

- Ref: BUTLER, Udi & RIZZINI, Irene. Young people living and working on the streets of Brazil: revisiting the literature. International Journal of Educational Policy, Research and Practice, University of South Florida, USA, winter 2001, Volume 2, Number 4.

Young People Living and Working on the Streets of Brazil Revisiting the Literature

**Udi Butler
Irene Rizzini**

**The University of Santa Ursula Center for Research on Childhood (CESPI),
Rio de Janeiro**

Key words: street kids, working children and youth,

Abstract

Young people living and working on the street can be seen as a bitter fruit in a complex tree of poverty and inequality, and a conspicuously visible fruit for reasons we will relate in this paper. Children and adolescents living on the street outside parental supervision is not in itself new, equally, though there are constant reports referring to the increasing number of this population there is little evidence, apart from periods of acute economic and social stability such as that between the late 70's and early 80's, that this is indeed the case. What instead has changed is the way this phenomena is viewed, interpreted and acted upon by wider society. This paper is an attempt to trace how this understanding has transformed in Brazil from a period two decades ago, when the phenomena can be said to have become the concern of society at large, up to the present. In seeking out this trajectory this paper focuses upon academic research produced between 1980 and 2000, pointing out how research focuses, concepts and terminology has changed over this period

Rio de Janeiro, August 2001

***"Não há esperança da Justiça Social.
Por isso: só na luta se espera com esperança"***

("There is no hope in Social Justice.
That is the reason why only in the struggle do we find hope")

Paulo Freire, 1987

Introduction

Young people living on the street can be seen as a bitter fruit in a complex tree of poverty and inequality, and a conspicuously visible fruit for reasons we will relate in this paper. Children and adolescents living on the street outside parental supervision is not in itself new, Gilberto Freyre in his 1930's publication *Casa Grande e Senzala* makes a reference to *moleques* (street urchins) as early as the nineteenth century (Hecht 1995:25). Since this time, though there have been constant reports as to the increase in numbers of children and adolescents living in such conditions, there is little evidence, apart from during periods of acute economic and social instability such as that between the late 1970's to the mid 1980's, that this is indeed the case (Ennew 1996:131). What instead has changed, is the way this phenomena is viewed, interpreted and acted upon by wider society. This paper is an attempt to trace how this understanding has transformed in Brazil from a period two decades ago, when the phenomena can be said to have become the concern of society at large, up to the present. In seeking out this trajectory this paper focuses upon academic research produced between 1980 and 2000.

From the 1970's attention towards the 'problem' popularly known as '*the abandoned minor*' grew in Brazil. For many, this time is seen as a period of crisis and transformations both in Brazil and in the global economy (Rizzini, 1986, Faria 1991, Rizzini & Rizzini 1991, Swift 1991). It is a time in which social and democratic movements proliferate, inflation worsens as does foreign debt and fiscal deficit, and the authoritarian regime begins to crumble. Brazil which had known high growth rates, enters into crisis and the period that becomes known as the 'lost decade', a time of negative growth, rife with hyper-inflation and huge international debts (Faria 1991:198). The highly unequal results of a developmental model based on accumulation without redistribution, also created a heavy social debt towards the poorest segments in society, one that is unsettled to this day. So much so that in 1981 between 40-50% of the population under 19 lived in homes whose families received less than 1/2 the minimum wage per person [Today this would be the equivalent of approximately US\$ 40,00 a month].

In this context of increasing poverty, and emergent social movements, people began to ask why so many children and adolescents were found living and working on the street, and also what kind of policies the state had to take care of the nation's poorest and youngest members. In the first years of the 80's researchers began an attempt at discovering the real situation in which children from the popular classes found themselves in. In this process, young people living and working on the street became emblematic of the situation of children and adolescents in Brazil more generally, not only within the academic literature but also in the media. For, behind every child on the street

we find the hardship of families of the urban peripheries and the even more precarious situation of the rural poor (Fausto & Cervini 1991:10). In this sense we can see the focus upon young people living on the street or in the custody of the state, in the form of research and alternative forms of non-governmental assistance, as actions that sought a more fundamental change on the way we see, and subsequently act towards childhood and adolescence in Brazil. From the period beginning in the 80's, emerge the first examples of social research about this population, in the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. This initial significant research compiled in *O Trabalho e a Rua: Crianças e adolescentes no Brasil urbano dos anos 80* [Work and the Street: Children and adolescents in Urban Brazil in the 80's] served to debunk previously held myths about this sector of the population. Firstly it was found that *menores abandonados* - or *abandoned minors* as unsupervised youngsters were called - were not really abandoned, they had families that are not necessarily unstructured. These youngsters mainly live in nuclear families which in order to survive, require all its members to work and to contribute to the household. Also research from this period pointed out that destitute children are not a minority in Brazil, but could describe over 50% of the population of 0-17 year olds who come from poor domestic units (Rizzini & Rizzini 1991:70 from IBGE 1989).

LOOKING AT THE STREET

The research from this first period of the early 80's can be broadly divided into two main concerns; a preoccupation with institutionalized 'minors' – in other words those under the care of the state - and with poor children and adolescents present on the street. As to the first concern, between the end of the 70's and the beginning of 80's we see the emergence of qualitative research into minor's who had been interned in correctional institutions. This research seeks to establish a profile of this group, made up of young people in trouble with the law as well as destitute children, looking into age, reason for being there and family background. The second branch of research, on youngsters found on the street, as well as the first branch, arises through the course of the 80's particularly as a critique of the concept of the 'minor' in the context of national policies that prioritize economic growth to the detriment of the well-being of the population (Rizzini & Rizzini 1991:75). This research begins to question the term 'minor', a term that frames these youngsters within laws of social control by the state, akin to laws on strike, national security and the press, which are seen as part of the authoritarian baggage of the military regime (Fausto & Cervini 1991:9).

