

KIDS OUT OF PLACE  
By Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Daniel Hoffman

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In Brazil, a poor ragged kid running along an unpaved road  
in a *favela* or playing in a field of sugar cane is just a kid.  
That same child, transposed to the main streets and plazas of town, is a threat,  
a potentially dangerous "street kid."

*Por esse pão pra comer  
Por esse chão pra dormir  
Por me deixar respirar  
Por me deixar existir  
Deus lhe pague!*

*For this good bread to eat  
For this hard ground on which to sleep  
For letting me breathe  
For letting me exist  
God reward you!*

**Chico Buarque**

On Friday, July 23, 1993 eight young "street children"--or *meninos de rua*--were gunned down as they slept near the Candelária Church in downtown Rio de Janeiro. The Candelária massacre brought renewed attention to the plight of street children, their "elimination" at the hand of death squads, and the wrenching poverty that has come to characterize life for vast numbers of urban residents in Brazil.

The pattern of violence reflected in the Candelária killings, though remarkable in its degree, is in no way new. In 1981 Hector Babenco's film *Pixote* stunned audiences with its brutal portrayal of the institutional and street life of marginalized children in Brazil. Filmed during the final years of a waning military dictatorship, *Pixote* focused on the generation forgotten by the Brazilian "economic miracle" of the 1970s.

In the ensuing decade the situation of marginalized children seems, if anything, to have gotten worse. Indeed, the contemporary plight and the problem of thousands of loose and "dangerous" street children has become the center of attention both within and beyond Brazil. Underlying the current formulation of the street children's crisis is a deep preoccupation with the future of Brazil, and with the increase in public violence that seems to have accompanied the economic crisis and transition to democracy. With the demise of the former police state, the structures that had kept the social classes safely apart and the "hordes" of disenfranchised, hungry and "dangerous" *favela*--shantytown--children at bay also disintegrated. Suddenly, street children seemed to be everywhere.

Urban violence itself may not have actually increased with democratization. What has changed significantly is both the official discourse and the popular representations of

marginalized children in Brazil over the past three decades. In the 1960s in the Northeast of Brazil, street urchins were a fairly familiar feature of urban life. They were commonly referred to with a blend of annoyance and affection as "*moleques*"--that is, ragamuffins, scamps or rascals. *Moleques* were "street-wise" kids, who were cute and cunning, sometimes sexually precocious, and invariably economically enterprising. They tried to make themselves useful in a myriad of ways, some of these bordering on the criminal and deviant. Think of Fagin's "boys" from *Oliver Twist*, especially the Artful Dodger, and you have it. Many *moleques* survived by "adopting" an affluent or middle-class household for whom they did odd jobs in exchange for the right to sleep in a courtyard or patio.

Today, despite new and in many respects model legislation asserting the rights of children, street children in Brazil are viewed as a public scandal and a nuisance. They are now referred to either as "abandoned" children or, alternatively, as "marginals." The first denotes pity for the child (and blame for the neglectful mother), while the second denotes fear. Both labels justify radical interventions and the forced removal of these public "pests" from the urban landscape.

During a brief season of field research two years ago in Recife, the capital city of Pernambuco, and in Bom Jesus da Mata, a small market town in the interior of the same state, we made a point of asking ordinary townspeople the naive question: "What is a *menino de rua* (street kid)?" While driving with a friend down a wide avenue in Recife, one of us, spying some scruffy boys walking in the grass along the road, asked: "Are those street kids?" "Of course," the friend replied. "How can you tell?" "Why, there's no parent with them." Pushing further: "Is any kid on the street without an adult a street kid?" In exasperation, the friend replied, "Look, they steal and sniff glue. That's why they're street kids."

What is rarely articulated but nonetheless quite clear is that street kids are poor children in the wrong place. A street child is, like our definition of dirt, soil that is out of place. Soil in the ground is clean, a potential garden; soil under the fingernails is filth. Likewise, a poor, ragged kid running along an unpaved road in a *favela* or playing in a field of sugar cane is just a kid. That same child, transposed to the main streets and plazas of town, is a threat, a potentially dangerous "street kid."

The very notion of a "street child" reflects the preoccupation of one class or segment of society with the "proper place" of another.<sup>(1)</sup> The term is a manifestation, albeit a semi-conscious one, of a kind of symbolic or psychological apartheid. Safely confined to the *favela*, the poor child or adolescent is invisible to the better-off city dwellers, and therefore of little interest or concern. Only when the child steps outside of his or her area is that child perceived as a problem about which "something must be done."

