

Children in the Cities: Uninvited Participants?¹

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ABSTRACT This paper discusses the role of children and youth in the construction of city life. Institutionally, children and youth have been considered minor social actors, those to whom scarce participation is afforded in the planning, discussing and decision-making concerning changes and improvements of city life. However, children and youth have invariably affected urban environment, though their contribution is almost always unaccounted for. The purpose here is to examine children's and youth's understandings of the city, the way they make sense and make use of urban environment. What sites, locations, displacements and trajectories children and youth make in the city are analyzed in order to search for the nature and the modes of their social participation and social recognition vis-à-vis other social actors. Special attention is given to the nature of social bonds that children establish in contemporary cities, producing new forms of sociability, thereby contributing to city life beyond radical or simplistic understandings, be them conceived-as of a full and straightforward participation or of a straightforward marginalization.

INTRODUCTION

*Dear sirs,
I do like many of your projects of improvement of our neighbourhood, but I'm writing to you for another reason. For many years the people living in this area of town have expected a boat line between here and the beach. There isn't any condominium nearby that hasn't got such a boat line.*

The creation of a boat line between our area and the beach won't be damaging to the privacy of our neighbourhood, on the contrary, it will favour that young people get together more easily, as in our neighbourhood there is no point where young people can meet, except the green where only boys play football. I look forward to a response or a reason for not creating such a boat line.

*Yours
John*

Dear Dweller,

We were happy to receive your electronic message. Be sure that for us your opinion and your criticism and your suggestion are quite useful for the administration of our condominium and of our site. We'll make contact with you soon,

Yours,

The Administrative Staff

This short, but real-life interaction between a thirteen-year old and the administrative staff of a condominium in an area of Rio de Janeiro, anecdotally illustrates the main point that this paper discusses. What is the role of children and youth in contributing to the construction of city life? In what ways, though often unacknowledged, children and youth can participate and significantly reorient the directions of social interchange in an urban environment? The dialogue in epigraph is provocative concerning two main aspects of the argument: in the first place, children and youth are consistently aware of their age-interests and on that account act purposefully towards changing the social environment, negotiating with others – specially adults – to attain this goal. In the second place, the vague, laconic and rather evasive answer given to this youth above reflects the cultural ethos of benevolent dismissal of children's and youth's demands for an effective participation in the planning and decision-making of city life.

This study is part of an ampler research project titled "Cities, Consumption and Citizenship: Childhood and Youth in Contemporary Brazil"² which aims at examining the overall impact of urban growth and developments on the life of children and youth. As the latter hold specific social positions in the social structure, their perceptions and use of their urban environment reflects the specific stringencies of their social position. Therefore, contemporary urban experience

becomes constitutive of children's and youth's sense of identity, sense of social capacity and negotiation.

This research project is committed to an ethical and political understanding concerning children's and youth's participation in city life. Contemporary citizenship is not only learned from a formal apprehension of rights, duties and obligations rehearsed from schoolbooks, but also takes place in the minute and daily endeavours and practices that children and youth have in the urban environment together with other social actors. In this sense, children can effectively *learn* from their social daily practices the emotional punctuation with which they will seek to apply the rational endeavours of school work. Therefore, rights and obligations of citizenship can be acted out with disillusionment or with hope, with indifference or with deep-seated conviction.

Contemporary cities are "big machines", as Lewis Mumford (1961, [1982]) once reminded us of, calling attention to the *productive capacity of cities*. Following Mumford's inspiration, cities are regarded here as productive of contemporary subjectivities, insofar as they stand as the Other for subjective constitution. This means that cities can be a useful concept that accounts for the overall changes in contemporary urban environment shaping the ways that children and youth come to organize their social and emotional experience and construct one's sense of self and other. Such changes encompass, for instance, the increasingly prevalent technological aspect of human interaction that is concomitant with city life, the mediatization and informatization processes that affect human communication most effectively in urban environments, the reorganization of domestic practices due to women's labour outside home, the reorganizations of family structures, leisure consumption processes and so forth. These and other factors point to the vicissitudes that concern the process of separation and re-merging of public and private spheres in the past decades.

