

## **Transversalities in the study on young people in Brazil: education, collective action, and culture<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the possibilities of analyzing collective action by young people, especially that which derives from cultural practices within a perspective that tries to recall the guiding lines of the Brazilian sociological thought which denies a rigid segmentation of study fields. Starting from a survey of student production in Post-Graduation programs in Social Sciences, Education, and Social Work, it is possible to delineate new challenges for the research on young people and their collective practices. A body of studies made since the mid-1990s provides an important framework of manifestations from the so called groups of juvenile style and culture, mainly in music. Darks, punks, and rappers were the main styles investigated and, in a lesser scale, the funk culture. A compacted understanding of the diversified presence of young people in public settings with their collectivities refers to a necessary transversality that demands not disregarding other dimensions of juvenile experience in the analysis. Transformations coming from an intense expansion of educational systems in Brazil in the last decades, the new configurations of the working market, and the significant forms of appropriating the urban space, which articulate new forms of sociability, are important aspects to take into consideration in analyses on juvenile cultures and their forms of collective action.

### **Keywords**

Youth – Collective action – Culture – Education.

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1. This article is a revised and expanded version of a communication presented in the I Luso-Brazilian Colloquium in Sociology of Education, Belo Horizonte, Brazil, 2008.

The birth of Sociology in Brazil and the studies on Education began to root in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in various research centers, many of which were damaged by the rise of dictatorial regime in the 1960s. Part of this tradition, which will be here analyzed, refers to a heuristic and suggestive way of articulating the interfaces between Sociology of Education and the studies on youth that might be taken into consideration nowadays<sup>2</sup>. Hence, we are not concerned with carrying out a survey of the huge amount of studies in Sociology of Education produced in Brazil in recent years; we try to put in doubt important perspectives which have been orienting the development of this discipline in the Brazilian context<sup>3</sup>.

In the 1950s the rise of sociological thought, mainly that carried out in Sao Paulo through the leading principles of professor Florestan Fernandes (1960)<sup>4</sup>, claimed that specific domains of Sociology – education, work, culture etc. – might not result in excessive segmentation and specialization:

As observed in any science, sociological methods may be applied to the investigation and reporting of any particular social phenomenon without claiming, as a result, that one should assume the existence of a special discipline, with its own object and problems [...]. Under other aspects, the relatively free use of such expressions turn it easier to identify the tenor of contributions, simplifying, this way, the relations between an author and the public. It seems to suffice to justify their use, since the efforts to endlessly subdivide the fields of Sociology lack logical sense. (p. 29-30)

In the 1970s Bourdieu (1975) also avoided to segment Sociology of Education:

Sociology of Education delineates its particular object when it constitutes itself as a science of relations between cultural reproduction and social reproduction, that is, when it struggles to establish the contribution which the educational system provides in order to reproduce the structure of strength relations and symbolic relations between the classes. (p. 295)

At that moment, these orientations aimed to think through the Brazilian society from its historic singularity, attitude demanding a critical dialogue with theories

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2. A more specific treatment on the interfaces between Sociology of Education and Sociology of Youth can be found in Sposito (2009b).

3. In another article, there was analyzed the fecundity of this perspective for analyzing social struggles somehow affected by the role of school in contemporary society (Sposito, 2007). Popular movements for the right to education and the expansion of public school should be examples of these articulations (Sposito, 1984; 1993).

4. The group of researchers gathered around Florestan Fernandes at University of Sao Paulo have also been designated as part of the so called Paulista School of Sociology. Some of these researchers

coming from abroad. Members of the so called Paulista School of Sociology had a concern with the theme of delay and, as a consequence, with issues of development, however, they proposed a break with mainstream dual vision regarding social change from a continuum which would allow the country to leave delay towards modernization. Thus, Brazil started to be understood as a peculiar form of making the capitalist system work, where economic dynamism did not exclude but connected itself to the archaic elements of social organization and the persistent forms of inequality. Tensions were not conceived as anomy, but as society's constitutive elements.