From the point of view of the *favela*, however, there is nothing inherently problematic about a child, especially a male child, flowing over into the main streets of the town. The street--especially the city center--is, after all, the primary site of employment and economic survival. As long as he or she doesn't get "in trouble" with the law in the

process of trying to survive, the child that can successfully negotiate the realm of the street is seen as resourceful and self-reliant.

In the context of his own environment, the street child is nothing more than a "kid." The very term "street child" has no meaning in the shantytown. Indeed, it is almost never used as a term of reference or identification, although *favela* mothers will sometimes lament having permanently "lost" one or more boys "to the streets."<sup>(2)</sup> Here, the term "lost" and "street" are used to describe a poor child's declaration of independence from his home and his parents. But under ordinary conditions, to be a *favela* boy is to spend the better part of the day--and often enough the night as well-- "*na rua*," in the street. Homes are over-crowded and mother's "*amigo*" or current boyfriend may make demands for privacy that preclude older kids sleeping at home. "Home" for many male *favela* kids is not so much a place to eat and sleep as an emotional space--the place where one comes from and where one returns, periodically.

For *favela* girls, the alternation between home and street is more vexed and problematic. The same home conditions that propel their brothers into the street affect them as well, but a *favela* girl must always declare a fixed assignment and a fixed destination in the "street." Surveillance of the immediate whereabouts of daughters is a perennial preoccupation of *favela* women who themselves must often be out working in the street for long periods of the day. From the age of seven or eight, *favela* girls are assigned child-tending and other domestic tasks that keep them close to home. But girls who are quick and savvy are often extremely useful to their mothers in dealings with the "somebodies" of the street, including shopkeepers, coffin makers, clinic doctors, patrons, political leaders and clergy.

Most "street children" are today, as they were in the 1960s, "supernumerary" or "excess" kids, the children of impoverished and often single or abandoned women. While they may be quite economically independent, street kids remain deeply emotionally dependent and attached to the idea of "family." When nine-year-old "Chico" was asked if his mother loved him, he looked back incredulously. "She's my mother; she has to love me," Chico said, although both Chico and the questioner knew that his mother had tried to give him away several times to distant relatives.

Street kids in Bom Jesus da Mata--most of them boys--tended to be sentimental on the topic of mothers, their own in particular. When asked why they beg or steal, or why they live in the streets, poor children often replied that they were doing it to help their mother. Most share a percentage of their earnings with their mothers whom they visit each evening. "Fifty-Fifty," said Giomar proudly with his raspy, boy-man voice. "Oh, *ché!*" his nine-year-old friend Aldimar corrected him. "Since when did you ever give your mother more than a third!"

A band of street children, who had attached themselves to Nancy Scheper-Hughes' household in the 1980s, liked nothing better than to be invited inside to use her flush toilet, to wash with soap and hot water, and, afterwards, to flop on the cool floor and draw with magic-marker pens. Their sketches were curious. Most drew self-portraits or

conventional intact nuclear family scenes even when there was no "papa" living in the house or when the child himself had long since "left home" for the streets. These homeless children also favored religious themes--the crucifixion in particular--colored in with lots of bright red wounds. Cemeteries and violent death were also a frequent theme. But, despite all, their self-portraits were often surprisingly smiling and upbeat.

The street offers both opportunity and danger. There are many ways to be a child of the streets. Most work selling candy or popsicles, guarding cars, carrying groceries and other parcels, or shining shoes. While most street kids return home at night to sleep, some alternate nights of sleeping outdoors with sleeping at home. A very small number of children actually live full-time in the streets, rarely if ever going home to visit.(3) This minority is, however, very visible, greatly feared, and fuel the stereotype of the "dangerous" and "uncontrollable" *menino de rua*.

These street children do not so much "run away" or "choose the streets" as they are thrown out of homes where hunger, abuse, poverty and neglect make life under bridges and in bus station restrooms seem more "peaceful" (a term that more than one street child used to describe his life in an abandoned building in Recife) than life at home. Such children "of the street" are predictably more associated with theft, gangs and drugs, and are the most common target of adult exploitation, violence and death squads.

While most of those who actually *live* in the street are boys, young girls may also enter the anonymous space of the street, often escaping exploitative work as junior domestic servants or abusive homes. The vehicle of their "escape" is generally prostitution.(4) Domestic work in the context of semi-feudal Northeast Brazil is not infrequently described by *favela* girls and older women as "slavery," so that a flight to the "streets" and even to "prostitution" can be seen as acts of self-liberation. "The first time I sold my body was the first time I felt that it belonged to me," said one young "runaway" from the rural Northeast who chose "the streets" of São Paulo and prostitution over domestic servitude in Pernambuco.(5) Because these girls frequently live in brothels, prostitution may remove them somewhat from the dangers of life on the street. They suffer, however, increased risks of exposure to HIV infection, pregnancy, and sexual abuse.