This first phase of research on the so called *street children*, is characterized by the discovery of how widespread across Brazil's urban centers, is the occurrence of young people on the street, and how similar the circumstances in each locality are. One feature of this phase is the failure to distinguish a typology of the population of children on the street, who are generically described as *meninos de rua* (*street children*, or literally *street boys*), a term that also tended to includes girls, those that work and return home and those that live on the street. Research findings from this period showed that 90% of those on the street are boys, that their ages range from 7-17, with greater concentration on the 11-

14 age group, that they are initiated into the street whilst they are between 7-12 years old, and stay on the street until they are 15-16 (Rizzini & Rizzini 1991:75).

Whilst early research tended to lump together all youngsters it found on the street under the generic category of *street children*, it is only towards the end of the decade that a distinction begins to emerge between youngsters who return home and those who have severed links with the family. The work of Mark Lusk, in the late 80's, in defining this typology is important here. Lusk conducted a 4 month fieldwork research in Rio de Janeiro in which 113 children and adolescents were interviewed. His work was prompted by what he felt was a lack of a standard definition in the literature leading to, at times, an over-inflation of their numbers in considering poor children in an unsupervised situation or else to an erroneous reference to these as abandoned. Lusk uses the UN definition of 'street children' for his study, which is;

"... any girl or boy... for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings and wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and/ or source of livelihood; and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults." (in Lusk 1994:161).

This definition is wide enough to encompass those who work on the street full and part time and yet live with their parents, and see that the child who may appear to be abandoned is part of a family network. Lusk's finding divide this street population into four groups, each with distinct indices of schooling, criminality and different family structures, different relationships with their family and with the street. The four groups are:

Family based street workers – representing 21,4% of those interviewed. These are the young people who live with their families, and it is the necessity to work drives them to the street. Of this group 90,9% are boys and 72,7% go to school. Their families are made of a father (or step-father) and mother in 59,1% of cases and their involvement with illegal activities is considerably less than in other groups. The average age of the group is 13.

Independent street workers – represent 50,5% of the interviewed population. Here Lusk notes, family ties begin to breakdown and the child involves itself more with 'street culture'. Families are made up of both parents in 61,5% of cases. The children sleep on the street periodically and are more involved with illegal activities (44,9% of cases). They are mainly boys 73,1%, and 60% have had dealings with the police or correctional institutions. Of this group only 30,8% said they still go to school and their average age is also 13.

Children of the street – represent only 14,6% of the population of youngsters on the street. These are children who are no longer linked to the family. They come from two parent families in 53,3% of cases and have a strong tendency to carry out illegal activities (60% of subjects responded affirmatively). They are mainly boys, 73,3%, and have a strong involvement with drugs, 80%. Many admit to having been arrested and in

correctional institutions for minors, 80%. The average age is 14 and only 6,7% go to school.

Children of street families – represent 13,6% of the sample. They stay all day on the street with their families, primarily the mother, in only 35,75% of cases was there a male figure present. There is also a significant involvement with illegal activities, 38,5%, and drugs, 57,1%. Whilst dealings with repressive institutions (police or Febem) are lower because of their being with their families, 14,3% admit to being interned, and 42,9% have been apprehended by the police. 64,3% are boys and the average age is also lower, 10,4, and 14,3% go to school.

In this context of trying to more clearly define the young street population, it is also important to mention the various attempts at pin-pointing their numbers. An article in *Time* from 1978 put the figure of 2 million Brazilian children ‘abandoned by their parents’ (quoted in Hecht 1998:100). UNICEF’s *Ideas Forum* of 1984 put forward a figure of 30 million, which if true would mean that there are more children living on the streets than in homes in urban centers (Ibid). An often-recurring figure is that of 7 million, cited by institutions, journalists and academics in the 80’s (i.e. Amnesty International, Childhope) (Ibid). As Hecht observes this figure is invariably quoted as someone else’s estimate. Yet as he concludes, if this estimate were accurate street children would account for 6% of Brazil’s 1993 population. If one works with Lusk’s typology, we find that surveys that attempted to record those who had been sleeping in the urban city centers apart from their families found much smaller numbers than these. A 1993 survey conducted by social research and policy organization IBASE, found 797 children under these conditions in Rio de Janeiro.

Similarly a 1994 survey, cited in *Veja* magazine in which 23 institutions participated, found 895 children who spent the night on the streets of Sao Paulo. Hecht concludes, from these cities’ surveys that for every 1 million urban residents in these cities there are 115 children living on the streets. If this ratio holds true this would mean a total of 13,000 street children in Brazil as a whole (Hecht 1998:100).

