Youth Gang Members in Rio de Janeiro: The Face of a ‘Lost Generation’ in an Age of Fear and Mistrust

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This article analyses the relationship between stigmatisation, violence and marginality, and its limits to social justice and citizenship. It involves a critical reflection on the way groups living in ‘a social and symbolical shade’ are represented and treated by governments and their institutions, and the way such practices reinforce a cycle of socio-symbolical marginality and the limits to life in the city. The article will explore the findings of a research within drug gangs in which I have been involved (Observatório de Favelas, 2006; Silva et al., 2009 and, Silva and Urani, 2002), and my own research on violence, urban marginality and stigmatisation (Fernandes, 2009, 2012).

Keywords: drug gangs, favelas, stigmatisation, urban marginality, violence, youth.

Urban contemporary societies have experienced crucial transformations over recent decades. A neoliberal agenda has been interfering with socio-spatial arrangements having a direct impact on the symbolic and social place of the most vulnerable and stigmatised groups, who are even more excluded in a structural perverse cycle of poverty and marginalisation. In this scenario, states have addressed this by using increasingly punitive measures to manage those groups identified by Bauman (2004) as the rejected result of the market society (the ‘wasted lives’), reflecting the growing criminalisation of the poor (Wacquant, 2003), the militarisation of urban marginality (Wacquant, 2003, 2008; Souza, 2006, 2008) and the emergence of a ‘penal state’.

The production of a ‘penal state’ as described by Wacquant (2001b) is a central aspect of the socio-political and symbolic condition of those living in the most marginalised communities in Brazilian urban centres. The criminalisation of the poor is a historical response from the state to social problems in Brazil. The implementation of a neoliberal agenda in Brazil during the 1990s, however, increased levels of inequality and social instability that led to a new set of strategies of socio-spatial control and contention (Fernandes, 2009). In this context, Wacquant (2001b) describes a shift taking place in advanced societies where a penal-state is substituted for a welfare-state in the treatment of poverty. Wacquant understands that the police, the criminal justice system and the
Youth Gang Members in Rio de Janeiro

prisons constitute the basis of a system created to manage contemporary marginality under the neoliberal agenda:

neoliberal penalty is more seductive as well as noxious when it seeps into countries traversed by deep inequalities of social condition and life chances, shorn of democratic traditions, and devoid of the public institutions capable of cushioning the shocks unleashed by the concurrent transformations of work, social bonds and self on the threshold of the new century. (Wacquant, 2008: 57)

Although Brazil is increasingly recognised as a global power—being listed as the sixth largest economy in the world (The Guardian, 2011) – extreme social and economic inequalities persist in its society. The response of the Brazilian state to urban marginality is based on an unbalanced distribution of wealth and the symbolic devaluation of stigmatised groups, such as residents of the favelas, black people, street children, the homeless and the landless.

The ‘Lost Generation’

The problem involving drug gangs and their impact on life in favelas and in the city as a whole has been constantly associated by the media with urban violence. However, the media approach has been built in a simplistic way without considering the wider criminal network involved in drug trafficking (Ramos, 2005; Ramos and Paiva, 2007). Furthermore, the focus on favela gangs and their members as being the main face of drug trafficking activity is part of a problem that associates favelas with crime and, more specifically, young people from favelas with drug trafficking. In this way, there is a disseminated social representation of favelas and youngsters from favelas as the image of crime, violence and fear in the city (Fernandes, 2005). Representations associating favelas, young people and violence have been largely used as part of a reactionary discourse, based on the criminalisation of the poor and the militarisation of public security (Souza, 2008). It has sustained a model of socio-spatial development in the city based on social fear, mistrust and socio-symbolical and spatial avoidance associated with strong indifference and denial against those considered a threat to urban life. Such transformations involve the rapid increase of gated communities and the adoption of new habits based on the idea of security and social cleansing as part of the re-establishing urban order. Consequently, the increment of socio-spatial inequalities and the creation of physical and symbolical barriers that increase urban fragmentation can be observed (Marcuse, 1997a, 1997b; Caldeira, 1996, 2002; Souza, 2000, 2008).