Indeed, food and affection exchanged for sex is common among Brazilian street kids, the majority of whom are initiated into sex by nine or ten years of age in the big cities. Both street girls and street boys are often used for passive anal intercourse. Street girls in Recife are frequently raped by men, including policemen, and younger street boys as well as street girls are vulnerable to rape by older street boys.(6)

Street children--typically barefoot, shirtless and seemingly untied to a home or a family--are separated from all the statuses and roles that confer propriety, rights and citizenship. In the context of family-driven Brazil, the street child is barely a "person," and is vulnerable to the worst forms of exploitation, abuse and manipulation. This is revealed in the proliferation of derogatory names for poor street children: *pivete* (thief), *trombadinha* (pick pocket), *maloqueiro* (street delinquent), *menor* (juvenile delinquent) and *marginal* (criminal).(7) Each term denies the validity and personhood of the child or adolescent and

transforms him or her into a dangerous and disgusting object, one to be removed or erased with violence and impunity.

Bolstering and justifying the persecution, indeed the open warfare on street kids in Brazil today are rumors, radio reports and sensationalized news stories about crimes committed by street adolescents. The popular news weekly *Veja* reported that in the central plaza of São Paulo, the Praca da Sé, street children commit over 32,000 thefts and robberies a year, each child allegedly committing three thefts a day.(8) Further fueling the panic among middle- and upper-class populations were news reports of the *arrastão*-- or sweep--in which large roving gangs of poor adolescents allegedly streamed across the elite southern beaches of Rio de Janeiro robbing anyone within reach.

Of course, many street children do, in fact, live through petty crime. Almost all of the street children we interviewed in 1992 at a shelter in Bom Jesus volunteered that they stole things, or that they "used to" before they mended their ways. But stealing, they said, was "*um jeito*"--a way of getting by--an unfortunate means of survival, not something they were proud of. There is a natural evolution from begging to stealing as begging becomes both humiliating and more difficult for the older child. When street children begin to show signs of physical maturity, they are chased away from public spaces and rarely evoke compassion or a handout from people on the street. Stealing is the next phase in the life cycle of a street child. When a younger child was continually pushed away from us at the street shelter in Bom Jesus by older and more "expert" kids who denied that the child had ever really been a street kid, the little one vehemently protested, "*Eu pedia, eu pedia!*" ("but I begged, I begged!").

Brazilian street children live in daily fear of the police, state children's asylums, anonymous kidnapers, death squads, and (more fantastically) imagined child-and-organ stealers.(9) In all, their lives are characterized by a profound sense of insecurity. The seemingly far-fetched rumors of street kids kidnapped for overseas adoption or mutilated for their organs co-exist with an active round-up of street urchins, thousands of whom "disappear" each year into state-run reform facilities that are viewed with suspicion and horror by shantytown residents. "You won't ever turn me in to FEBEM (the misnamed state institution for the well-being of minors), will you, Nancy?" Scheper-Hughes was made to answer many times over. "They kill children there," little Luiz insisted. The more she denied that this could be so, the more the children ticked off the names of friends who had been "roughed up" or hurt at one of the reform schools. "Why do you think that they built the FEBEM school so close to the cemetery of Bom Jesus?" asked José Roberto, age 12, with a quiver of fear in his voice.

Until the enactment of the new Child and Adolescent Statute (1990) which recognized the legal rights of minors incarcerated without due process, almost 700,000 Brazilian children and adolescents were locked up in FEBEM or related reform schools.10 The film *Pixote* recreated the life of children in a FEBEM facility, portraying conditions of everyday violence and vulnerability where criminalization, rather than reform or education, were the only possible outcomes. In spite of the new legislation, the disturbing conditions dramatized in *Pixote* have not changed. On October 22, 1992, in the FEBEM

facility of Tatuapé in São Paulo, a 24-hour rebellion resulted in one death, 40 wounded, and over 500 escapes (350 of whom were recaptured). The daily *Folha de São Paulo* reported that those adolescents returned to the 1,200-inmate facility were beaten severely by state functionaries. In the investigation that followed, a state legislator claimed that the youths were "caged up like animals." "Not even in maximum security are prisoners treated this way," a prosecutor said, commenting about 100 youths who were kept locked up 24 hours a day in cells without ventilation or bathrooms. A director of FEBEM confirmed that the adolescents were being kept naked in the buildings "for reasons of security."(11)

Reform of the FEBEM system--a central demand of child advocates and an implicit provision of the 1990 Child and Adolescent Statute--remains elusive. The primary function of these "correctional" institutes continues to be the removal of unwanted children from the public sphere.

