

## Teenagers of Slums Occupied by Drug Trafficking *Versus* School

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### Abstract

*The intention of the present essay is to reflect about some of the psychosocial characteristics of the teenagers who live in slums with drug trafficking in the city of Rio de Janeiro. To do so, we will discuss, from an anthropological perspective, three cultural aspects observed in these individuals, namely: the stigmatization, the warrior ethos and the lack of perspective in the future. Then, we will reflect about the teachings' practice in schools that receive students from slums with the mentioned characteristics, in which we verify that the practice of the professionals of this important institution, in those poor spaces, can reinforce the social exclusion instead of propitiating citizenship and social inclusion.*

**Keywords:** Basic Education; Teaching-learning; Social Exclusion; Bourdieu.

### Introduction

There is a consensus among scholars which says that the multiplicity of subjects, knowledge, space and time cannot be placed in second in the school practices. The educational process, however, thought and created by people of a culture outside the slums, cannot reach, effectively, a great number of individuals that live in such spaces. The everyday school life, the methodology, the idioms used by the teachers and the built image of the ideal student do not relate to the reality of the students in the poor areas of the city. The attempt to improve the school performance (measured through exhausting national and international official evaluations) has been innocuous in the majority of the schools situated in the mentioned poor areas, especially the ones dominated by drug trafficking. In the case of the slums where drug trafficking continues to exert a great power, even in the "pacified" areas (after the installation of the "Pacifying Police Units"), we notice a specific culture, created amidst the members of the criminal groups, which overflow their limits and roots throughout the community, involving fear, the devotion to drug dealers and their values, the standardization of violence as a means to power, the aversion to the public power and the protection of illegality etc. Taking the shackles of prejudice, this work will analyze the universe of the students from the slums with drug trafficking in the city of Rio de Janeiro. These boys and girls, impregnated with their life experiences, values and their local culture have something to say about the lack of interest in studies, the lack of commitment, the repudiation of the teacher's authority, the violent behavior etc.

### *The Distance between the Slum and the City*

The slums, characteristics of the *Carioca* geography, were initially comprehended as the result of the human occupation over the empty spaces of the city, such as hillsides and mangroves, devaluated by real estate companies and accessible only to the poorer ones. Nowadays, this spatial description starts to represent, in the common sense, more than a mere reference to the city spaces, remitting also to different lifestyles, to the relations established and to the way people "evaluate" these places.

The term 'slum' comprises numerous other territories stigmatized by poverty (housings, irregular allotments, suburbs etc.), alluding not only to the lack of urban structure and specific land statutes, but, especially, to the stigma of marginality, disorder and violence that covers it, transforming the people who live there in the archetype of 'dangerous classes'. (LEITE, 2008, p. 117)

Bourdieu (1997: p. 160) stresses that the "the position of an agent in the social space is expressed according to the physical space where he is located. Therefore, the space occupied in the cities, more precisely the dwelling ones, reflects the hierarchies and social distances characteristic of this society. The spatial structures observed in the first moment conserve symbols and produce an imaginary both inside and outside the slum, converging in the mental structures that are the product of the incorporation of these spatial creations.

As for the space, Lefebvre (1991) conceives it as a result of an interrelation between what is lived and imagined (the everyday experience) and the relations established by the spatial practices (work, leisure, among others) and, still, through what comes from information produced by other segments (verbal signs elaborated by institutions or the academy). This article will have the aforementioned issues as the north for the analysis of the culture of the slums' teenagers (students of public schools).

It is indispensable to inform that the popular classes of society do not present a homogeneous culture, but, in general, represent a disqualified work force in the social structure. However, belonging to a low income class cannot be the only factor to bond the individuals that share the same physical space, which would be a reductionist vision. Besides being highly heterogeneous, the observation that led to the writing of this work found some common traits in the behavior, world vision, the relation among schoolmates and between students and teachers, built from specific experiences, which corroborate their professional insertion, place of living, familiar constitution etc. The culture as a social production presupposes a transmitter and a receiver, giving rise to the fact that "all individuals, before making their first conscious act, already have a patronized behavior proportionate by the interiorized culture, modeling, inclusive, their psychological and organic processes". (MELLO, 2013, p. 50) Mello (2013), developing the concept of culture, emphasizes the permanent confrontation between individual experiences and the petrified ones. Because of this, the cultural process is not the sum of experiences interiorized for each one of the individuals living in this society; it is, more importantly, a result of the individual confrontation and all the cultural collection of the society.