As the main target of the ‘penal state’ policies, youngsters involved in drug gangs are widely labelled as criminal or dangerous. This highlights the negative aspects of life in favelas, reinforcing stereotypes associated with criminality. Furthermore, most of their individual histories and life difficulties as well as the social processes that led to their situation are hidden as part of a systematic process of criminalisation and denial that spreads the image of evil present in mass media discourse. This discourse feeds the ‘talk of crime’ (Caldeira, 2002) across the city and, thus, increases feelings of fear and mistrust. Such images result in a mix of social representations, personal feelings and resignation and are part of a historical process of socio-spatial control and enclosure of those groups considered undesirable and worthless in a society with strong roots in the culture of slavery, oppression and social exploitation. Placed in a social
shade, these youngsters are subtly considered a ‘lost generation’ by the media and most reactionary groups. This situation results in their non-recognition as part of the city and, consequently, the feeling that they should not be part of or participate in city life. Their symbolical devaluation involves a systematic depreciation and criminalisation of their culture, lifestyle and habits. Furthermore, the term ‘lost generation’ can be understood in the same sense that Wacquant (2001a) describes ‘urban outcasts’ in the advanced societies, and also Bauman (2004) when he considers the ‘wasted humans’ in modern society. Living under violence, discrimination and a lack of hope, such human beings are actually ‘the “excessive” and “redundant”, that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognised or allowed to stay’ (Bauman, 2004: 5).

The Context of Drug Gangs in Rio

The engagement of youngsters in drug gangs in Brazil reflects the relation between the rise of new forms of social marginality and a gap in social security for the poor youth (Fernandes, 2009). Drug gangs in Rio are part of a network of criminal armed groups that control urban settlements that have challenged an historical lack of authority and sovereignty of the state (Fernandes, Silva, and Willadino, 2008). Drug trafficking gangs in Rio are divided into three main groups (or commands) that fight over the drug market and territories: Comando Vermelho (Red Command), Terceiro Comando (Third Command) and Amigo dos Amigos (Friend of Friends) (Amorim, 2003). These groups have a great influence among youngsters because of the strong rivalry and forms of power, prestige and social recognition that they represent among peers and inside the communities. The basis of the gangs’ power is territorial domain through the use of armed force. Despite being located in favelas, these groups represent the local (and fragile) point of an extensive network with international connections that represent drug trafficking (Souza, 1994, 1996).

The presence of youngsters in gangs is a phenomenon observable worldwide (Dowdney, 2003; Klein, 2005; Zdun, 2008). It is understood that gangs represent a space for identity and social recognition in contexts where youngsters are almost socially invisible. This may also be a way to reinforce competition, differences and disputes arising from different causes, not necessarily linked to crime (despite reproducing crime), such as disagreement among football supporters (Deuchar and Holligan, 2010). Gangs may also represent an opportunity to earn money in response to poverty, but they also potentially allow access to consumption and a globalised consumer-oriented society. Youngsters want to sustain their image through fashionable apparel and goods that appeal to the global youth market.

In Brazil, the engagement of youngsters in gangs is a phenomenon associated with the socio-economic and political transformations that occurred during the 1990s (Cruz Neto, Moreira, and Sucena, 2001) and is linked to the collapse of family and community ties and the incapacity of public institutions (such as schools) to promote social capital and self-esteem (Zaluar, 2004). Moreover, the rise of neoliberal policies has increased institutional fragility and individualism. The lack of opportunities for youth has increased their involvement in some circuits of the informal economy and illegality. The informal economy has become the main destination of the new labour force and, at the same time, illegal activities have become an attractive field for easy money. Furthermore, as the boundaries between legal and illegal are unclear, those
Youth Gang Members in Rio de Janeiro

youngsters circulate with relative facility in both. Usually, an individual’s moral sense defines the barriers between right and wrong.