History and totality marked these theoretical and methodological orientations, that is, there was a need for understanding what connected our society to the global processes of capitalist development, but, at the same time, there was a need for recognizing what would constitute the historical particularity of the Brazilian society in its multiple dimensions – the political, economic, and cultural ones (Bastos, 2002). Concerning the sociological thought produced at University of Sao Paulo (USP), José de Souza Martins (1998) thinks this period has, besides defining a work style, created a cast of practical and theoretical issues which still remains deeply rooted in the historical, cultural, social, and political particularities of the Brazilian society.

In this sphere of orientations, the first works focusing school as an institution assumed a central role on the Brazilian Sociology of Education. However, these researches circumscribed their concerns in the frame of recent processes of migration, industrialization, and urbanization which brought into school a set of tensions demanding analyses (Pereira, 1967; 1971; 1976). Works such those by Florestan Fernandes (1960) and Fernando Henrique Cardoso & Octavio Ianni (1959) expressed a trying for understanding the paths for development and recognized school education as one of their possible expressions.

At this moment, an important text for the research on school, proposed by Antonio Candido (1973), announced the pedagogical illusion of Durkheim, who defined the educative act as an unilateral action of the adult generation on the immature ones, who were considered *tabula rasa* (Durkheim, 1970). Candido examined – it is perhaps the pioneering and stimulating aspect of his analyses – the

conflictive potential and the tensions arising from the relations between adult generations and the young students, who presented certain resistance to the educative work.

Candido proposed the study of the characteristic sociability of students and the investigation of their expectations, which did not find an end in formal relations prescribed by the institution or circumscribed in the processes of teaching and learning. Hence, it is from then on an analytical opening for the examination of aspects of school life referring to the forms of students' sociability which could interfere in the institutional context. There has been proposed a theoretical perspective open to take into consideration less institutionalized and visible dimensions of school life, approached again by Sociology of Education only from the 1970s, with the crisis of explanations based on mere structural focus of theories concerning school.

American and European studies on school settings offered important contributions for the analysis of school life regarding its less visible and formalized aspects. The new Sociology of Education provided, after years, relevant contributions for studying micro situations in school. An overview of these orientations and impacts on the Brazilian Sociology of Education can be found in an article written by Leila Mafra (2003).

The same theoretical and methodological inspiration – the historical particularity of Brazilian society and the totality of social processes – was found in the first studies on young people in Brazil. One of the core ideas of this perspective, which clearly produced a way of construing research problems, laid on the premise that starting from peripheral regions and marginal populations would help to better understand the move of the whole society, allowing a check of the principles which structure it (Bastos, 2002). Situating youth as a social category, inspired by Karl Mannheim (1968; 1973), Marialice Foracchi (1965; 1972) examined the relative marginalization of young people facing social structure and centers of power. This way, their researches situated Brazilian university students as emergent actors in a dependent society who became protagonists of the political radicalism observed in student movements of the 1960s.

The theme of juvenile radicalism has been also approached by Octavio Ianni (1968), who proposes a strong embeddedness between the history of capitalist

regime and the history of political youth rising. Therefore, these authors considered that the particularity of youth as a social category presented peculiar omissions, benefits, and tensions of a social configuration, since youth should represent the social category where systemic crisis echoes in a special manner (Foracchi, 1972).

Once historical problems and global conditions have been included in a framework concerning the Brazilian social and cultural particularities, the interfaces between Sociology of Education and Sociology of Youth become apparent considering the theoretical and methodological presuppositions stated above. These orientations denied an inopportune specialization of sociological studies as observed in the first steps of Sociology of Education and Sociology of Youth as well.

