

Youth and the Police Project

The “Pedagogy of the drums”: Music and art as mediators between youngsters from favelas and policemen in Brazil

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Brazil is not at war, but the indicators of violent death in the main urban centres are similar to those in countries that are involved in armed conflicts. In 2002, 49.695 citizens were murdered. This national rate of 28,5 killings per 100,000 inhabitants places Brazil among the most violent countries in the world, bearing in mind that rates in European countries are below 3 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants and the United States is below 6 homicides per 100,000 people. In Brazil, when we study specific poor urban areas and focus on youth, we find rates of 230 killings per 100,000 inhabitants. According to some experts, what is taking place is the genocide of young people, black youths in particular. This is the result of a rapid increase in criminality and an unlimited access to firearms. Comparative analyses with countries that are at war or in situations of intense conflict conclude that over the same time periods there were more firearm-related deaths in the city of Rio de Janeiro than in the armed conflicts in Angola (1998-2000), Sierra Leone (1991-1999), Yugoslavia (1998-2000), Afghanistan (1991-1999) or Israel (1991-1999).

The unequal distribution of death

The murders are mainly concentrated among young people between 15 and 24 years old. This is a nationwide trend, and it applies in states with higher murder rates, like Rio de Janeiro and Pernambuco, as well as in states with lower rates like Minas Gerais (Chart 1). More than 90% of the violent deaths occur among males, so the distribution of lethal violence by sex in Brazil is in line with world trends. This is what we call “the age of death”.

Violent deaths in Brazil are also dramatically higher among young blacks, a trend that reflects the unequal distribution of wealth and social resources (education, health, sanitation) between blacks and whites. In fact, as well as exposing the racial dynamics of Brazilian society, the indicators of homicide by age and color show the social class of the victims: they are mostly poor, and they are black, thus showing the “color of death”.

And, finally, the data disclose the “geography of death”, as most violent deaths occur in *favelas* (shanty towns) and in peripheral areas, as we can see in the cities of Rio de Janeiro and in Belo Horizonte.

In these areas, a high proportion of the violence which is drug-related has its genesis in the network of trafficking and consumption. The rapid increase in violent deaths in *favelas* and poor neighbourhoods may be explained by a combination of factors: the appearance of cocaine in urban centres like Rio and São Paulo in the 1980s and its high profitability, the increasingly violent and repressive behaviour of the police, the fights between rival gangs for the control of key distribution and sales areas, and the use of military firearms. A contributing factor was the absence of public institutions (schools, health centres or police patrols) in these areas, which made it easier for groups of armed drug traffickers to establish themselves and extend their territorial control. Given these conditions, drug trafficking has an extremely powerful attraction for children and adolescents who find few opportunities for employment or for income generation, and whose prospects for the future are fragile. The quick profits and the “glamorous” lifestyle provided by the power and visible presence of firearms make many young people see drug trafficking as an attractive way out of their predicament, however lethally dangerous it may be. This feeds a culture dominated by despotism, machismo, arms and violence, which contaminates a high proportion of the young people in these areas, even those who are not directly involved in the drug trafficking or in crime.

The priority of public security

The low socio-economic profile of the victims of violence, and their scant capacity to exert political pressure, help to explain the fact that Brazilian national and local government and civil society were slow to wake up to the problem of public safety and the need for modernisation, control and democratisation in the police. The majority of the police forces in the country degenerated and became violent and inefficient. Through mechanisms that operated on various levels, organised crime involved in arms and drugs corrupted large sectors of the police forces, from the lowest ranks all the way up to the top. In some states, police violence became a major problem and directly affected the poor people of the *favelas* and the outlying marginal neighbourhoods, who were trapped between the violence of the armed gangs of drug traffickers and the violence and corruption of the police. In Rio de Janeiro, the police are responsible for more than 10% of killings. Most of these deaths occur in “confrontations” in the *favelas*, and the bulk of the victims are young people, mainly black. The police forces of the State of Rio de Janeiro kill, in one year, more people than all the

police forces of the United States together. The young and the black end up being the “suspects of ever”, as we can see in the results of the racial profiling research which I coordinated and which was developed by the Center for Studies on Public Security and Citizenship in 2003, in which I work.