The lack of opportunities is more dramatic for those who are part of groups with low educational and social capital and high levels of stigmatisation, in particular, for young people living in favelas that are associated with violent crime. At the same time, the development of youth-oriented policies with respect to ‘social risk’ (Sposito and Carrano, 2003) and the profusion of social projects to prevent violence among poor youngsters reveals the recognition of their vulnerability in Brazilian society. It has been suggested, however, that making the young urban poor the focus for policies of social control and spatial enclosure has also served to keep this ‘lost generation’ confined to favelas (Fernandes, 2009, 2012). In other words, as Bauman (2009) suggests, these outcasts are no longer identified as ‘educable’ or ‘rehabilitated’; on the contrary, they are not suitable to be ‘socially recycled’ and thus, they are individuals that must be obstructed and kept away from mainstream society.

The management of these residual groups raises a debate about the meaning of ‘bio-power’ (Foucault, 2008: 12) in the neoliberal city, particularly in terms of the condition of being undesirable and unwelcome. Here, the production of ‘spaces of embarrassment’ (Fernandes, 2009: 217) is an expression regarding this process of making marginalised young people feel embarrassed. Thus the creation is evident of socio-symbolical barriers and practices that subtly prevent the presence of stigmatised youngsters in certain areas of the city—in particular, where their image as dangerous criminals is strong, as is the case of middle-class neighbourhoods. In addition to this there is a range of social projects addressed to keep the threat under control.

This is the socio-political context in which the gang phenomenon arises in Rio de Janeiro, a city where, during the 1990s, an impressive number of youngsters joined drug gangs. In an age of conflict for territorial dominance among the gangs, the death of the most experienced gang leaders allowed youngsters to gradually take relevant positions in the gangs’ hierarchy (Dowdney, 2003; Silva et al., 2009). The presence of new and youth members in relevant positions increased the tension and internal disputes in the gangs. Some studies have identified a singular behaviour linked to a male youth subculture as part of this phenomenon. As Zaluar (1994: 20) indicates, those youngsters have what she called a ‘disposition to kill’, reflecting machismo and brutality among drug gang members in Rio. In this case, the fact they are younger would make them more audacious and without a clear perception of the dangers involved in their violent lifestyle. Alongside this, the lack of community ties and institutional references (family, religion and law) has reinforced the use of violence as a resource for social affirmation and justice.

The growing violence among gangs has brought out public concerns about the threat those groups pose for public security (Souza, 1996, 2008). Television and the press daily expose scenarios of brutal violence such as burned bodies and mutilated heads, as well as burned vehicles in public roads and shootings. Such images have spread public panic in the city, particularly among the middle classes, who want tougher responses from the government.

The rise of violence in the city during the 1990s, and its representation by the media has produced very conservative reactions in defence of urgent action in order to stop the wave of insecurity and fear (Souza, 2008). Some of these reactions were strongly addressed to empower the police and to increase police capacity to confront crime through investments in armament rather than in violence prevention strategies. For instance, between 1995 and 2005, expenditure on public security was raised by 260 percent in Brazil, and 383 percent just in Rio de Janeiro state (O Estado de São
Paulo, 2007). Furthermore, the police have adopted tough strategies, such as the use of special armoured vehicles called Caveirão (big skull). Such strategies have reflected directly on the enforcement of the militarisation of public security, including the use of the Brazilian army to support some police operations in favelas. The media and some politicians have contributed to spreading the idea that tough reactions were necessary. However, the main consequence was the increase in violence across the city. The state has been accused of using violent measures, including abuse of and disrespect to human rights, which were subtly supported in the name of the ‘public security’ of the ‘good citizens’ in a kind of ‘state of exception’ (Agamben, 2004).