We will not approach the evolution of research on Sociology of Education in Brazil since the organization of Post-Graduation programs in Education after university reform in 1968, since many studies have made important investigations about the changes observed in this area (Cunha, 1981; 1992a; 1992b; Gouveia, 1989). However, it's worth noting that part of the problems faced by researchers was due to difficulties for understanding particularities of the Brazilian society and its educational system, along with the lack of thicker discussions about the process of appropriating the theoretical frameworks, many of which produced abroad, which supported the investigations. Anyway, the research focused on the processes of school inequalities, although Sociology of Education could cover an extremely wide field beyond school life, since

[...] the mechanisms through which a society transmits to its members the knowledge, know-how and know-to-be that it presumes to be necessary for its own reproduction have an infinite variety. (Duru-Bellat & Van Zanten, 1992, p. 1)

The enlarged theoretical arc and new researches have advanced besides the movement for democratization in Brazil, which included again in public debate the importance of school education as a democratic right and the need for investigating the less clear dimensions of school practices. In this period occurred an intense process to enhance opportunities for schooling, along with recognizing the crisis of effective socializing action of school as an institution, that is, aspects of domination along with cultural and social reproduction might be affected by current school organization and its new target public. Someway, students started to see a problem

in practices and processes of cultural reproduction and demanded a new perspective in this field of research.

Examining the rise of Sociology of Childhood, Sirota (2006) claims that in Sociology of Family or Sociology of Education the child was a phantom character, an almost invisible one. The same might be said about young students in studies about school carried out in Sociology of Education until recent years (Dayrell, 2002; 2009). Sirota (2001; 2006) points that, in sociological studies on childhood, one may observe a move starting from a sociology of schooling towards a sociology of socialization which tries to “deschool” the approach on children.

In another work (Sposito, 2007) we examined aspects of this issue, since, as observed by Duru-Bellat e Van Zanten (1992), the condition of student may be a problematic object of investigation in sociological studies of school: no one is born a student, someone becomes a student (Perrenoud, 1994; Sacristan, 2005). At least three requirements must be met to legitimate this perspective: the dissociation between teaching and learning, which raises the notion of school work done by children and young people; the recognition that this work by students is not restricted to responses to covert expectations from the institution and teachers – in this case, it is important to promote an integration between the body of perceptions elaborated by the student in his extra-school socialization, with his/her family or in other environments, with emphasis on the orientations deriving not only from his/her social or ethnic origin but from the fact of being a man or a woman and, finally

[...] the necessity of recognizing that the student is a kind of expression is also somehow particularly related to his/her insertion in the cycle of life – childhood and youth – specific categories which present relative autonomy in society and in sociological literature. (Duru-Bellat & Van Zanten, 1992, p. 179, our underlining)

This way, investigating the condition of student and the multiple actions that nowadays constitute his/her process of school socialization imply recalling other investigations on youth carried out in Brazil, mainly in Education. These orientations may become apparent highlighting the privilege granted to schooled forms in the process of socialization by Brazilian studies on youth concerning Education. Considering a survey of student production in Post-Graduation programs (1999-2006), one may find out that around 37% of works in Education concentrate on the relations of young people with their school steps (from the conclusive moments of

basic school to higher education)<sup>5</sup>. However, in Social Sciences this thematic line reaches only about 10% of students, something which reinforces previous analyses on the weak interest for research presented by the educational system and its target public.

However, if youth is “only a word” changes due to the massification process of education have turned more obscure the polarities between two kinds of youth (burghers and workers) creating a set of intermediate figures:

One of the most important factors in these confusing oppositions of youth among different social classes is the fact that some classes have had a wider access to secondary education while, at the same time, a portion of the (biologically) young people that haven't had access to adolescence have suddenly discovered this temporary status, “half-child, half-adult”. [...] The adolescents are bound for a relatively long period to an age when in previous times they should be working in positions almost outside the social universe that defines the condition of adolescent. (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 114)

Disharmony between these young people aspirations and the possibilities objectively circumscribed in the enlarged educational system was already foreseen by Bourdieu (1980) in France in the 1970s, when he admitted the possibility that these groups recognized school as a carrier of privileges. This confuse unconformity,

[...] a kind of discomfort at work, something which is not political in common sense, although it could be; something which is too much alike some forms of political conscience, as they are blind about themselves, because they did not identify their own discourse, and at the same time have a revolutionary strength able to surpass instruments, as, for instance, the subproletarians or the peasant first generation of workers. (p. 118)