As the researcher’s gaze becomes increasingly more sophisticated, different themes begin to emerge towards the end of the 80’s, though all researches agree upon the importance of the family situations of these children, information about the family had only been obtained through interviews with the children and not the family itself. An exception to this emerges in the work of a group of researchers in Goiania, Goias. Alves, who is part of this group, like Lusk, acknowledge the importance of UNICEF’s Bogota Meeting in 1989 as a turning point in an attempt to create an adequate typology of children who are found on the street. International bodies have focused on street children since the United Nations Year of the Child in 1979, since then there have been many attempts to define the category, including the distinction between children ‘on’ and ‘of’ the street based on the work of the late Peter Taçon in 1985 (Ennew & Connolly 1996:131). Here the distinction between *on* and *of* the street was made, the former being designated as a ‘minor in a strategy of survival’, that is those whose connections to the family are still important. The distinctions between the two groups refer to the level of

risk to which they are submitted and to the nature of the ties they have to the family (Alves 1991:119). With this definition in mind the author asks:

“why facing apparently similar socio-economic conditions do some children maintain links with their families whilst others, swap the home for the street? Are there differences in the histories, in the dynamic structures, as well as in the life conditions of the families of these two groups of children that could, in some way, contribute to the maintenance or rupture of family links?” (ibid).

The research supported by UNICEF and FLACSO, in the Brazilian state of Goias, consisted of interviews with 128 families; 42 of which had children who were of the street and the other 86 were families of child workers. In the work the authors depart from the premise that family life is in principle the most adequate environment for the psycho-social development of children. The research then attempts to establish the nature of this family environment by asking about its members, their earnings, living conditions, where they came from, the current and past family structure and how people relate within this structure, how they relate to other groups and institutions, what are their main worries and who they count on to resolve these.

Alves' found that *children of the street* come predominantly from female headed households. They tend to display greater difficulties in inter-personal relations than young street workers, and they display greater incidences of problems at school. For Alves, the difficult relationships *children of the street* have with their father show:

“ a picture of the father as unprepared and impotent before the difficulties of life and the responsibility to the family, this image, combined with emotional distance, make them an unattractive model for their sons to identify with” (Alves 1991:125).

The danger of this, as the author points out, is the disqualification of the paternal figure as a model of identification which tends to open the way to a life of crime (Ibid.).

Also involved in this research are Wilson Moura, who analyses the findings from a psychological perspective, and Arno Vogel and Marco Antonio da Silva Mello who add an social anthropological dimension to the work. Moura describes the condition of tension between conflict and fantasy that children and adolescents of poor families find themselves in being submerged within a consumer culture symbolized in the collective imagination as the city, and the sad living conditions they find themselves in with poor housing conditions, no space for leisure, or which to call their own. This scenario is followed by conversations with friends who know or are on the street, where they have liberty, wear designer labels, don't work too hard, and suddenly the city becomes an *Eldorado* – a goldmine of opportunities. But then, the author asks, what keeps so many children at home? For Moura, people tend to abandon the group when this no longer fulfills one's necessities. What has prevented more youngsters ending up on the street is the presence of affection, of the feeling of protection and safety, of interdependency,

loyalty and solidarity. “*The situation is like two force fields, each trying to attract particles to its interior*” (Moura 1991:171). In this tug-of-war of attractions, there are also forces of repulsion which push out these youngsters; domestic or community violence, weak parental figures who are seen as incapable of facing the adversities of the world, or of proving adequately for the home. Added to the issue of unstructured home-life, Vogel & Mello found that there was the added element of a curiosity that saw venturing out towards the street as an adventure. As well as the violent home, there was also a problem of the empty home, the absence of adults within the home leading to an impoverishment of home-life, to the absences of care towards the child and of the rituals of home life. As Vogel and Mello write:

“ The violent or empty home, in many cases, represents servitude in the perspective of these children.... This picture shows the transformation of the home, which ceases to be a space where the child finds shelter, care, instruction, time to socialize and free-time for themselves, becoming a space of conflict, risk, solitude and servitude; where, instead of being given, childhood is taken away”(Vogel & Mello 1991:144).

Investigating the family background of young people on the street, Maria Gregori, some 15 years latter, also found a great degree of instability in these families as they are constantly on the move – to seek work, because of rent, etc. - and the child may be circulated between relatives or be brought up by people other than parents.¹ These factors make it very difficult for the child to build roots or connections and emotional links with a locality, school or community as well as with the family. Being constantly on the move makes it very difficult for the children to pursue their studies which are constantly disrupted, and it becomes problematic to re-start school because of school year schedules. The unstable nature of some of these families sometimes prompted the mother to intern her child in the FEBEM, the government-run homes/correctional institutions for *abandoned minors* and young offenders which have been dismantled since the introduction of Children and Adolescent Statute of 1991(Gregori 2000:85).

LIVING ON THE STREET

Whilst the majority of research on young people on the street has tended towards a methodology of questionnaires, and structured or semi-structured interviews, another more anthropological line of research has attempted to unravel what life on the street is really like for these youngsters by also spending a considerable period of time undertaking participant observation (Ferreira 1980, Vogel & Mello 1991, Fenelon, Martins & Domingues 1992, Hecht 1998, Gregori 2000). Questions asked about the

¹ For research on child circulation amongst the popular class see **Claudia Fonseca’s ‘Children and Social Inequality in Brazil: A Look at Child Circulation in the Working Classes.’** In *Children in Brazil Today: A Challenge for the Third Millennium* Ed. Irene Rizzini 1994 Editora Universitaria Santa Ursula: Rio de Janeiro

youngsters by these authors are; where, why and how they work, how they survive on the street, who are their benefactors and who they fear, what are their hopes and finally what identities are being fashioned through these processes?