In addition to the thousands of children who fill Brazil's special reform schools, significant numbers of children are illegally detained in prisons alongside adult offenders. This appears particularly true of smaller municipalities that lack specially designated facilities for minors. The practice is in flagrant disregard of the new Brazilian Constitution with its bill of rights for the child. The newly appointed Children's Judge of Bom Jesus allowed us to visit a few dozen minors being held without bail in the local prison. The children were incarcerated, the judge explained, for their own safety. Outside they were already "marked for extermination" by local hit squads, he said, and they had been rejected by family members as well as feared and hated by the local population for whom their deaths would be counted as a relief.

In one cell of the local jail we found "Caju" and "Junior," 15 and 16-year-olds whom Scheper-Hughes remembered as cute street urchins attached to her household in 1987. "Caju" was elected to represent the street children of Bom Jesus at the first national convention of street children held in Brasilia in 1986, when street children from all over Brazil converged on the capital to voice their grievances and demand their human rights. Now, five years later, both boys were accused of assault, and Junior, of the rape of another street child. Thus were they rapidly transformed into precocious "little men" incarcerated and held accountable for their chaotic street behavior.

As a guard at the jail in Bom Jesus reflected: "the life of a young marginal here is short...It's like this: for a *menino de rua* to reach 30 years of age, it's a miracle." The Federal Police reported that close to 5,000 children were murdered in Brazil between 1988 and 1990.<sup>12</sup> Few of these deaths were considered worthy of investigation, which is hardly surprising given that police officers are themselves perpetrators of many of these crimes.<sup>(13)</sup> Most of the victims are adolescent males, like Caju and Junior, between the ages of 15 and 19, a particularly "dangerous" time, especially for the children of black favela dwellers.

The specter of violent and sudden death looms alarmingly close for poor adolescents and for street children especially. This is no less true for the children of a relatively small

municipality such as Bom Jesus (population 50,000) than for those of major cities. Street kids of Bom Jesus had no difficulty identifying the names of murdered friends and companions. The list we gathered from several street children one morning in Bom Jesus in 1992 carried no fewer than 21 names. We offer them here as a small act of resistance and as a way of honoring their short lives:

Pedrinho  
Zeze  
Docideiro  
Rihgue  
Deda  
Beto Boca de Veia  
Joca  
Misso  
Bebe  
Taiga  
Ze Pequeno  
Pipio  
Regi  
Geronimo  
Xunda  
Gilvam  
Bodinha  
Biu  
Nino  
Biopiolho  
Fro

A few of these adolescents and young men lost their lives after having fled to Recife, the regional capital. Some were summarily murdered when caught in the act of petty theft, or were the victims of vigilante "street justice." Still others died at the hands of death squads, their murders unresolved and little investigated.

In 1991 Veja reported that the public morgue in Recife received approximately 15 bodies of dead children and adolescents a month. Black and brown (mixed race) bodies outnumbered white bodies 12 to 1, and boys outnumbered girls at a ratio of 7 to 1. In 80 percent of the cases, the bodies had been damaged or mutilated.<sup>14</sup> The local human rights organization GAJOP characterizes the routine assassinations of poor adolescents as an unofficial death penalty which is carried out "with chilling cruelty and without any chance of defense whatsoever."<sup>15</sup>

Brazilian journalist Gilberto Dimenstein, in his forceful denunciation of violence against children, *Brazil: War on Children*, emphasized the complicity of off-duty policemen, hired killers, and store owners (lojistas) in the death squads.<sup>16</sup> Typically, it is store owners who pay to have "undesirable" adolescents and children eliminated. A similar conclusion was reached in a report by the São Paulo chapter of the Brazilian Bar

Association, which indicated that "the military police and death squads paid by shantytown shopkeepers killed most of the nearly 1,000 street children slain here in 1990."(17)

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Dimenstein writes that support of human rights for children in Brazil is confined to a relatively small minority, and that to make a case for the rights of children is perceived by many as "an attack on decent people's rights to walk down the street in safety."(18) Underlying this sentiment is a perception that street adolescents are dangerous criminals with little chance of reform. Discourses regarding human rights, including rights for children, easily come into conflict with popular concerns for public safety, leading some to claim that human rights are the "privileges of bandits."(19)