The war against drug trafficking became a new war against the favelas and reproduced the historical rejection of favelas in the city (Fernandes, 2005). Moreover, the image of the poor youngsters has turned into an image of fear and mistrust in the city. They were widely identified with the young gang members without discrimination. It started a war not only against the drug dealers, but against everyone who was considered to represent them. Thus, for those who were involved in drug gangs, there has been a subtle feeling that they should die or at least suffer the toughest consequences of being a criminal. The Brazilian penal system is a clear example of this. Inhumane conditions, violence and severe overcrowding are aspects of life in the prisons (Human Rights Watch, 2011) that have been neglected by Brazilian authorities as well as the wider Brazilian society.

Prejudice against and stigmatisation of youngsters involved in drug gangs have put them in a social shade of invisibility and indifference. Thus, even those with some desire to leave the gang context, it is difficult to obtain social recognition despite the support coming from community organisations as we found during the Escape Routes project (Fernandes and Rodriguez, 2009). The level of stigmatisation is a great barrier for a ex-drug traffickers to overcome completely (Rodriguez, 2011).

Some studies have been developed as part of an effort to better understand that reality, as well as to identify the aspects that could contribute to the creation of alternatives for these youngsters. Among these studies, there is the pioneer anthropological study of Zaluar (1994), carried out during the 1980s in the favela City of God, located in the west area of Rio de Janeiro city. Dowdney (2003) and Silva and Urani (2002) were part of the initiative of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international cooperation agencies to influence public policies. New studies followed this path, most notably Cruz Neto et al. (2001), Observatório de Favelas (2006), Silva et al. (2009), Fernandes and Rodriguez (2009), Ramos (2009), and the polemic video-documentary Falcão, meninos do tráfico (‘Falcon, Boys of Traffic,’ 2007) produced by the rapper MV Bill and followed by two books (Soares et al., 2005; Bill and Athayde, 2009).

The Data

The data presented here refer to the research carried out by the NGO Observatório de Favelas between 2004 and 2006 (Observatório de Favelas, 2006; Silva et al., 2009). The research was part of the Escape Routes Programme, which ran between 2004 and 2006. Altogether, a total of 230 youngsters were interviewed who were directly involved in drug trafficking activities at the time of the study. The research involved 34 locations dominated by three criminal factions or commands. The main aim of the research was to produce a comprehensive analysis of the characteristics of the actors involved in drug trafficking in Rio de Janeiro, as well as looking at how this network had been
Youth Gang Members in Rio de Janeiro

progressing over previous years. This research was expected to provide information for the development of methodologies to prevent the involvement of children and youngsters with drug trafficking, as well as to create alternatives for those who wanted to come out of the trafficking.

The challenge proposed by the aims of the research demanded a methodology able to access information directly from the youth gangsters. Thus, a very important issue regarding the research methodology was how to reach young gangsters performing illegal activities. This was of great ethical concern, particularly because of the criminal nature of the activity. It was necessary to preserve the interviewee's identity but it was also necessary to assure the safety of the interviewer. The nature of the research demanded a great level of confidence between the interviewee and interviewer, which involved verbal consent instead of any kind of document that could produce mistrust. The strategy was to create a research field team composed of people who had previously been involved in drug trafficking. The research team believed these interviewers would be able to deal with interviewees using similar codes and language in order to produce a trust relationship. The research field team was also selected according to their capacity to access specific criminal networks by location and drug traffic command.

As Observatório de Favelas had a strong reputation among community organisations and favela residents, it was relatively easy to access ex-gang members. Through its network in several favelas in Rio, Observatório de Favelas managed to contact people who were previously involved with drug trafficking who manifested an interest in collaborating with the people undertaking the study. Some of them had participated in previous research in 2001 (Urani and Silva, 2002) and others had been involved in social projects. The research field team received training in research methods as well as information about ethical posture in the field as well as how to deal with situations such as sudden shootings, mistrust and questioning. Besides the main research team, other researchers and professionals were invited to offer training activities. The field research team was also systematically consulted about their own views on the field approach, based on their lived experiences as members of a drug gang.

Research participants were identified and contacted randomly. The access was directly linked to field workers' capacity to reach them through friendship and confidence built during their gang times. However, it was planned that the sample should cover the three 'commands' as well as all geographical areas of the city.