In this context, histories, memories and concepts get reinforced and mitigated, in a process of construction-deconstruction-reconstruction of the group's identity, as a result of the experiences lived by those who inhabit a certain space. Synthetically, as Sorokin (1973, p. 227) affirms, we may say that similarities in the social position of the individuals generate different ways of thinking, given that they imply habits, interests, costumes, values and traditions inculcated in the people by social groups similar to the ones they belong to. (SOROKIN, 1973, P.227) We will analyze, subsequently, some psychosocial characteristics of the students from slums with drug trafficking and their relation with the ambiance and the social groups, a relation which, at this age, occur in the families, schools or streets, with individuals of the same age.

### ***The Stigmatization***

The stigmatization is present as a strong trait in this culture, emphasizing the marginal character of these teenagers in what concerns the rest of the society. This view is presented from the point of view of those who are inside and outside the slums, causing a cyclical effect of permanent submission of the poorer ones to the unequal system generated by capitalism. This cycle is well synthesized in the words of Bourdieu (1997, p. 166): "the stigmatized neighborhood symbolically degrades those who inhabit it, and, in exchange for that, they degrade it, given that, deprived of all the necessary means to participate in the different social games, they do not have anything but their own ban in common". He also adds that the reunion in the same place of a homogeneous dispossessed population has the effect of enhancing the dispossession, mainly in what regards culture and the cultural practices, because it produces "a downward effect of attraction, leveling them, and it does not leave other escape than moving elsewhere (but this generally does not happen because of the lack of resources for doing so). (BOURDIEU, 1997, p. 166) The stigmatization is one of the effects of violence in the slums, because violence, according to Soares (2000), stimulates reactions which tend to stigmatize poverty and the poor, promoting negative portraits of the communities in the popular neighborhoods, which tend to be seen as sources of the evil around. Such images inspire and reinforce discriminatory practices of the society as a whole towards the slums and the popular neighborhoods, over which we start to see stigmatized concepts and speeches.

As a legitimacy of this discrimination by the society, we verify the transformation of the unclassified place of the slums' inhabitants in a *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1979), for which it is produced the pejorative distinction between them and the rest of the society, a distinction that is well perceived in the lower salaries paid to the first ones. Therefore, why should a slum boy have to study? In his view, his submissive place in the social structure is something certain and natural. This feeling of exclusion, of low self-esteem, is always related by the teachers and perceptible in the difficulty that these students have to mingle themselves with the others when they need to do a group work, or in the attempt to organize and commit them to participate in a given event, like a June party, for example. The low self-esteem is also highlighted in what regards their social condition, which does not allow access to the material and symbolic goods aired by the media and "sold" by advertisements as something very interesting and important to possess.

Buying a "brand shoes" represents *status* amidst the group, and, more than it, a bond with the "exterior world". Through the consumption, the individual feels a sense of belonging. He belongs to a group different of his, and, in this group of consumers, he ends up being recognized as a citizen. Another possible behavior related to the stigmatization is the constant use of nicknames by the students, which almost always finish in physical aggressions. Although nicknames are notably used by teenagers in this age group, we observe in this case the culture of stigmatization, both by the amount as by the nature of the events. The pejorative labeling presents itself, frequently, as a self-affirmation. This happens because of the rejection of a characteristic seen as "bad" by the group, to praise a positive trait, as in the following speech "-I live in Morro da Galinha, but at least my hair is straight". The desire of remaining in their territory, on the other hand, is very present among the students. This is observed when there is a class outside the school and more than half the students are absent. This is also notable when the school stimulates the students to study in a renowned institution far from their neighborhood. The students, even the adolescent ones, aged between 14 and 17 years old, promptly say: we want to study near our houses! Would this reflect the fear of moving away from their territory and feeling excluded, or the lack of knowledge of other places than the ones close to them? Anyway, what we infer is that the fear of "knowing the new" or the attempt to get out of their "comfort zone" reigns.

### ***The Warrior Ethos***

There is a kind of reductionism when criminality and violence are explained as a consequence of poverty and inequality, emphasizing the interconnection between the legal and illegal economy in drug trafficking. The dissemination of the practices of the organized crime, far from being restricted to the illegal drug trafficking, roots their values throughout the community, including children and women in this process. The warrior *ethos* would correspond, in first instance, to this propensity to destruct the rival - called "German" - physically. As the anthropologist Alba Zaluar demonstrates (Carta na Escola, 2011), "violent practices outside the drug dealing world start to occur". The disorganizing effect of violence, associated to the drug and weapon trafficking, creates a social ambiance and a culture which diminish enormously the necessary recognition of the social institutions. As a consequence, they also mitigate the solidarity practices, hitting especially the young inhabitants of the poorer neighborhoods.