Vogel and Mello point out that to exist as a child implies, for an extensive layer of society, an abdication of this role to an immersion in the world of work and in the public sphere assuming all the risks this entails. This entails not only an exchange of hunger for work, since also cashed in is time to play, to hang out, to experiment ludically with the world, as well as the opportunity of an education (Vogel & Mello 1991:135). Amongst the reasons for going to work, researchers found the need to earn one's own money as a recurrent theme, particularly in order to engage in certain forms of consumption that cannot be met by the parents.

From beginning to work on the street, some children may gradually become socialized into a street culture, by groups who are already there. As the authors pointing out the importance of this socialization process; "*Nobody leaves home to the street to be alone*" (Vogel & Mello 1991:144). Yet this process of socialization into a *street ethic*, is still little understood as is the extent to which these youngsters are involved with 'delinquent' behavior. For Vogel and Mello, the narratives of these youngsters show common themes, one which they call *caixa roubada*, [stolen shoe-shine box]. With a few variations this narrative recounts how the boys go to the street to work and one day have their shoe shine box, or other work tool/means stolen by *children of the street* and subsequently do not return home.

"What seems to be at work in all these episodes is the questioning of a value because of an action. In depriving the boy from the possibility of executing his task, there is a radical questioning of work as a value related to the reproduction of the domestic group, that is, the family" (Vogel & Mello 1991:144).

Similarly the author's also point to another recurring theme; the sniffing of glue or nail varnish, prompting a similar questioning of the work versus a pleasure seeking ethic.

On the other hand, for Rosa Maria Fischer Ferreira, in her pioneering work of the late 70's, addresses a common profile of what life is like on the street, by showing the example of Alvaro; he is part of a group of between 7-10 boys who take charge of a *ponto* - a spot in the city center - and charge for parking in that area. Alvaro goes back to his home every 15 days to give his mother some of his earnings. From this *ponto* objects may occasionally be stolen from cars that are left open. A lucrative *ponto* allows for an almost entrepreneurial organization. The boys sort out regular periods of work so that no gaps are left and all have a chance to earn. They learn to predict according to times and days which are more or less profitable and distribute their activities of rest, family visits and leisure, accordingly. They develop fixed customers - reserving spaces, cleaning the windscreen, carrying packages - and a fixed charge is accepted by all customers depending on the day (Ferreira 1980:104).

Public space is appropriated, in this instance, is turned into private space in order to generate income. As Ferreira rightly points out, in the act of appropriation of the *ponto* and in the way that labor is divided, hierarchies of power and control of space from wider Brazilian society are reproduced. The figure of the *dono do ponto* or leader of the spot is justified chronologically *he arrived first*, and it was him who rationalized the space making it productive. (Ferreira 1980:104) The youngsters in her research showed a preference for having *carteira assinada*, a genuine certified job, rather than to earn easy money because of the constant hassles with the police. The issue of the obstacles children and adolescents face when trying to secure an adequate job, is also noted by Hecht (1998). When youngsters of the street explain why they don't work, they often say it is because they don't have the right documents. These are the legal papers such as a birth certificate, voter registration and work permit, that are required by Brazilian law in order to gain official employment. Street children therefore speak of their ability to work and advance in life as being inhibited by bureaucracy.

So whilst for Vogel and Mello, emphasis is given to the disruption of social norms that the street ethic brings; for instance the questioning of the work as against the pleasure ethic in learning how to beg or steal, in other words, by learning of ways of gaining resources immediately, others like Hecht and Ferreira stress the continuities with work patterns in wider society. Undoubtedly both processes of rupture and continuity are at work, operating differently in different individuals, perhaps related to the length of time that has already been spent on the street. One thing, however, that is very widespread amongst such youngsters is what can be called an ethos of liberty.

ETHOS OF LIBERTY

The group and the street is clearly the site for activities other than work. The opportunities for leisure that the urban centers bring has to be a major pull factor in drawing these youngsters away from their spaces in the *favelas* and peripheries. For Maria Filomena Gregori, working in Sao Paulo in the late 90's, whilst the street may represent freedom for all social groups, for young people living on the street it involves "*an existence whose origin relates to the standards indicated by a family dynamic - the circulation of children, urban mobility, irregular schooling, the familiarity with the city.*" (Gregori 2000: 100). Rather than being the cause of the phenomena, Gregori sees the family as "*part of the context that encourages an experience of circulation that could be - and in most cases is- made use of on the street.*"(Ibid) Yet, if the family provides the context of *circulation* in which urban space is used differently from other groups in society, the rupture with the family, or as the UN definition would have it, being 'inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults' further alienates these youngsters from the rest of society.

The chance to hang around with one's peers, catching rides from the bumper of buses, getting up to high jinks, courting, going to parties, consuming legal and illegal drugs, all in an unsupervised environment are attractive prospects, especially in the lavish and spacious urban centers where opportunities for fun are never far away. Many researchers have commented on this issue of *liberty*, often found in the youngsters'

speech. For Tobias Hecht, whose fieldwork with young people living on the street in Recife and Olinda in the end of the 90's, this entailed "*a street ethos based on spontaneity, insubordination to authority, and solidarity with other deeply rejected young people*"(Hecht 1998:183). This being an ethos, which according to Hecht, made it hard for these youngsters to be absorbed into assistance programs even when the alternatives they proposed appeared attractive. As Vogel and Mello write:

"On the street there is no right time to do anything, and one is not forced to do or stop doing anything. To live on the street means to have no boss or father. Because of this, beyond attaining in time and space a liberty inconceivable to home children, the children are also able to use their bodies in the manner they please, through sexual experiences and drug consumption" (Vogel & Mello 1991:145).