The research in the field took place between April 2004 and May 2006. During this period, 230 questionnaires were completed with a total of 92 questions involving a wide range of information. Questions tackled factors that made them join the trafficking, as well as what life is like as a drug trafficker and what they expected for their future. Moreover, the field team also applied a monthly shorter questionnaire for a period of six months. This instrument asked questions about life on a daily basis, such as the number of confrontations and personal incidents (such as paternity, death of a relative). The idea was to create a panorama of day-to-day life in a drug gang. By the end, some selected participants were invited for an in-depth qualitative interview involving a set of open questions about their life experiences, expectations and dilemmas.

In this article, selected data are presented to discuss the experience of violence lived by youngsters involved in gangs. Through this information, it is expected that an analysis of the role of stigma and social representations for their urban life experiences will develop. It is understood that stigma and social representations incorporated by the police and by the youngsters contribute to the reinforcement of violence cycles as well as reducing the chances of disruption to gang life.
Who Are the Youngsters Involved in Drug Gangs?

The research involved a group of 230 youngsters from 11 to 24 years old. Most of them (85.7 percent) were concentrated in the range of 15 to 19 years old. It is possible to say that this sample roughly represents the age distribution of youngsters involved in drug trafficking gangs in Rio de Janeiro, as suggested in other studies (Silva and Urani, 2002; Dowdney, 2003). This aspect also refers to their ethnicity and gender. A total of 63 percent of the interviewees had an Afro-Brazilian background and 97.4 percent were males, and 60 percent of the youngsters came from families with an average monthly income of three minimum wages (about US$300.00).

The number of family members is another relevant factor once it contributes to the economic power reduction and the potential engagement of children in labour activities in order to support economic demands. The family structure is complex, involving a significant number of members living under the same shelter. A total of 47.7 percent of the interviewees declared that they have more than three siblings. These siblings most of the time had different fathers. This is why a notable number of interviewees (37.4 percent) described the role of the mother in their upbringing and the absence of their fathers in this process. An interesting aspect of this situation is the reproduction of this cycle among these youngsters. Almost one-third of the youngsters had at least one child. However, it was possible to establish that 13 percent of them did not live with their children.

Regarding education, only 7 percent of the 230 interviewees declared that they were currently studying. Almost half of the interviewees (46 percent) abandoned school between the ages of 11 and 14 years old. This is interesting because most of those who joined a drug trafficking gang did so between the ages of 12 and 15 years old. This data suggests that there is a connection between the age range and transformations that persuade youngsters to begin a life in criminal networks. This age range must be the target of public policies and new investigations in order to gain more knowledge about the factors that interfere in this process. Most of the interviewees (61 percent) had some work experience in their previous life before the gang, so it is important to understand the cycles of poverty and social vulnerability that surround these youngsters. They live in a socio-economic context that has clear barriers for social and economic capital improvement.

The Experience of Violence

‘The Police are powerful’. Declaration made by a youngster who suffered a series of abuse from the Police in Favela da Maré (Fernandes, 2009, 414).

Young gang members experience many violent contexts in the course of their lives. The majority of these experiences are regarding community violence. This refers to a group of violent situations that occur in the community environment and are strongly associated with the life of the community. In stigmatised communities, violence might play a dramatic role. The absence of state regulation associated with a weak bond of primary sociability contributes to an environment of conflict and a lack of agents and institutions that enable conflict resolution and mediation. Moreover, the use of violent practices may be understood as a way to deal with conflict. In this context, communities have developed a kind of social regulation based on singular aspects of the local culture and values that frequently overtakes the state regulation.