The lack of a plausible relation between promises and real possibilities, along with the progressive transformation of wage-based relations, have marked the expansion of the Brazilian school system in the last decades. The poor adherence to school rituals and the lack of conflicts about school socialization opened a path for retreat or denial of school practices (Dubet, 2002) and became part of the unstable routes that lead to a huge fragility in the work market — highlighting its inability to

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5. The project involved a net of researchers from many universities to provide the Second State of the Art of student production in Post-Graduation programs on youth in such areas as Education, Social Sciences, and Social Work (1999-2006). As a study field, be it in Education or Social Sciences, the works which focused young people are not statistically significant, since they reach respectively 6% and 5% of total research production in Education and Social Sciences. Although public debate has paid considerable attention to youth as a theme, considering student production in Post-Graduation programs reveals that this field of investigation does not play a major role (Sposito, 2009a).

receive young people from popular segments of society according to formal requirements for their employment in Brazil.

In a way, the social conflicts characterizing the emergence of young university students as political actors in the 1960s analyzed by Marialice Foracchi (1965; 1972) dislocate to other kinds of “youth” without the same channels for expression of previous decades. In this framework, the enlarged hypotheses about the possibility of a new social conflicting scene are headed by juvenile segments, some of them anchored in the incipient reflection on social struggles, the so called social movements which were born in Brazil with the advent of redemocratization (Sposito, 2000).

An important preliminary survey of the forms of young people grouping and their collectivities in the urban settings were carried out by many studies in Education and Social Sciences. The so called style groups have been investigated since the 1980s; this practice offered a varied cast of juvenile presence, mainly that coming from popular segments of society. It represented a step further considering the participation of young people in student movements (Abramo, 1994; Caiaffa, 1985; Carrano, 2002; Costa, 2003; Dayrell, 2005; Herschmann, 1997 and 2000; Magnani & Mantese, 2007; Pais & Blass, 2004; Sposito, 1993b; Tella, 2000; Vianna, 1987 and 1997; Weller, 2005).

Appropriating the theme of multiple circulating spaces for urban young people, these studies offered important elements for the understanding of the aggregating elements of juvenile life through style groups and the so called juvenile cultures, including in their analyses the themes of ethnic diversity and gender in a constant dialogue with obstacles due to social inequalities. One of the weak points of the research on youth in Brazil lies on the pale highlight provided for the study of peasant young people and their freshly recent emergence in public arena (cf. Strapasolas, 2006; Carneiro & Guaraná, 2007). The survey of student production (1999/2006), identified few studies about peasant and indigenous young people, reaching only 4% of total production in Education, Social Sciences, and Social Work (Sposito, 2009a).

Most of these researches tried to break with the classical models of studies on juvenile groups, anchored in the functionalist tradition which privileged deviation and anomaly as analytical categories. One may observe a relative influence of studies on juvenile subcultures, carried out by researchers in Cultural Studies from Birmingham,



England. However, it is worth mentioning the important contributions of the Portuguese Sociology of Youth through the works of José Machado Pais (1993; 2004) and the anthropological studies carried out by Carles Feixa (2004; 1998) in Spain; both of them examined this sociability from the idea of juvenile cultures (somehow surpassing the presupposition of subculture). In recent years, the studies on urban anthropology carried out by José Guilherme Magnani (2007), dealing with the juvenile routes and circuits in the city, also enlarged the analytical perspective on juvenile groups. Considering the various theoretical approaches, the influence of founding principles of theories concerning collective action and social movement presented a decrease. A survey of the production on juvenile groups in the period 1999-2006 is available in Almeida (2009).

As the reflections developed in the 1950s and 1960s, research on youth in Brazil should try to understand the outlines and practices that constitute young people as relevant actors in the public and political sphere through cultural practices starting from historical particularities of Brazilian society. But this production presents an inequality considering the kind of analysis carried out and significantly fragmented in relation to what we might term studies on youth in Education (only 2% of total production) and a little bit more intense in Social Sciences, reaching 13% of theses and dissertations defended between 1999 and 2006 (Almeida, 2009).