Those who are recruited by the criminal organizations rapidly acquire financial resources which would take months to be saved through an honest job, especially if we consider that the jobs obtained by this group are those that do not demand a good education. On the other hand, the astounding number of deaths of young men generates a social context in which the shortening of the horizons drive these to attitudes not well accepted according to the society's values. Luiz Eduardo Soares (2000) related some negative effects of violence, and, among them, the author mentions the dissemination of warlike values, contrary to the democratic universalism, like the social behavior orientation principles of these young men, which are the ones linked to loyalty, honor and courage, the same of a feudalized society. Therefore, we can notice here a mitigation of the civilizing values of a society that portrays itself as democratic. Another result of this violence, according to Soares (2000), is the destruction of the family structures and the dynamics of the cultural reproduction which advocates the acknowledgement of the intergenerational authority, converting it in ties of militarized power. The unexpected effects of violence increase the suffering of these people, obliging them to live under the rule of tyrants - both the drug dealers and the police -, which limits their freedoms of movement and speech, besides making the poor youngsters even more vulnerable. Therefore, we see the rising of a parallel power, with a parallel legal code, which institutes its own way of judging and punishing. For instance, we can quote, among many others, the intervention of drug dealers in the resolution of conflicts between inhabitants of the same slum.

In the case of the influence of the traffic power in the school life, the examples are numerous, like the orders to close schools in confront days or to pay respect for the death of any of the drug bosses. As a more incisive example, we can mention the drug bosses' threat to shave the heads of two girls who were constantly fighting at school. The conflict was "solved" through the intermediation of the drug boss after the request of one of the girls' mother. Being violent, thus, is a synonym of *status*: it is through it that we solve the conflicts. The demarcation through violence occurs when the boys are rehearsing the affirmation of their masculinity, when the pride does not come from kindness, but from the disposition of terminating the opponent of the other group, like if he was "from an enemy country" and needs to be attacked until death. The drug dealers, using this logic, are idols, flaunting power through clothes and shoes of famous brands, cars, motorcycles, jewels... In informal conversations, the students say that the drug dealers "are very good", "they throw all-inclusive parties for the community", "they solve conflicts", "they financially help the poorer ones", "they pay funerals" etc. The police figure, on the contrary, has a pejorative connotation, because this is seen as a menace to the *status quo*, representing a perverse, outside force. It is obvious that this aversion has been constructed for decades, due to the lack of public presence in these places (the State was only present through the police, which used to arrive there violently), which is starting to be reconsidered by the State, as we can observe with the installation of Pacifying Police Units (Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora - "UPPs").

In this analysis, both the police officer and the teacher represent an external and authoritarian power over the local culture. According to Bourdieu (BOURDIEU, 1997), this is one of the places where power is affirmed and is exercised under a symbolic violence, capable of instituting images, speeches and social practices which define a social ambiance related to the correspondent agents or its class position, affecting also the production of their own portraits.

### ***The Lack of Perspective in the Future***

Statistics show a growing participation of children, adolescents and youngsters in the organized crime (especially drug trafficking) in Rio de Janeiro. The described situation also raises their mortality rates by firearms, mainly among the poorer ones. When we reflect about the behavior and the social facts related to these high mortality rates because of the murdering of poor youngsters from 15 to 24 years old, we notice a link with drug trafficking, either for them working directly with it, or for being with people involved on it. Giffin and Cavalcanti (1999) analyzed three works about poor teenagers and street boys in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (Paiva, 1994; Barker and Loewenstein, 1997; Childhope, 1997), finding that the "drug trafficking reinforces the violence patterns: the police executes drug dealers and innocents, the youngsters are victims of attacks and sexual abuse and the girls also start to adopt violent behavior". The replacement of the family ties by the identity with traffic, which eventually assumes the patriarchal figure and the manly strength, as well as the lack of mother and father figures, due to work or death, drives the youngsters to a process of premature disaffiliation. Castel, when studying the consequences of the new familiar structures, which according to him would be detrimental to the youngsters, lists various negative determinants of the identity of the mentioned youngsters: "poor school performance, professional disqualification, painful occupation of the space in the suburbs, being a foreigner to the social-cultural and local policy institutions, besides being in constant conflict with the law and order representatives." (CASTEL, 1991, p. 28) To Castel (1991), these youngsters are not only disaffiliated, but "they embody a new way of being on which we see the configuration of a time simultaneously eternal and fugacious, with a shallow past", because very few was transmitted to them, both in the familiar environment and the school, and even in cultural terms, which could mirror a healthy social life.

### ***Final Considerations***

The schools situated in slums with drug trafficking do not present, evidently, a good environment for learning. Borell (1989) defines their organizational space, emphasizing the importance of the relations amidst the members of a specific group, as well as the external factors reflexes. He also says that the psychosocial system is composed by individuals and the groups in interaction. "We must consider the individual behavior and the motivation on it, the *status* and *role* relations, the groups' dynamics and the influence systems." He adds: "it is also affected by feelings, values, attitudes, expectations and aspirations of the members of the organization, and, obviously, it is influenced by the outside world, as well as the tasks, technology and structure of the internal organization." (BORELL, 1989, p.86). All these elements (according to Borell) configure the organizational space where men, as participants, develop their roles and activities.