Furthermore, there is a space for groups as well as individuals that take advantage of the absence of state regulations. These groups have been exploiting opportunities in
Youth Gang Members in Rio de Janeiro

the informal economy and illegal activities, as is the case with drug gangs. In order to create the socio-political conditions for their activities, they have created a parallel state that configures a strong threat to democracy and state sovereignty (Leeds, 1996). In this process it is also important to highlight the rise of militias in favelas. Such criminal groups are mainly composed of ex-police officers (most expelled for involvement in illegal activities), but involve a complex network of politicians and local businessmen. The militia phenomena is explored in detail by Alves (2008) and Cano and Loot (2008).

Drug gangs use firearms to produce their social order, but they also adopt other strategies to produce a stable environment inside the favelas. A good relationship with the community is the basis of criminal groups’ power and authority, yet this good relationship does not mean that people accept the rules easily or that they are convinced they are the best for them. Actually, people recognise criminal groups as a local power and local authority. Thus, in spite of the violence adopted as part of the social ordination, local people understand that accepting crime rules is the best way to keep them in relative security (Leite and Oliveira, 2005). Through the adoption of this strategy, people in favelas believe they are less vulnerable to the risks of gang violence. However, by accepting this, they also know that everybody is subject to some kind of informal criminal justice rules. In this way, it is possible to see that some problems are relatively solved, such as robberies. People are confident to say that inside the favela there is no robbery, no rapes. These criminal activities are strongly reprehended by the criminal groups, and thieves and rapists are subject to severe punishments that can include aggression, banishment from the community or even death.

This universe of parallel rules and social order creates a widely understood message that violence is part of the life in the favela. This phenomenon has been observed by Anderson (1990) as part of a street culture, in which people deal with conflicts following their own values and norms. Thus, violence can be applied as a strategy of education as seen in the cases of domestic violence and the recognition that parents are allowed to perform physical punishment against their children when necessary. As the research reveals, an express number of the youngsters interviewed have experienced some kind of violence either at home, in the community or outside the community.

These experiences of violence also include the community’s view of the police officers. They are identified as external violent agents as well as enemies. This vision is justified on account of the many instances of abuse and violence on the part of the police in favelas. As demonstrated in several studies (Cano, 1997; Leite and Oliveira, 2005; Ramos and Musumeci, 2005; Silva and Leite, 2007; Fernandes, 2009), police officers sustain their action in the general sense by taking ‘justice into their own hands’. They also reproduce the wider society’s reactions to violence, being more violent against those widely identified as a threat and being worthless. In addition, the police reproduce historical processes of class domination, being an apparatus of state control and having elite dominance in a very unequal society (Bretas, 1997; Cano and Santos, 2001).

The research reveals that youngsters are subject to a range of illegal procedures from the police, such as extortion, kidnap and public humiliation. These negative experiences regarding who should look after their rights lead to a mistrust of the state and the police. Because of this, there is a sense that it is better to put confidence in the criminals instead of the police, because the criminals are violent agents that they can negotiate with. This fact contributes to the reinforcement of the criminalisation of the poor and the belief that local people support crime. Most of the interpretations regarding this idea sustain the view that the poor take advantage of the illegal and irregular activities despite the violence of the criminals. The absence of state regulation has allowed a situation where
people might not pay taxes and public services (water, sewage, electricity). In favelas, people can also have access to illegal cable TV and internet services, paying less than the regular, formal services offered in the city. These conditions have been used as part of an argument that does not accept the fact that some people pay high taxes and service charges while other groups do not pay them. Therefore, this social representation pushes the state reaction in order to fight against crime through the use of all necessary resources. In this way, supported by their own view about the favelas’ residents and the view of a feared society, the state feels that it is allowed to reproduce an environment of a ‘state of exception’ (Agamben, 2004), with explicit or subtle reduction of civil rights and a disrespect for human rights. As a result, in the name of order and public security, favela residents suffer the consequences of deliberate violence and indifference performed particularly by the police. It looks as though the interventions are addressed to keep people outside the favelas safe while everybody in the favelas must suffer the consequences of the policing operations. In this way, as favela residents are considered as second-class citizens, there is no concern about their security and well-being during the confrontations. This increased indifference is shown through the lack of interest when someone living in a favela dies as a result of a confrontation.