For Vogel and Mello, liberty in time, space and of body, signify something far problematic for the social system; 'the liberty of someone who does not adhere to the conventions of the market'. On the street, they consider, "*to have what you want, you only have to take it*"; this is how it is possible to have what the family could not offer and which are out of reach of who works hard regularly. The consumption of the domestic group whose earning is low, is constantly frustrated from what urban society produces. "*On the street you can have 'the city at your feet', if you have the will to conquer it*"(Vogel & Mello 1991:145). Alba Zaluar, conducting research on youth involvement in crime from a poor housing project in Rio, comes to similar conclusions as to the origin of this ethos of liberty, or as some call it, this *immediatism*. For Zaluar, consumerism and a pleasure-seeking ideology lead to an absence of constraints over individual desires. It is an ideology which entices youth through constant propaganda in the mass media, particularly television, at the same time frustrating them by the inaccessibility of such goods because of low wages and the lack of opportunities of social climbing. Accordingly, we see "*the demoralization of words and rules for respectful, equanimous community living, which can only be sustained with institutional engineering for equal justice and social access*" (Zaluar 1994: 216). As a consequence, Zaluar found, a life of crime becomes a way of accessing consumer goods and the status they endow.

We can then see that researchers have in the 90's gone beyond attempting a profile of this street population in terms of its typology, its numbers and its habits, and also attempted to look into the motivations and identities of young people who live on the street. In doing so they have shed light upon the lack of opportunities and support within the families and communities from which they come from and consequently upon how urban centers serve to fulfill some of these needs in terms of peer supports, work and leisure opportunities. Researchers have also contextualized the apparent immediatism of these youngsters as being within a consumer society that encourages its members to aspire to obtain goods and to hinge their identities upon acts of consumption.

VIOLENCE – LIBERTY AS AN ILLUSION

The provisional and tense nature of street life filled with fear and violence means that these youngsters are the first to recognize that the 'liberty' of the streets is also an illusion. An alarming phenomena that emerges in academic research and in the media towards the end of the 80's is the disproportionate numbers of young poor youths that are murdered every year in Brazil's largest cities. Particularly significant was the research conducted by MNMMR, (National Movement of Street Boys and Girls), IBASE and NEV-USP (two social research centers) in 1991, published in *Vidas em Risco: Assassinatos de Crianças e Adolescentes no Brasil* [Lives at Risk: Murders of Children and Adolescents in Brazil]. The research, which looked into the murders of youths in Brazil between 1984-89 through an analysis of newspaper reports and reports from the Legal Medical Institute, found that a significant proportion of the murders had been committed by on-duty policemen and many others, whose culprit was unknown, pointed to the work of off-duty police and extermination groups. What was also shocking about these murders was the number of times in which the crime was not fully investigated and no one was charged.

Human Rights Watch, who also conducted research on this theme in 1994, point out that between 1989 and 1991 5,644 youngsters between 5-17 years of age were victims of violent deaths in Brazil according to the Ministerio Publico. (Human Rights Watch 1994:ix) The authors give the following view of why such violence is perpetrated:

"Children, and especially poor children and adolescents, become targets of killing by off-duty police and death squads because they are often popularly perceived as criminals. Violence against children is largely the result of this perception combined with three other factors: the lack of policing in poor neighborhoods; the belief that the justice system is inefficient; and traditions of violence, many dating back to Brazil's era of military dictatorship. In each instance a cycle of official omission, disregard or complicity accentuates the problem and perpetuates the violence" (Human Rights Watch 1994: 30).

This perception of children as invulnerable before the law, Hecht believes, may ironically contribute to their victimization, since many may see the only solution is to enforce punishment extra-judicially (Hecht 1998:143). Beginning in the 80's, reports by human rights organizations emerge pointing to a deadly campaign of kidnapping, torture and assassination at the hands of vigilante groups and off-duty police. As Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman question, why should the period of democratization in Brazil (the military dictatorship lasted between 1964 and 1985) be accompanied by a dramatic increase in public violence? For the authors,

"With the gradual dismantling of the military police state, the former authoritarian structures that had kept the social classes 'safely' apart and the 'hordes' of disenfranchised, hungry, and 'dangerous' poor children at least symbolically contained to the favelas (urban shanty-towns) or in long term public detention weakened. And suddenly - or so it appeared to a great many Brazilians - the favelas ruptured, and poor, mostly black, and aggressively needy children descended from hillside slums and seemed to be everywhere, occupying

boulevards, plazas, and parks that more affluent citizens once thought of as their own” (Scheper-Hughes & Hoffman 1998:353).

Whilst these kids have in the past been tolerated, the authors note an increasing weariness towards what over the past couple of decades has come to be conceived as a *dangerous* group. For Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman what has changed is the inability of the modern and the 'hyper-segregated post-modern city' to absorb this large and growing number of children, leading them to conclude that street children are simply poor children in the wrong place (Scheper-Hughes & Hoffman 1998:357).