Children and youth's identifications, subjectivity and social action have been mainly considered in the light of the processes of familialization and school pedagogization, both of which have modelled a certain perspective and under-

standing of child and childhood, young people and youth. Contemporary transformations, such as media pedagogization, to mention just one, have problematized such models of understanding child and childhood. Family and school, as features of the institutionalized childhood of modern times, have been to some extent superseded by a gamut of newly configured experiences that children and youth are exposed to today. It is in this sense that we propose here to use the city as a starting notion for other late of the century conditions for subjective construction of children and youth.

Along this research project about 150 children were interviewed at different phases of the research. Children were interviewed individually or in small groups, and at each phase of the research different aspects of a child's or a youth's life in the city were investigated. The age range of subjects was from 7 to 17 years old. They came from different economic and cultural backgrounds, and this diversity was in fact searched for along the research project. What was aimed at was a broad base of case studies from which to discuss and problematize children's and youth's social action in the cities making it thereby possible to gain some understanding into the complexity of the specific situation of these social actors.

In the next sections of this paper children's and youth's perceptions, representations and use of urban spatiality were analyzed under a dominant socio-geographical polarity that characterizes children's sociabilities in the city: home and street.

HOME: THE SANCTUARY REVISITED

Children's and youth's trajectories, their mobility and the sites they go and use in the city offer a generally descriptive mapping of what kind of appropriation children make of the city. However, what remains missing in the emerging picture is the emotional and social resonance of the places and of the transit for children and youth. In this sense, *cityscapes* are constructed through social action and social encounters: as Simmel pointed out long ago (1908, [1971]) "spatial relations not only are determining conditions of relationship among men, but are also symbolic

of those relationships" (p.143). Following his line, which has been taken up by others lately (Lefebvre, 1974; Soja, 1993; Smith, 1992), it was possible for us to discriminate between two prevalent spatialities that bring forth disparagingly different social and emotional experiences as children and youth move about in the city: that of home and that of street.

Home is the very first and the foremost space from where children begin to establish their social bonds and to construct their social knowledge. Such bonds and knowledge are circumscribed within the family sphere: with father, mother and siblings. As a matter of fact, modern children have been institutionalised in homes (Qvortrup, 1996), and this means that certain social practices have become dominant moulding children's experience. In principle, at least, home has emblematically stood for the presence of family ties which are expected to exert a long-lasting effect on children. Thus, the spatiality of home symbolically represents the enduring quality of relationships, as well as the submission of children to such relationships which are imposed onto the child without any choice on his/her part. As such, there is an aspect of immobility and restriction concerning social relationships in the domestic arena, insofar as family figures remain constant through time and they cannot be chosen at one's will.

Homes have been generously depicted as the place of intimacy, dreams and emotional nourishment (Bachelard, 1989). The social imaginary has re-created homes as places detached from the de-personalizing surroundings, as places of shelter and protection. Social division of labour in modern times has privatized the spatiality of homes in that identity and recognition are constructed on the basis of kinship ties of the nuclear family. In the bosom of the family, the child learns who he/she is from the on-going interactions and identifications with primary figures, such as father and mother, as well as his/her social position of dependence before the adults. In the domestic sphere some allowance is admitted for the expression of the singleness of individuals.

The process of familialization of children in our century has brought about a deep-seated embeddedness of self in home. The sense of iden-

tity and self-recognition are woven in the spatiality of home, so that, one can argue, identities are primarily constituted as first-hand embodiments firmly seated and located, a process named *installation in the world* after Winnicott (1982) (see also, Cervini, 1998). Therefore, cultural and historical processes of modernity have articulated the spatialized element of homes with the constitution of social identities.