It was not until the 1990s that systematic efforts began with a view to establishing public safety policies with a contemporary perspective identified with human rights and police efficacy. Until then, most of the regional governments had relegated the problem to the corporative spheres of the police themselves. During the 1980s and well into the 1990s, indifference and silence about the scale of lethal violence also predominated among intellectuals, universities, the media, and even among NGOs.

New mediators: young people in *favelas* and periurban neighbourhoods

Among the efforts to revert this scenario it is important to mention the **Disarmament Statute**, a new law approved by the Brazilian Congress, under the leadership of NGOs and the support from a large part of the media, which establishes a series of measures to control the sale and possession of firearms, and to prohibit the bearing of arms.

In the middle of the last decade, in the context of responses to violence from civil society, a widespread movement has begun to emerge among young people in *favelas* and marginal outlying neighbourhoods. This consists of projects, programmes, or local initiatives based on cultural and artistic activities, which in many cases are undertaken and co-ordinated by the young people themselves. Some examples of these initiatives are the *Olodum* group in Salvador; and the *Afro Reggae*, *Nós do Morro* and *Companhia Étnica de Dança* groups in Rio de Janeiro, as well as hundreds of local groups that have mobilised around the hip hop culture on the outskirts of São Paulo, in the shanty towns of Porto Alegre, and in neighbourhoods in Recife, Brasília and São Luís.

These groups are competing with the drug traffickers for influence over young people, and they are using different but equally effective seduction techniques. They are committed to a culture of peace, but a culture that is also in tune with the spirit of the times (the groups value music, Internet, computers, travel, and regional and international exchange, as well as culture and the arts). In general, these groups have four main characteristics: a) they foster the generation of income and employment in the short term; b) they have a strong component of self-esteem, which includes training musicians, artists and leaders whose fame and success may serve as an example and attract other young people in the area; c) they have a strong component of territorial affirmation, and very often the words of their songs, the names of the

groups and their leaders, and the t-shirts and other clothes that they wear reaffirm the names of their communities (*Vigário Geral, Cidade de Deus, Capão Redondo, Candeal*) as a sign of commitment to change in the community; d) there is a strong component of denouncing racism and affirming their black identity in the lyrics of their songs, in their look (afro hair styles and clothes), and in the names of their projects.

These projects and initiatives, which are heterogeneous and not co-ordinated among themselves, are steadily growing in different cities around the country, and are becoming important not only as centres for constructing a culture which is an alternative to drug trafficking, but also as mediators between youth and local government, the media, and very often international actors like foundations and co-operation agencies. These “new mediators” are bringing new elements into the field of NGOs, the Left, and traditional social, trade union and associative movements, and they that cannot be scorned by those who are seeking to support the solutions which the Brazilian society is trying to produce in this decade in order to confront violence and construct paths towards safety, justice and citizenship.

AfroReggae is one of the most important groups in the country developing these strategies, since 1993. The group was created, in Vigário Geral, a favela in Rio de Janeiro, in the same year when 22 people were killed by policemen in an illegal police operation, in a traumatic incident known in Brazil as “The Massacre of Vigário Geral”. Afro Reggae started a musical band that is nationally known today and maintains various other groups of music, percussion, theatre, circus and video made up of youngsters from the favelas. As George Yudice describes, in his “*The expedience of the culture*” the guys from AfroReggae are the “polyglots of sociability” and one of their main concerns, when they stage their shows or convey messages through the television is to fight against the stereotypes of criminality and victimization”

The Youth and the Police Project

In 2003, the Center for Studies on Public Security and Citizenship, that deals with researches on the police, violence and crime, was approached by José Junior, the Co-ordinator of Afro Reggae. He made a unique proposal: the group would like to try develop “something” with the police, not against the police, as had always been the case, considering their stories of violence and humiliation by the police as black young people from favelas. We created a musical and cultural intervention project for Military Police Battalions, which, initially was supposed to be developed in Rio de Janeiro. The Ford Foundation in Rio de Janeiro, at the same moment, gave us a grant to support the project. But the police in Rio de Janeiro did not

accept the proposal to participate in this innovative project. Then, in 2004, we were invited, by the Military Police in the State of Minas Gerais to develop the experience there. It turned out to be a four-stage pilot project aimed at establishing a dialogue between police culture and youth culture, reducing the huge gap between these two groups through music and art: percussion workshops, theater, graffiti, circus, dance, and shows.

