

Urban Youths 'Doing Politics': Transgression, resistance, and emerging forms of urban political action

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Urban governance in Brazilian metropolises has gone through paradigmatic changes in the last three decades: as Harvey (1989) first observed in advanced capitalist countries, the managerial approach of the 1960s was replaced in the 1970s and 1980s by an entrepreneurial stance in a post-Fordist and neoliberal context. Brazilian cities, which only turned to urban entrepreneurialism in the 1990s, did it with considerable delay in comparison to First World local administrations, which made the process more aggressive. Vainer (2009) notes that the notion of strategic planning has become central in Brazilian urban governance to pursue the creation of a “modern city” image, in which elements associated with the notion of backwardness should not be on display. This is especially the case in cities where poverty is distinctly visible in the urban landscape, as is the case in most Brazilian cities and certainly is in Rio.

The process of trying to displace or erase the features which do not fit in a marketable image of Rio - such as favelas, homeless and prostitutes (Harvey 2014; Vainer 2009) – has generated a lot of tensions, conflicts and dissent. Concentrative policies that lessen investments in health and education services while increasing public expenditures on market-oriented projects, the privatization of public infrastructure and services in general, the casualization and shrinking of the job market and the mobility/transportation crises hit specially youths in their possibilities and hopes, for the uncertainties of the present are coupled with an obscure vision of the future. While current studies dedicated to youngsters show that their intense and diverse daily lives in Rio’s favelas are unequivocal demonstrations of their challenges to the poverty-stricken and violent stereotypes and stigmas imposed on them by the hegemonic model, their collective protests, as recorded during the 2013 Rio riots show their frustrations and willingness to transgress, revealing, besides their political understandings, new forms of organizing, networking at an ever increasing speed in making themselves heard.

Youth resistance – stemming from favelas and from the 2013 Rio riots - has been studied recently by the Favela Observatory, which mapped cultural movements through a qualitative study with one hundred youngsters from Cidade de Deus, Complexo do Alemão, Complexo da Penha, Manguinhos and Rocinha slums, and by the graduate students at the Architecture and Urban Planning Program of the Federal Fluminense University (UF) who conducted a probabilistic survey with 385 participants of the June 2013 riots.

Among the main findings are that the youth, through protests and cultural manifestations, proposes a dialectical relation with the capital-state vision and consequently their policies and places. Everyday practices seem to follow Bourdieu’s habitus to a good extent, bringing some tension regarding what can or cannot be accepted, or over who gains what and through which mechanisms. Another aspect is that favela youngsters engage in identity-creating practices and into a different political insertion of slums in the public arena, notably built on social movements that transform culture into a political aesthetic attitude in order to face human rights violations and to organize themselves peacefully and claim these rights in the public sphere.

Young participants in the 2013 riots in Rio differ from the first analysed group both in their profiles and in their opinions and attitudes. They did not come from favelas, they were already accepted in the city's public spaces. Richer or poorer, they were mostly students who denied their representatives and politicians. As their transgression was 'mediated' by the internet and their friends, and modulated by the access to downtown and the noble areas of town, their quest for better services and punitive measures against corruption was eventually instrumentalized by the system. The conflicts, in this case, did not reach a dialogue with the state but gave way to acts of exception, thus fostering the hegemonic actors and eventually contributing to the political coup and the state of exception installed in 2016.

What's new in this neoliberal, globalized scenario, are the possibilities of networking support and internet constructed demonstrations, in order to occupy public spaces and make the youth visible. While in favelas the youth daily use these means and subaltern spaces to culturally manifest the territorial/corporeal distinction processes, in 2013 the middle class youth felt encouraged to take the downtown and wealthy public spaces to manifest their indignation towards public policies. The surprising aftermath, is that despite the massive extermination of young favela dwellers – depicted in a number of studies – their movement resists, while the young middle-class riots ended up helping to support a coup against everything they stood for.

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