Recent socio-cultural conditions have changed the overall significance of homes as the prime spatiality from which identities are constituted. As already mentioned before, women's labour outside home, institutionalization of care in creches and nurseries, and mediatization processes of communication have exerted a deep impact on the constitution of subjectivities in contemporary times.

The analysis of children's interviews in this study showed a rather complex picture in the dynamics of self/other constitution. From this analysis we learnt that homes remain the prime spatialized locus of self constitution, as it retains – either effectively through past evocations, or through fantasies and wish-fulfillment – the quality of long-lasting and enduring relationships, the place where one comes into the world, as it were. Even for the most destitute children and youth of our group of interviewees, those whose knowledge of their life-histories revealed that they had never had "a" home – having been born on the streets, having had very tenuous contact with one's family of origin, and having moved from one place to another with practically no experience of continuity of care and education –, homes are referred to as the constituting place of identities: there is always a nostalgia for "a" home as a magical evocation of subjects against annihilation, non-existence and loss. For these children, social destitution resulted from a lack of a home, and not necessarily, shall I remark it, a lack of parents.

By the same token, everything that should have a long lasting permanence in children's lives, like for instance, the process of one's education – schooling – was associated with the possibility of having a home. For all the children who dropped out of school very early in their lives, the impossibility of resuming their school education was considered the result of not having a

fixed home.

The condition of home, being conceived as the constitutive spatiality for a social identity – subject to other's recognition –, is true for our group of interviewees. However, this is due less to the effective presence of parent figures, who are seldom evoked, than to the permanence of this spatiality which can guarantee an imaginary protection against the flux and the vertiginous mobility of the outside – the city itself.

Thus, home offers retraction from an agitated, unknown and often referred to dangerous social environment. On the other hand, by the sheer fact that it offers shelter and protection, refraining social action, it instigates one to overcome immobility. *Domestic immobility*, an aspect Canevacci (1997) pointed out, seems to be a foremost aspect of a kind of sociability in the city, representing the affirmative evasion from a transient, ephemeral and unknown *other* of the city.

Duties and obligations to be carried out at home, like studying, doing housework and helping to look after younger brothers and sisters, do not make home a place for fun or pleasure. There is an ambivalent feeling when interviewees refer to home as a pleasurable place, which it can be at times, but not always. At home one is usually by oneself. In this sense, the pleasure to be at home can be derived, mainly, from solitary habits, like watching TV, listening to music or playing videogame. Therefore, being at home conveys an existential emptiness, a spatiality where people and social contact are lacking, a deserted place of real people except through the media one-way communication. Not only are there just a few things to do, not to mention those dull and routine tasks like studying and housework, but also home lacks social and emotional relevance. Privacy does not correspond to intimacy anymore.

Contrarily, to be out (of home) is regarded as a promising place for social contact: people are out there. This certainly arouses feelings of curiosity and excitement, since to meet people signifies to be able to do a lot of things together. Therefore, to be out of home means to evade the solitude of domestic life and search for the opportunity for social contact and social participation. Solitude, dullness and immobility of home counterpose the swiftness, the excitement and

the effervescence of experience of outside in the city. The former represents dwindling opportunities for social contact and social knowledge; the latter, the excess of it.

If, on the one hand, children and youth still conceive of home as the spatialized support of a founding sense of self, on the other hand, home does not amount to such importance in the process of monitoring social relationships. In this study, home stands out as a social vacuum that allows, for its conditions of permanence, long-term projects (such as schooling). It also offers the in-between sheltering space/place among various activities outside home whereby the instrumentality of living is carried out, such as, eating, having a bath or resting. By and large, home lacks emotional and social relevance.