Support for death squads, "private justice," lynchings and lethal tactics by the police is related to widespread perceptions that the justice system does not work, and that police are inefficient, corrupt, and frequently themselves involved in crime.<sup>(20)</sup> Residents of poor neighborhoods are often the strongest supporters of violent, extrajudicial solutions to local crime, a phenomenon that has been, in part, attributed to the lack of security in these communities. As one observer writes, "people are usually asking the police, whom they fear and accuse of being violent, to be violent 'against the side that deserves it.'"(21) The poor, it appears, feel every bit as besieged by crime, if not more so, as the rich and middle class do. This is crucial to understanding their acceptance of extreme forms of private justice, even when they are most likely to become the targets of its abuses.

Thus, each time a troublesome young street child was swept up in a police raid or was physically attacked or "disappeared" in Bom Jesus, people said nothing. Some residents were even sympathetic to these violent attacks on other people's "bad" children," and would occasionally murmur under their breath, "Good job, nice work!"

The tolerance for violence is also a legacy of the dictatorship. Throughout Brazilian military rule (1964-1985), the civil and military police were heavily implicated in the disappearances, tortures and deaths of suspected "subversives." Although the process of democratization has been fairly rapid since 1982, it has yet to check the extraordinary power of the civil and military police over the poorer populations. Today, the police are called upon to enforce, often violently, the apartheid-like codes that seek to keep the poor and the black--young as well as old--"in their proper place." Indeed "race" and race hatred have emerged today as popular discourses that justify violent and illegal police actions in shantytown communities. Death squad persecution is directed at a specific class and shade of shantytown resident. Consequently, young black males in Brazil are increasingly a threatened population.

In all, the problem of "street children" is emblematic of a larger dilemma in Brazil: a failed economic development model that has relegated a vast proportion of the population to misery. Out of this configuration arises the specter of the homeless and abandoned street child, perceived by the more affluent classes as a blemish on the urban landscape and a reminder that all is not well in the country. Unwanted and considered human waste, these ubiquitous tattered, mainly black children and adolescents evoke strong and contradictory emotions of fear, aversion, pity and anger in those who view their neighborhood streets, boulevards and squares as "private places" under siege. But unlike other forms of debris, street kids refuse to stay in the dump (the favelas of Brazil). Instead, they often stake out the most public and most elegant spaces of the city to live, to love, and to work, thus betraying the illusion of Brazilian "modernity."

By invading the city centers, frequenting the public parks and upper-class beaches of Rio de Janeiro and Recife, and engaging in petty crimes against the middle class, street children defy the segregated order of the modern city. Street children are, in a sense, poor kids in revolt, violating social space, disrespecting property, publicly intoxicating themselves, and otherwise refusing to conform or to disappear. The risks and hazards of this inchoate domestic rebellion are great: illiteracy, toxicity from inhalant drugs such as glue, chronic hunger and under-nutrition, sexual exploitation and AIDS. It is this overall configuration of risks that leads child advocates in Brazil to defend the right of the child to be in the street, while recognizing that a life of the streets can only be self-destructive in the long term.

The new Brazilian Constitution and the subsequent Child and Adolescent Statute recognize the rights of children and the obligation of the state, civil society and parents to protect these rights and to provide for the needs of children as individuals in a special condition of dependency, and physical and social development [see "The Struggle for Citizenship and Human Rights," p. 19]. The National Movement of Street Children (MNMMR), an organization of street educators and children's advocates, is at the forefront of legislative reform and the movement to engage and empower street children in their own environment: in the parks and plazas of the city [see "The National Movement of Street Children," p. 21]. The MNMMR helps street children to form their own organizations, to develop their own leadership, and to articulate their own demands, so that individual acts of survival can be translated into collective acts of political

resistance. The Street Children's Movement activists recognize the anger and indignation of street adolescents as appropriate to their marginalized and precarious existence.

The outcome of the struggle for childhood in Brazil will weigh heavily on the success of activists in the MNMMR and other organizations that share its vision of a new society in which all children are valued. For all its power, however, the Brazilian street children's movement has been unable to strike at the source of the problem. Until the chaotic economic and social conditions that cause desperately poor parents to "lose" their children to the streets are reversed, childhood for the vast majority in Brazil will continue to signify a period of adversity to be survived and gotten over as quickly as possible, rather than a time of nurturance to be extended and savored.

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