The violent and disrespectful school environment does not present a good ambiance for learning. The school environment, what constitutes it, according to the Swiss psychologist Marc Thiébaud (Nova Escola, 2013) “corresponds to its atmosphere, values, attitudes and feelings shared by its actors, as well as with the social relations and knowledge”. The school culture, specific in its identity with the environment, is the result of a group of organizational factors and specific social processes (as an expression of the values, habits and behaviors transmitted through the educational school form from outside determinations). (BARROSO, 2004) The schools situated in the *Carioca* slums dominated by drug trafficking receive individuals from a specific culture (due to all the reasons discussed here), very distant from the precepts of the traditional "belletristic" school, more focused on teaching than on learning. Therefore, on an environment like this, the teaching-learning process ends up impaired. The culture of the mentioned students is specific and opposed to the dictates of the traditional school. It is evident that the school ends up assuming other roles, which overpass that of the traditional vision. There are no doubts about it, and the pedagogical proposals to develop attitudes, habits and the necessary values for a pacific life inserted in the society are numerous. However, this work did not intend to reinforce the need for change, because first it is necessary to reckon the existence of this culture, with its own social and economic factors, its aspirations, and the relations between the members of the group. The teaching methodology guided by the mere content conveyance in these spaces is, thus, doomed to failure, because the student does not recognize the teacher as a legitimate authority. Besides, these students do not have an improvement perspective over their social condition through the school. Therefore, a traditional methodology, disconnected from their realities, loses its meaning.

More than this, being the school a reproduction of a given social order (which drives to the maintenance of the economic order), it reproduces the "aesthetics as a sense of distinction" (BOURDIEU, 2007, p. 58). Therefore, the aesthetics disposition is the dimension of a distant and safe relation with the world and the others, which predicates objective safety and distance. The aesthetics is also the distinguishing expression of a privileged position in the social space, which distinctive value objectively determines itself in the relation with expressions engendered from different conditions. The aesthetical disposition, as every type of taste, unites and separates, being the product of the conditionings associated to a particular class of existing conditions. It unites all those who are the product of similar conditions, but distinguishing them from all the others and from what is their essence, given that the taste is the beginning of everything we have, people and things, and everything that we are for the others, of what serves as the base for classification. The personal tastes (in other words, the expressed preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no coincidence that, when being obliged to justify themselves, they self affirm in a totally negative manner, through the refusal of other types of taste. (BOURDIEU, 2010, p. 58). The academic adds that "in what concerns taste, more than in any other aspect, every determination and denial counts, and, undoubtedly, tastes are, above all, the aversion, developed by horror or visceral intolerance ("nausea") to other tastes, to the tastes of the others. (BOURDIEU, 2010, p. 56).

The stigmatization is absolutely linked to this process addressed by Bourdieu, because the sense of not belonging that the youngsters of the slums have in what regards the city life, its activities and festivities, enhances the marginal character of these adolescents in relation to the rest of the society. It is necessary to recognize education, especially the one at school, as a continuous and decisive process for the development of the individual and its citizenship, as well as fundamental for the preservation and transmission of the cultural heritage, edified by the human genius. The impossibility to include the slums' youngsters in the human universe of this culture, as a strategy of knowledge socialization, is an incalculable damage. And, in the impossibility of transmitting contents, which is what the school and the teachers know to do, such institution ends up excluding the ones who does not fit in, and this reinforces their exclusion from the system. Unprotected by the State and its institutions (and the school is a very important one), there are no alternatives left to the youngsters stigmatized by poverty than thicken the statistics, which show a growing participation of children, adolescents and youngsters in the organized crime (especially drug trafficking) in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The warrior *ethos* is in the stigmatization's reaction field and in the acceptance of inferiority and not belonging to the "civil society", the holder of rights and duties. Hence the predisposition to the physical destruction of the rival, the enemy. Violence, associated to drug and arms trafficking, destroys the recognition of the social institutions, and, as a consequence, extinguishes the solidarity practices.

Because of this, we notice that the school needs to reorient its educational functions towards learning instead of teaching, not to reinforce the social exclusion, but to practice the inclusion in its boundaries in a way that it overflows to the whole society. When this happens, the concern will start to be with people and not with content. Only by doing this is that it will be possible to contribute for the creation of a school environment favorable to the teaching-learning process, with the development of values and social attitudes, stimulus to study, debates over pertinent subjects and related to the daily life etc. Finally, we defend, in this article, that it is really possible to develop culture in the school organizations (even with these being a part of a broader cultural context), through the development of values and behaviors, together with the members of the organization, schools, parents, teachers... on behalf of the entire community, aiming a fulfilled citizenship.

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