Discussing the new role of children as "homestayors", that is, the fact that recently children have taken possession of the house in the time when it is vacated by the adults, Solberg (1990) argues that the "homestay position" gives children a large amount of self-determination as well as determination over the dwelling. We agree on this point with her, once supervision by parents gets difficult and children and youth can exert control over their time, space and activities. Solberg is much more interested in pinpointing the consequences of the vacancy of home left specially by the mother, one of them being the negotiation of social age between parents and children. It is interesting, however, that in her study she observes that children prefer to spend their free time with their friends at home, as indoors they found plenty of opportunities for a variety of activities and equipment, like TVs, tape recorders and video games. "There is ample space to socialize freely with their friends", Solberg says (p. 132). Contrarily to Solberg's study, the present study shows that the amplitude of the spatiality of homes is not compensated with any human presence. Friends, in the Brazilian context, cannot be found inside homes, but in streets, outdoors. Therefore, socialization opportunities are mainly outdoors and not indoors. Maybe cultural differences between Norway and Brazil, determined by climate, historical conditions of constitution of private and public domains, ethnic constitution and so forth, can be evoked to explain differences in perspectives of

how children come to see the space of homes nowadays. Moreover, there is a difference in what is at stake. Here, the issue is to investigate social action and social identity from a socio-spatial perspective. In this sense, homes, though idealized in fantasy, and fictionalized as the landmark of self-constitution, remain the empty nest where solitude and emotional scarcity reign.

From the point of view of adults, children and youth (more the former than the latter) remain secluded in homes and in schools because, so it is held, the cities – or, the world at large – can be dangerous and inadequate for them. Therefore, children *should* remain privatized, and *should* remain excluded from larger social contact. The exclusion of children from city life feeds back into the belief that decision-making on city life concerns adults only, since cities are made *by* them, and consequently, *for* them!

Even though staying most of their time at home and at school, children and youth feel attracted to what goes on in the streets. Streets open up the world at large, luring both by the strangeness as well as by the excess that the city inspires. It is not an easy task to overcome domestic immobility. Children and youth are not allowed to circulate freely in the streets. Their most often trajectory is to come and go to school, and when a bit older, to circulate in the surroundings of home, or, to go to “safe” places like shopping malls and the church. Parental fears can hinder the learning of the complex social codes of city life so that children and youth become less likely to benefit from the diversity and the cosmopolitanism that cities can offer. The next section explores the vicissitudes of the going-out-of-home process and the sociabilities that are engendered thereby.

STREETS: FROM DIS-EMPOWERMENT AND WITHDRAWAL TO THE PERSONIFICATION OF DANGER

Streets represent the door to the world at large, to the diversity and the effervescence of experiences and stimuli that characterize city life. Differently from being in schools, for instance, when children and youth are kept in the same place over days and sometimes years, where postures, behaviours and activities are mostly

routinized, streets offer infinite possibilities of enjoying the flux and the changing atmosphere of our days. As such, streets can be at the same time scary for the unknown and unpredictable aspects that they contain, and both extremely attractive.

For children and youth going out of home represents symbolically the distancing from what is *familiar* – in the sense of the dual implication of such a term: belonging to a family, and coping with what is known. Streets demand a cosmopolitan *habitus*, and from the beginning of this century scholars, like Simmel (1903, [1971]), Benjamin (1989) and others more recently like, Meyrowitz (1985), Guattari (1993), Sarlo (1998), Canciani (1996), have spelled out the transformations of subjective constitution due to the new configuration of city life.

The use of streets by city dwellers has certainly changed along this century. Sennett (1988) argues that, as early as mid-XIXth century, the spatiality of streets came to constitute circulating paths for people in their carriages. In our century, city dwellers have gradually taken the role of passengers in buses and cars, looking through the windows fleeting images of the city, *voyeurs* of the scenery that is presented before their eyes. Late in this century, streets have become more a *passage* in dwellers' trajectories from one place to the other, than a *place* where one can meet other people. Consequently, it has been pointed out (Augé, 1994) that streets have ceased to be a forum for getting together and socializing, having been transformed into a “no-place” dis-invested of historically memorable landmarks.

