from an old bike. A good construction worker must master the art of palliative care.

The term stuck with me. As a medical domain, palliative care provides patients with relief from the pain and stress of an illness that cannot be cured. What are these things that keep on breaking and are cared for by the hands of Senhor Silva? Doctor of things, treating the life of ruins, constantly mitigating and delaying catastrophes. Just like someone who relieves an incurable patient, Senhor Silva fixes the floor, walls, ceilings, pipes and wires, lessening symptoms without addressing the cause. And even though his intention is that these palliatives work as provisional solutions, many of them linger; they linger until they become permanent and enter the limbo of object chimeras.

Senhor Silva's laugh could be heard far away, I was sure, resounding from the terrace through the neighborhood's narrow windy streets. His pride in his improvisations was evident, but he was also cautious: "palliatives aren't good; good is to do it right," he repeated. After all, the permanent remediation of life is a risky business and *gambiarra* is an ability without ethics – it can be used for many different ends. And as if warning me of the dangers of excessive enthusiasm for "the poor's way," Senhor Silva stressed that necessity, although not equal for all, is a universal condition. "Necessity makes you do certain things, you must improvise, there's no other way. But it's not the favela... Life itself teaches that you got to find a way."