This is the scenario that describes the situation of youngsters involved in criminal activity. The high number of armed confrontations means that they are very frequently exposed to death. In the research, probably the most significant information regards the high homicide rate among youth gang members involved in drug trafficking. After two years of research, 45 out of 230 interviewees had died. A total of 29 out of the 45 confirmed deaths had been caused by police officers, which demonstrates the high level of violence used in police approaches.

This aspect directs attention regarding the potential influence of stigma and prejudice among police officers, because they might reproduce the general idea that those youngsters are a threat that must be eliminated. Thus, under wider support from conservative and reactionary discourses, the police have been promoting a massacre in favelas that results not only in the death of people involved in criminal activities, but also the death of ordinary people that in their view may represent some threat or danger. In this case, the most vulnerable group is poor (particularly black) youngsters living in favelas.

Internal conflicts within the gangs or conflicts among gangs are another major cause of death. A total of eleven deaths were reported, which reveals the strong conflicts existing in gang life and the risks, even among peers. As the qualitative interviews revealed, there is a lot of mistrust in the gangs. Youngsters are afraid of peer betrayal for a number of reasons, such as envy and disputes over internal power or even a girl. A total of 53.5 percent of interviewees have had at least one confrontation with rival gangs during the research, and almost half of those who declared some confrontation had five or more in the period of the research. Inside the group, some unapproved behaviour has resulted in punishments applied by peers. This situation was mentioned by a high number of interviewees. While 22 percent have suffered some punishment, another 34 percent have applied some punishment to their peers.

The violence suffered from the police is evidently a significant aspect of gang life. Some data demonstrates that the police do not perform their attributions fairly, as, for instance, 53 percent of the interviewees have declared that they were arrested at least once by the police. However, the number of gang members who were taken to the police station was lower. Only 28.3 percent declared that all procedures were fulfilled after arrest, which includes being taken to prison or some alternative punishment. It
Youth Gang Members in Rio de Janeiro

reinforces the claims that police officers accept bribes for freedom after arrests. In this research, 54.3 percent of gang members said they had paid a bribe to police officers at least once.

Here, it is important to highlight that violence against youngsters is also reflected in violence against police officers. These officers are exposed to extreme violence and they are also vulnerable in this context. During the period of this research, a total of 103 police officers died in official confrontations across the state of Rio de Janeiro. There are also a significant number of deaths outside official activities. In 2006 for instance, only 19 percent of police officer deaths were during work hours (CESeC, 2010). It reveals the level of exposition of police officers in Brazil. They are in a vulnerable position that may lead to more violence as a way to be safer. Furthermore, the high risks, the fear and self-protection reactions are part of a set of factors that contribute to the police violence in Rio. Police officers have their own understanding of violence in the city, and this tends to incorporate the idea that they can take justice into their own hands. The high level of social revolt and prejudice enhances the level of external pressure to which those professionals are exposed. Here the tension between the state agent and the human person is evident and it is observable in the relationship between the necessary respectful approach and the feeling of revenge among police officers. Moreover, this situation reveals the antagonistic social and symbolic place of the police officers in Rio, while they themselves are in a very precarious situation: under extreme stress, underpaid, under-qualified, over-loaded with work and over-exposed to the risk of harm and death (Souza and Minayo, 2005; Minayo, Sousa, and Constantino, 2007; Andrade, Sousa and Minayo, 2009).