For the children and youth of our study streets pose the intricate problem of how to relate to somebody who is not known. The *stranger* becomes the prominent figure in the anonymity of city life towards whom both kinship rules of social relationship, or universalistic values of respect and civility towards the other fail to be of much value in view of the overall transformations concerning the nature of social bonds in our globalized world (see for instance, Maffesoli, 1987, 1997; Baudrillard, 1993; Santos, 1996).³ Streets are the arena of the stranger who is not only unknown, but is felt as basically menacing.

The analysis of our interviews points at the dominant theme of *danger*. Streets are, above

all, dangerous because they shelter unknown people. The inaccessible other is construed as dangerous. Danger results from the ambiguity of the unknown other, one who is feared but whose strangeness becomes attractive. For children, dangerous aspects of the stranger are also reinforced by parents, as a sort of protective mechanism to refrain children to overcome domestic immobility. Parents frequently admonish children and youth about the consequences of staying out in the streets, of going to unknown places, of desiring too much what is out there. Children's and youth's reactions tend to be two-fold: at a behavioral level, they can disobey parents and face the risks of confronting bad consequences for one's actions; at a cognitive level, even if they transgress parents' rules, they fail to change cognitions accordingly, and continue to hold the same views as those of parents' – that streets are dangerous, and one must avoid them. Therefore, transgressive behaviour does not imply necessarily, and at first hand, a novel way of regarding city life, the world outside home.

Different sociabilities can be observed in children's and youth's process of overcoming domestic immobility. In a previous study (Castro, 1998) it has been found that this is a gendered process, since girls: i) are the ones mostly affected by parents' negative evaluation of what streets can offer; ii) are prone to show a wholesome adhesion to domestic values; and iii) still tend to regard the streets, and the public domain, as part of man's entitlements. By and large, though not observable only for the girls' population, children and youth demonstrate diffidence in overcoming domestic immobility to face the streets and conquer the city. Therefore, dis-empowerment and withdrawal are common attitudes specially among younger children who *consider they do not have a right over of the city*. The city is regarded as part of the adult's world.

Withdrawal from the street tends to reinforce negative evaluations about social contact outside home. For instance, girls talk about the 'bad fame' of staying too much in the streets, and attracting, thus, the company of those with a bad fame. Staying in the streets can bring all sorts of trouble, like being teased and abused by men, beggars and thieves. In fact, the street turns out to be a no man's land where one cannot fore-

see and prepare oneself for the social encounters one is likely to face. Having lost the quality of a relatively safe place to be, the streets become devoid of any contractual sociability – no norms or rules are supposed to exist.

The intensity of the "withdrawal sociability" depends surely on other factors: one is gender, and the other, social class. Socially and economically disadvantaged children and youth are pushed into the streets to earn money, or to free themselves from a perverse home atmosphere. To earn money on streets is, nevertheless, also regarded as a risky business subject to many pressures, one of them being the extortion and ill-treatment by corrupt policemen. For some children, to face the risks of living on streets becomes certainly a conquest, even though it also means the recognition of familial abandonment which entails self-devaluation.

The picture that emerges from the analysis of our interviews is that the most pervasive sociability of children and youth in the process of conquering the city, of overcoming domestic immobility and de-mistifying city danger is *peer alliance*. One can explore the city and face the dangers of streets if one is together with friends who are the best antidote against unforeseen events that can befall one. With friends children and youth feel confident to move more freely to unknown places, to make new acquaintances, to experiment with situations and even to calm down parents that they will be all right. Peer alliance involves basically sociability among children and youth alone, but implies to some extent social contact with adults, when, for instance, asking for help. To search for help from adults becomes easier when children are together than when they are by themselves. As danger haunts adult figures, peer company makes children more confident about facing the eventful city life.