The surprising results of the four weeks of activities confirm the success of an innovative, creative, and radical proposal for integration between the police and society, unprecedented in Brazil. In addition, the project proved that it is possible to value and highlight the human, playful, and artistic side of the police while decreasing prejudice towards young residents of slums and housing projects.

Among the distinctive aspects of the experience as compared to traditional ways of working with police forces (courses, meetings, and lectures on human rights), the following key elements are worth emphasizing:

1. First: the experience involved not only reasoning, as most experiences related to teaching human rights to police officers, but hearts, minds and specially bodies, through the workshops of music, theatre, graffiti and others.
2. Second: the essence of the intervention was not merely to “change the police”, intellectually teaching them something which they appear not to want to understand, or that they resist assimilating, but rather to propose new and unique experiences both for the police and for the young people who are entering a Military Police barracks for the first time. The young instructors dressed, spoke, and had the “*attitude*” of slum kids, changing their stereotypes about the police and challenging the police with their senses of rhythm and music and the plasticity of theater, dance, and graffiti. What was essential was the exchange, and it took place primarily in the sphere of aesthetics, the music, the body, and the experience of creating a new “*image & attitude*” in the police. The police and the youth - that were constructed as opposed groups – were then both protagonists in a new moment.
3. Third: Sound and image was central to this project. The idea was to challenge the image that society and youth have of the police and the image that the police and society have of youth, especially young black slum-dwellers. Stereotypes are archaic, frozen images, even if they are not true. In particular, the police “*are all about image*”: the uniforms, the weapons, the military aesthetic, and the patrol cars. Afro Reggae, in turn, “*is image*”: the performers, the shows, a new image of the slum and the youth. All the stages in the project were filmed, photographed, and tape-recorded. During the project, two

experiences proved to be important: the video workshops and the photo sessions. During the video workshops the police discussed images of the force; during the photo sessions they were exposed to a selection of images taken by themselves in the previous weeks. It was amazing to see the police looking at the beautiful pictures they themselves had taken during the workshops, shows, and closing meetings. On these occasions the police saw themselves just as they had been seen through the photographer's lens and discussed the "*effects*" that the images will produce in the photo exhibit to be held in 2005. Equally essential was the media coverage. The numerous stories in newspapers and radio and TV programs invariably led to debate, laughter, and emotion the next day. Several times the instructors would sit with the police in a circle after the activities to discuss one of these media stories. All of this helped create a new "we"/"they" watershed: we, the participants in the project Youth and Police, and they, society and the media seeing the police out-of-the-ordinary scenes. All of this quickly replaced the old we/they: we, the police; they, the young kids from Afro Reggae. It was also moving to watch the journalists themselves get worked up with the scenes of uniformed police playing tambourines, snare drums, and bass drums, dancing, and painting graffiti. A new sound and a new image is liberating. As a police officer said in an interview, "*The time must come for the curse to be broken*", referring to the gap between the police and society. Or, as a musician from Afro Reggae said: *The suffering we had with the police, those bad remembrances, all of this was a big barrier. I confess that , in the beginning, I had to overcome this anti-police feeling which was very strong among us. Afterwards, when I saw the percussion instruments, these drums that had saved our lives, in the hands of the policemen, when I saw them playing with joy and happiness, very motivated, dancing, working their self-esteem, that really moved me*".

Obviously, there still are numerous barriers to be overcome. The first one is to convince the authorities and police commanders in other states to recognize that the hatred between youth and the police is something bad for the whole of society. The second is to convince them that initiatives when the youth speak, through music and art, during direct encounters with the police are powerful tools to create a police which is more modern and democratic – much more powerful than the usual human rights courses offered in police academies.

Finally, it must be shown that projects like this and many others being developed by groups like Afro Reggae, which are changing the image and the reality of the youth from favelas, may also change the police.