However, the possibility of a thicker study field on youth in the tradition defended here lies on the challenge of connecting the analysis to classical domains of Sociology. Excessive segmentation of the research object can damage the reflection on young people, since the essential dimensions covering the life of these segments is placed between the intersections of diversified agencies: family, school, friendships, work, neighborhood relations, and leisure, among others. In the Brazilian case, it is evident that the dimensions related to working settings represent an important field of investigation, since a significant part of juvenile experience is found in its connection to work or the lack of it (Corrochano, 2009; Sposito, 2005).

That is why the investigative interest on juvenile collectivities, considering their cultural dimensions, demand transversal perspectives able to reconstitute the porosity found in these collective actions and other periods and settings of young people lives. We should not avoid considering the multiple forms through which new kinds of inequality are disseminated and new conflicting situations. According to

Rossana Reguillo (2004), the understanding of juvenile collectivities must necessarily take into account language, subjectivity, and daily life:

“Go out streets”, break down overt prohibitions, all together, the sense of collectivity, the emotion of collective words, powers silenced for a moment, constitute a fountain of confidence and strength; however, after the happenings one should think about the bills, take care of ill children, play the traditional roles, as women in the kitchen and men at work. No “subjectivity” is able to resist for long to the vertigo of novelty if it lacks a collectivity that supports it in the long run; the “conviction” of not risking essential membership status; the conditions for plausibility that “contain” the interpretation and the new practice, the bursting one. (p. 269)

A field scarcely investigated in the body of studies on youth can be found in the theme of young people modes of life in their dwelling settings, regarded as territories of multiple social relations. In this case, daily practices should be analyzed highlighting their transversal dimension – school, work, leisure, sociability (Sposito, 2009b). In fact, it is an important theoretical and methodological challenge, since there is a need for diving into a tradition of investigations that focuses daily life still foreign to most researchers on youth in Brazil. The studies carried out by José de Souza Martins (1992; 2008a; 2008b), inspired by Henri Lefebvre’s reflections, are an indispensable reference in the contemporary Brazilian production.

Regarding all these reasons, the studies on the Brazilian young people concerning their diverse modes of collective action, their practices and their orientations may not be restricted to only one analytical domain, representing a specialty, a feature for long denied in Brazil according to the sociological tradition examined in this article.

Without a clear dialogue with classical themes of Sociology, this production tends to become poorer and maybe a special sociology leads the studies on youth to stop representing an increased theoretical fertility and conceptual thickening — becoming foredoomed to a fatigue which may be translated into persistent reiterations of claims fully developed by other authors.

The reflections here outlined illustrate plausible ways of interaction between the studies on youth with a relative tradition inspired by theoretical and methodological orientations of the 1950s and 1960s in Brazil. Assuming the sociological studies on school as an institution within historical and cultural processes which constitute the particularities of Brazilian society, one may reaffirm the practice

of a Sociology of Education non-restricted to a merely schooled perspective and, at the same time, able to construe a situated reflection: how can we understand school in a society connecting archaism to post-modernism, development to delay, growth to new forms of inequality? Proposing the development of a Sociology of Youth anchored in processes that configurate current Brazilian society, be it from the point of view of the transformations in educational systems, work settings, or technologies of communication and information, be it from the perspective of Sociology of Collective Action, social movements, and cultural studies, the position here made evident recalls a theoretical and methodological point of view dedicated to the understanding of particularities that constitute the young people, without disregarding the simultaneous register of global processes of contemporary capitalist development, the so called times of globalization.

Examining the interfaces, challenges, and particularities of the investigative field, this perspective do not circumscribe Sociology of Education or Sociology of Youth in the segmented register of special sociologies. Contrary to this, the basic presupposition lies on the idea of a theoretical domain – Sociology – that tries to understand the occurrence of (dis)encounters, conflicts, and tensions in the relations of individuals or groups with social world through some privileged protagonists, the young people, tips of the iceberg of contemporary social dilemmas (Melucci, 1997).

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Accepted 29.01.10

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