Together, children and youth also feel confident enough to defy adult figures producing novel forms of sociability. By being provocative, in a verbal way,⁴ kidding or mocking at passers-by, when on streets and on buses coming from or going to school, children and youth seek to arouse in adults some form of social recognition. Kidding, teasing and mocking at adults, specially, or even at other peers, *always* takes place when together with other youth and

children, and seems an important form of being in streets: by catching other people's eyes, getting noticed and sometimes being rebuked for such a behaviour. Barred from more institutional forms of social acknowledgement, invested with social invisibility and condescending dismissal, children and youth opt out of conventional social codes of self-presentation and social rapport. Instead, they demonstrate a sort of abusive form of social contact that certainly secures conspicuousness and stands for a countervailing force in the dynamics of social interchange between children, youth and adults in the city.

In line with the previous findings, so can one understand children's and youth's graffiti. From the point of view of adult dwellers, graffiti dirties city walls, and therefore should be banished. From the point of view of youth, "to dirt city walls with graffiti means, ultimately, to put one's marks in a nice place, and the higher and the more visible, the better". Thus, by planting one's marks as conspicuously as possible, where no one expects them to be, children and youth defy the culturally arranged patterns of social use and appropriation of the public space – the streets and the city, overcoming the confinement to certain localities, such as the home and the school (Castro, 1999).

Last, but not the least, our analysis shows that children's and youth's sociability in streets takes the form of personifying danger itself. To counteract danger, one becomes dangerous himself. To overcome the fear of being hurt and ill-treated, one hurts and ill-treats the other. The upsurge in violent behaviour among children and youth in streets and in the city at large, can be interpreted within such a context that of a retaliation of an imaginary aggressive treatment in order to feel confident, powerful and safe. To some youth who had been incriminated because of criminal offenses the question whether they felt un-safe in streets, or whether they feared anything, was posed. These youth answered that they were not afraid of anything because they were the danger themselves. Others who belonged to gangs of martial arts (which have become specialized fights, having nothing to do with arts) derive pleasure from inspiring fear in younger ones, old people and women. Very of-

ten they take fierce dogs, like pit-bulls, around with them in the streets. Thus, such a novel form of 'sociability' in the streets takes the stranger as an enemy, displacing social links, and discouraging any form of social empathy and social identification with the other. The stranger stands invariably on the threshold of being considered the worst enemy, and on that account likely to be eliminated.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

To be able to move around in town means to know and to master complex codes of cosmopolitan *habitus* allowing one to orientate oneself, to act and establish social contact. The city offers diversity, and as the epicentre of exchange processes of the consumer culture, the city demands from youth and children to differentiate from one's original ties. Home is not the same anymore. It is not the place for familiarity or affection. It has been turned into a mixture made out of loneliness, obligations and emotional scarcity. Where to go? Certainly in the streets which seduce for their effervescent, varied and intense life.

Children and youth establish different sociabilities in the streets. These sociabilities centre round the category of danger that seems emblematic of life in the streets. Children's and youth's sociabilities in the streets are produced in the process of dealing with danger. "City islands" are constructed where children and youth's seclusion and invisibility is guaranteed: home, the school and lately, the shopping malls. However, children's and youth's presence is insidiously guaranteed in the city: it is mainly through counterposing current and normative social practices that children and youth make themselves socially acknowledged and visible. To children and youth who do not feel legitimately empowered to act in and over the city, opting out of contractual sociability seems one way to conquer the city.

To become a citizen – a member of the city with prerogatives and duties – one should be able to act out citizenship from one's early days, since childhood. The city with its complex interweaving of social and physical elements would then reflect, like a mirror, its owners and its builders, and children and youth would possibly

recognize themselves as true actors in and of the city.

NOTES

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2. This research project is supported by the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development) in Brazil.
3. It is not our intention here to deal in more details with the consequences of the de-traditionalizing processes in the Brazilian context. For such, see Duarte (1992; 1996).
4. The interviewees used the slang term *zoar* in Portuguese.
5. An excerpt from one of the interviews.

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