A CRITICAL STANCE

To conclude we refer to one last line of research, or rather perspective, which is not necessarily apart from the research already mentioned above, this is a critical stance that questions the designation of young people on the street as a *problem*, considering this definition and attempts at remedying as related to the desire to keep such poor and very often black, youngsters in their place. Such writers ask whom the term *street children* serves? Who benefits from this definition and the eradication of this *problem*? For some writers, (Aptekar 1988, Glauser 1990, Leite 1991, Ennew 1996, Scheper-Hughes & Hoffman 1998, Hecht 1998, Graciani 1999), the definition of and intervention upon the phenomena of youngsters living on the streets only serves the interests of particular sectors of society. These debates about the category of 'street children' over the last decade, echo wider debates in the social sciences that have come to see childhood as a social category that reflects particular visions of society (Jenks et al 1990, James & Prout et al 1992). As such they differ from earlier concerns of defining and classifying a particular group of youngsters that use the street for work, leisure and/or habitation. Instead, these debates problematize the ways in which society's gaze, through such classification and implication of difference, serves to stigmatize the group and ends up serving the interests of particular sectors of society.

For Glauser the concept of *street children*, “*becomes necessary in the response to speak about children who fall outside the frame of what is considered 'normal'*” (Glauser 1990:145). He concludes: “*It is therefore, the concern not for children's but society's needs which has given importance to the concept and to the category of 'street children'*” (Ibid). This aspect of street children falling outside normal expectations of childhood is also noted by Aptekar, in his classic study in Colombia, who explains that, the smallest children that are seen on the street produce a form of *cognitive dissonance* in many adults. The observer's concept of a child as innocent and in need of family protection and of a child who is capable of producing a self-sustaining livelihood are incongruous. Aptekar concludes, “*Street children can be defined as an aberration of childhood in a particular society with a particular point of view about childhood*” (Aptekar 1988:46).

This critical perspective is also expounded by Paulo Freire and Lygia Costa Leite, among others. Though their work would more fittingly be placed within a paper

addressing the changing practices in dealing with this population, the concepts they raise concerning the quest for freedom and the *political* nature of the actions and lives of these youngsters have also been significant contributions. In a lecture given to employees of the FEBEM (the state's correctional/shelter institution for dealing with youngsters) in 1984, and referring to the youngsters the institution harbored, Freire sums up this position:

"I imagine, that in truth, each time one of these youngsters breaks a window, he is breaking the dominant class of this country. Symbolically he is not breaking the window, but is killing who kills him on a symbolic level"(Freire1984:8).

Freire's pedagogical approach, were dialogue and departure from the cultural context of the student were of central importance, proved hugely influential in the movement that created a new way of working with this young street population particularly through the figure of the *street educator* (Freire, 1987). Within this movement an educational experiment also took place in Rio de Janeiro in the mid 80's, a school build especially for society's most *marginalized*, particularly in an educational context. Ligia Costa Leite, the director and one of the creators of the school, considered this street population and others whom Brazil's schooling system had failed, as heirs to the legacy of *Zumbi dos Palmares*, an African king and rebel leader who led runaway slaves to many battles from the runaway slave community of Palmares in the 17th century. The students, in their revolt against society express this legacy individually in the ways through which they live in and communicate with the world. According to Leite;

"These youngsters, in being in their great majority black heirs of Zumbi dos Palmares... are bearers of a form of resistance associated with the cultural creativity of their fore-bearers, which makes them survive in this lettered society (that created them and are hostile to their presence), without having its key weapon and magic – reading and writing" (Leite1991:105).

Freire, and Leite in particular, consider the young population in question as a form of urban guerrillas, a kind of cultural resistance with its roots in Brazil's slavery regime. Their contribution is important in the sense of adding a historical dimension to this population's present predicament, and in pointing towards ways of working alongside these youngsters in order to reduce their marginalization from society.

The gaze upon the phenomena of young people living on the street has turned from labeling them as *abandoned minors*, to *street children*, to *children of the street* to more recently, *children in situations of risk* (or *situation of street – or in difficult circumstances*)². Each time the term reflecting a greater sensitivity to the actual situation of those it studies. We have also seen how what was once held to be an undifferentiated

² This latest term also a UNICEF's category *Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances* (CEDC) originally established to include refugees, children with disabilities, children affected by organized violence, as well as street and working children, has been hijacked by *street children* (Ennew 1996:132).

population, was found to be comprised of a myriad of different circumstances; different relationships to the family, to school, to crime, different kinds of work, as well as different dreams and identities. Yet, even those children that are in the last definition in a situation of risk or *of the street*, we must acknowledge, as Riccardo Lucchini does, that the street is only one domain amongst others, such as shelters, schools, welfare programs, through which children pass at different times and with which they have ‘a constellation of relationships’ (Lucchini 1996:167).

“What is called being a street child corresponds neither to a clearly delimited social category nor to a perfectly homogenous psycho-sociological unity. For some children the street seems to be a residual category; to others it is above all a workplace and its value is firmly instrumental. Relatively few children distinguish themselves from others by having the street as their principal reference” (Lucchini 1996:169).

This last point made by Lucchini, is also very important, raising questions that have not as of yet been researched; how do young people living on the street understand their situation, how do they self-identify? Clearly when authors question attempts at tackling the *problem* of young people on the street they do not simply mean that nothing should be done since this is serving the interest of particular social classes. Instead they offer a critical vision of a society which makes a life on the street an alternative for some who are excluded from the possibility of a healthy, wholesome and dignified childhood and adolescence, and who are then further stigmatized and violated by society. It is a position that also questions why such a relatively small number of youngsters in our urban centers should provoke so much indignation from society whilst millions hidden away in the peripheries or in rural areas go hungry, or suffer silently in their homes (Rizzini, Barker, Cassaniga, 2000).

