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Chosen topic: Words, identity, homologation

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Youth, violence and modernity

Dialectics of marginality in Brazil and in Italy

***Ragazzi di vita* (P. P. Pasolini) and *Capitães da areia* (J. Amado)**

Abstract: The present essay discusses legal, identity and cultural aspects that connect Pier Paolo Pasolini's novel *Ragazzi di vita* with Jorge Amado's *Capitães da areia*. The theoretical and methodological premises are based on the works on law in literature, established by authors such as François Ost, James Boyd White and Richard Weisberg. The concept of Antônio Cândido's "dialectics of the malandro" (*dialética do malandro*) plays a key role on the approach on literary representations of diverse forms of life (both violent and non violent) of the urban marginal youths in Salvador, State of Bahia, Brazil. The processes of identity formation and emancipation of these youth groups is set in decisive moments the rapidly shifting modernity of the twentieth century in Brazil (1930ies) and Italy (1950ies).

In 1937 the dictatorial regime of Getulio Vargas' Estado Novo publicly burned the first edition of Amado's novel "Capitães da areia" in the city of Salvador. The text and the author were condemned for the practice of communist propaganda. At the center of Amado's plot is a group of abandoned children who lives together under a pier at the beach and gain their livelihood as thieves and minor criminals. These kids, outcasts clad in dirty rags, deprived of any formal education, rights and dignity in the face of the law and the institutions, are, from the narrator's point of view, the real masters of the city – because it is them who know the urban space through and through.

Amado's novel is based (consciously or not) on Euclides da Cunha's path breaking idea of the reversal of leading roles from the centre towards the margins of the political spectrum. While the "idle, lazy and ignorant" elite lives in total neglect of their political and social responsibilities, the outcasts living in the margins ignored by the society (Euclides' rural sertão, Amado's marginal urban spaces) start organizing what is left to them

by a corrupt, unjust and violent social system. The young kids learn with and from each other and their companionship builds a solidly organized group which provides each individual with a role, an identity and a voice. As they grow up together, they build their own trajectories and an original form of resistance against the brutal industrialization and modernization promoted by the Brazilian establishment.

Pier Paolo Pasolini and his novel *Ragazzi de vita* offers an analogous, though less romantically idealized version, of what has been identified, by the Brazilian literary theorist Antonio Candido, as the “dialectics of the malandro” – a new and insidious form of class struggle in the urban conditions of the 20th century. João Cezar de Castro Rocha followed up the evolution of this phenomenon in his essay on the “dialectics of marginality” (*dialética da marginalidade*).

Writing almost a generation later, in a very different urban context, Pasolini’s portrait of Ricetto’s struggle for survival and identity was condemned and legally prosecuted for obscenity and pornography, due to the episodes which lead the protagonist from minor crimes (thefts and pick pocketing) to assaults and male prostitution. As in Amado’s trajectories, the lives of Pasolini’s *Ragazzi di vita* and of Ricetto become a true libel against the bourgeois society, whose repressive forms of life – and still fundamentally fascist government –, constitute an extremely violent system of exclusion and marginalization of large parts of the urban population or masses.

What is truly innovative and revolutionary, however, is Pasolini’s capacity in emancipating his protagonists by giving them their own voice. Ricetto tells his story in the idiom of a real street boy, an urban nomad who belongs to a “tribe” totally different from the political and social system that emerged from the breakdown of fascism. Their forms of life and their language is totally different from the pretentious “high culture” idiom of the bourgeois society. Their slang and their (sexual and social) practices offer richer, truer and more original variations of social and bodily intercourse, which defy the rigid habits and customs in ways of a provocative rebellion. Pasolini’s artistic praise of these marginalized forms of life is an eloquent protest against the reconstruction of the same (basically fascist) political system in its new variety of industrial complexes. Ricetto is the emblem of the autonomous outcast, who emancipates himself of the prevailing oppressive political and legal system, and a model for a more daring and original identity of the Italian people.