The broad social representation of the police as an unreliable and corrupt institution contributes to a negative image of the police officers, who are constantly accused of being partners of criminals or even criminals themselves, as can be observed in the growing groups of militia composed in the majority of current and former police officers (Alves, 2008). In addition, there is a split between the idea of ‘police’ and ‘human rights’. On the one hand, police officers are constantly accused by human rights organisations of abuse. On the other hand, the police complain about the great concern of these organisations about criminal deaths while police officer deaths remain in the shadows. The argument sustained by human rights organisations is that the police must respect human rights because they represent the state and society’s interests. Thus, the higher number of criminal (and supposed criminal) deaths puts in focus the public image of the police as an ‘exterminator institution’. A study carried out by Cano (1997), for instance, has revealed that a high number of deaths caused by the police came about through shots in the back and in the head, which demonstrates the intention to kill instead of to immobilise the offender (or suspect). In addition, a huge number of homicides in Brazil are not investigated, which means that these practices are not eradicated. In Rio, for instance, just 3.6 percent of homicides are judged (Misse, 2010). In the end, there is the public opinion that supports police violence against the poor as a result of a distorted view of its role in society, resulting in the sense that the police are allowed to kill and to take justice into their own hands.

Expectations for the Future: Building New Routes

The life experience of youth gang members in Rio de Janeiro reflects aspects of a complex society marked by deep inequalities and strong socio-spatial differences. It also
reflects the weakness of the Brazilian state in some territories, particularly regarding its authority and sovereignty in favelas.

The situation regarding youth drug gang members has worsened because of strong socio-spatial and cultural stigmatisation of favelas and their inhabitants. They suffer a triple stigma driven by where they live, their ethnicity, age and gender and their association with social representations about crime that enhance social fear and conservative reactions.

Despite Brazil’s strong position in the global economy it is clear that socio-spatial inequalities are a challenge in Brazilian society. However, social justice in the most marginalised and stigmatised neighbourhoods also demands a drastic reduction of violence and violation of human rights as part of an agenda for socio-spatial development. As this article tried to show, there is a need to reflect upon the role of stigmatisation and violence on the reinforcement of social injustice and, additionally, the cycles of poverty and socio-symbolic marginality among the most vulnerable groups. The development of a penal state in Brazil has been producing a fragmented society composed of walls and fences. The ‘lost generation’ view of youngsters from favelas has exacerbated this scenario because, instead of social integration and transforming lives, it works towards exclusion and socio-spatial contention and enclosure. Because of this, there is a big challenge for the production of new views about this ‘lost generation’ and the necessary understanding that the future of cities depends not only on economic development and wealth distribution, but also on policies of socio-spatial integration and life evaluation for those who have been historically purged in Brazilian society.

The aspects brought out in this article highlight the need for a change of concepts and approaches with groups that live with cycles of poverty, vulnerability and stigmatisation. These cycles are reinforced by the socio-political and spatial place of the poor in the city as well as their symbolic image. This reinforces stigmatising practices and, in consequence, the cycles of poverty and marginalisation. The understanding of space and social representation must be considered in order to establish better strategies of social and spatial inclusion. Furthermore, one of the biggest challenges for the creation of alternatives and for the creation of new approaches is the need to overcome stigmatising practices present in some institutional attitudes, in particular those of the police. The police, in fact, are responsible for a significant portion of violence in Brazilian society. Police violence feeds a perverse cycle that leads to resignation and mistrust in the public sphere. My understanding is that most of this violence could be reduced if socio-symbolic marginality were more seriously considered as part of social policy design and strategies to tackle violence in the cities. It would include changes in practices and views with appropriate training and public monitoring. Fortunately, some changes in police attitude have already taken place over recent years. Some good examples are the Pacifying Police Units in Rio and an innovative project developed by police officers to create synergies with young people – the ‘Papo de Responsa’.

The necessary valuation of the youth image in the cities must also include strategies to build capacities and to strengthen self-esteem through the stimulation of youth languages and ways of expression in the city. In this case, culture and the arts are identified as very successful strategies because they acknowledge youngsters’ knowledge and practices (Fernandes and Hudson, 2010). These strategies signal the potential role of youth in the production of their own images and narratives of life as a way to produce new routes in their lives beyond the social and symbolic shade they experience in the city.
Furthermore, the challenge to overcome stigma and socio-symbolical marginalisation rests on the development of strategies to increase the critical voice, participation, and capacities for autonomy and freedom, with particular attention to the right to live in the city as part of the city.

References


Youth Gang Members in Rio de Janeiro