A useful concept in helping us to understand this debate is Victor Turner’s notion of the social drama, introduced in the work of Fenelon, Martins & Domingues, where it is through crises and conflicts that the social structure is revealed when a break of rules and regulations is perceived. The rules spoken of here are clearly not only those set down by law, but also refers to the habits or discourses of sectors within society; about the rightful place of childhood, of the uses of public/commercial space, of the roles of adults in the education and care of the youngest members of society. Interested parties who, for a variety of reasons, wish to contain such occurrences then act upon these ruptures.

In the case of young people living on the street this rupture is frequently seen in their relationship with adults and institutions – the family, the school, the police, passer’s by in the city centers - attaining a permanent form unable to be contained by social measures. This condition of permanent crisis, in turn, exposes a social structure made up of relationships that tend to generate and maintain experiences of social exclusion (Fenelon, Martins & Domingues 1992: 23). As research has illuminated these structures, we have seen that its roots are deeply woven into poverty, into communities with inadequate facilities or support systems, into families who also lack support, adequate housing conditions and a decent wage. As many institutions working in the area have

come to realize, it is only by tackling these roots with preventative measures and programs, by giving attractive alternatives, that the street will some day appear as an unappealing existence.

References

Alves, A. J 1991 Meninos de Rua e meninos da Rua: Estrutura e Dinâmica Familiar. In Fausto, A and Cervini, R (Eds.) 1991 *O Trabalho e a Rua: Crianças e adolescentes no Brasil urbano dos anos 80*. Cortez Editora: São Paulo

Aptekar, L 1988 *Street Children of Cali*. Duke University Press: London

Boyden, J. 1990 'Childhood and the Policy Makers: A Comparative Perspective on the Globalisation of Childhood.' In James, A. & Prout, A. (Eds.) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* The Falmer Press: London

de Castro, M. R. 1997 *Retóricas da Rua: Educador, Criança e Diálogos* Editora Universidade Santa Ursula: Rio de Janeiro

Ennew, J. 1994 'Less bitter than expected: street youth in Latin America,' *Anthropology in Action*, vol.1, Spring, pp7-11

Ennew, J. & Connolly, M. 1996 'Children Out of Place' in *Childhood* Vol.3, 1996: 131-145, Sage: London

Faria, V. 1991 'A montanha e a Pedra: Os limites da política social e os problemas da infância e da juventude'. in Fausto, A and Cervini, R (Eds.) *O Trabalho e a Rua: Crianças e adolescentes no Brasil urbano dos anos 80*. Cortez Editora: São Paulo

Fausto, A and Cervini, R (Eds.) 1991 *O Trabalho e a Rua: Crianças e adolescentes no Brasil urbano dos anos 80*. Cortez Editora: São Paulo

Fenelon, G. M. Martins, L. C. & Domingues, M. H. 1992 *Meninas de Rua: uma vida em movimento*. Universidade Federal de Goiás: Goiás

Ferreira, R. M. 1980 *Meninos de Rua: Expectativas e Valores de Menores Marginalizados em São Paulo* CJP: São Paulo

Fonseca, C. 1994 'Children and Social Inequality in Brazil: A Look at Child Circulation in the Working Classes'. In Rizzini, I. (Ed.) *Children in Brazil Today: A Challenge for the Third Millennium*. Editora Universitaria Santa Ursula: Rio de Janeiro

Freire, Paulo 1984 *O Papel do Educador* Documentos FEBEM: São Paulo.

Freire, Paulo 1987. In: Paulo Freire & educadores de rua. Uma abordagem crítica. Projeto Alternativas de Atendimento aos meninos de rua.. Rio de Janeiro: UNICEF/SAS/FUNABEM.

Glauser, B. 1990 'Street Children: Deconstructing a Construct' in James, A. & Prout, A. (Eds.) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* The Falmer Press: London

Graciani, M.S. 1999 *Pedagogia Social de Rua* Editora Cortez: São Paulo

Gregori, M. F. 2000 *Viração: Experiencias de meninos nas ruas*. Companhia Das Letras: Sao Paulo

Hecht, T. 1995 *At Home in the Street: Street Children of Recife, Brazil* Unpublished PhD thesis, Cambridge University

Hecht, T. 1998 *At Home in the Street: Street Children in Northeast Brazil* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge

Human Rights Watch 1994 *Final Justice: Police and Death Squad Homicides of Adolescents in Brazil*. Human Rights Watch: New York

Impelizeri, F 1995 *Street Children and NGOs in Rio: A Follow Up study on non-governmental projects*. AMAIS/IUPERJ: Rio

James, A. & Prout, A. (Eds.) 1990 *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* The Falmer Press: London

Jenks, C. (Ed.) 1992 *The Sociology of Childhood: Essential Readings* Gregg Revivals: Worcester

Leite, Ligia Costa 1991 *A Magia dos Invencíveis: Os meninos de rua na Escola Tia Ciata* Editora Vozes: Petropolis.

Lucchini, R. 1996 'Theory, Method and Triangulation in the Study of Street Children'. in *Childhood* Vol.3, 1996: 131-145, Sage: London

Lusk, M and Mason, D. 1994 'Fieldwork with Rio's Street Children'. . In Rizzini, I. (Ed.) *Children in Brazil Today: A Challenge for the Third Millennium*. Editora Universitaria Santa Ursula: Rio de Janeiro

MNMMR/IBASE/NEV-USP 1991 *Vidas em Risco: Assassinatos de Crianças e Adolescentes no Brasil* MNMMR/IBASE/NEV-USP: Rio de Janeiro

Moura, W. 1991 'A Família Contra a Rua: Uma análise psico-sociológica da dinâmica familiar em condições de pobreza'. In Fausto, A and Cervini, R (Eds.) 1991 *O Trabalho e a Rua: Crianças e adolescentes no Brasil urbano dos anos 80*. Cortez Editora: Sao Paulo

Pilotti, F. and Rizzini, I. 1994 'The (Dis)integration of Latin America and its Impact on children'. In Rizzini, I. (Ed.) *Children in Brazil Today: A Challenge for the Third Millennium*. Editora Universitaria Santa Ursula: Rio de Janeiro

Rizzini, Irene (Org.) (1986). *A Geração da rua : um estudo sobre as crianças marginalizadas no Rio de Janeiro*. Rio de Janeiro : USU/VRC/CESME. Série Estudos e Pesquisas, 1.

Rizzini, Irene & Rizzini, Irma 1991 *menores institucionalizados e meninos de rua: as grandes temas de pesquisa na década de 80*. In Fausto, A and Cervini, R (Eds.). *O Trabalho e a Rua: Crianças e adolescents no Brasil urbano dos anos 80*. Cortez Editora: Sao Paulo

Rizzini, I. (Ed.) 1994 *Children in Brazil Today: A Challenge for the Third Millennium*. Editora Universitaria Santa Ursula: Rio de Janeiro

Rizzini, I. 1994a 'Street children: An excluded generation in Latin America', in *Anthropology in Action*, vol.1, Spring, pp215-233

Rizzini, I., 1994b *Children in the city of violence: The case of Brazil*, from K. Rupesinghe & M. Rubio Correa, *The Culture of Violence*, Tokyo: The United Nations University Press, 257- 275.

Rizzini, I., I. Rizzini, M. Munhoz-Vargas & L. Galeano, 1992 *Childhood and Urban Poverty in Brazil: Street and Working Children and their Families*, Florence: UNICEF ICDC, August.

Rizzini, I., I. Rizzini, M. Munhoz-Vargas & L. Galeano, 1994 'Brazil: A New Concept of Childhood' in Szanton Blanc, C. et al 1994 *Urban Children in Distress: Global Predicaments and Innovative Strategies* Gordon and Breach: Reading

Rizzini, I. Barker, G. & Cassaniga, N. RIZZINI, Irene, BARKER, Gary, CASSANIGA. 2000. *Criança não é risco, é oportunidade: fortalecendo as bases de apoio familiares e comunitárias para crianças e adolescentes*. Rio de Janeiro : USU Ed. Universitária/ CESPI/USU/Instituto Promundo.

1998 *From Street Children to All Children: Improving the opportunities of Low income Urban Children and Youth in Brazil*. CESPI/USU: Rio de Janeiro

Scheper-Hughes, N. (Ed.) 1987 *Child Survival: anthropological perspectives on the treatment and maltreatment of children*. D.Reidel: The Netherlands

Scheper-Hughes, N. & Hoffman, D. 1994 'Kids Out of Place' NACLA Report on the Americas.

Scheper-Hughes, N. & Sargent, C. (Eds.) 1998 *Small Wars: The Cultural Politics of Childhood* University of California Press: Berkley

Scheper-Hughes, N. & Hoffman, D. 1998 'Brazilian Apartheid: Street Kids and the Struggle for Urban Space' in Scheper-Hughes, N. & Sargent, C. (Eds.) *Small Wars: The Cultural Politics of Childhood* University of California Press: Berkley

Swift, A. 1991 *Brazil: The fight for childhood in the city*. UNICEF: Florence

Szanton Blanc, C. *et al* 1994 *Urban Children in Distress: Global Predicaments and Innovative Strategies* Gordon and Breach: Reading

Vogel, A. and Mello, M. S. 1991 'Da Casa a Rua: A cidade como fascínio e descaminho'. in Fausto, A and Cervini, R (Eds.) 1991 *O Trabalho e a Rua: Crianças e adolescentes no Brasil urbano dos anos 80*. Cortez Editora: Sao Paulo

Zaluar, A. 1994 'Gangsters and Remote-Control Juvenile Delinquents: Youth and Crime'. In Rizzini, I. (Ed.) *Children in Brazil Today: A Challenge for the Third Millennium*. Editora Universitaria Santa Ursula: Rio de Janeiro

The Authors

Udi Butler is a researcher at The Center for Research on Childhood (CESPI, Universidade Santa Ursula); Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Butler is involved in action research projects at CESPI and is currently working on his Doctorate at the University of London, Goldsmith College, UK.

Irene Rizzini is a Professor and a researcher at the Universidade Santa Ursula and Director of The Center for Research on Childhood (CESPI); Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Professor Rizzini serves as Vice-President of the Advisory Board of Childwatch International Research Network. She is the author of several books, among which are: *The art of governing children : the history of social policies, legislation and child welfare in Brazil*; *Desinherited from society: street children in Latin America*; *The lost century : the historical roots of public policies on children in Brazil*; *Images of the child in Brazil : 19th and 20th centuries*, *Children and the law in Brazil- revisiting the History (1822-2000)*.