Brazilian Youth Activism: In Search of New Meanings for Political Engagement?

Conceição Firmina Seixas Silva[1] and Lucia Rabello de Castro[1]

Abstract

This article discusses alternative forms of political participation among Brazilian youth today. The prevailing context of social and economic inequalities in Latin America stands as a key factor for understanding young people's experimentations with new forms of activism. The article considers research based on in-depth interviews with twenty young residents of Rio de Janeiro about new youth collectives engaging with issues of social change. The analysis shows that the meanings of politics and political action are extended to encompass direct and effective action motivated by a personal interpellation against social injustice. It also shows the importance of experiencing politics as a "bottom-up" undertaking resistant to hierarchical constraints and characterized by individual autonomy. Finally, the article discusses whether this new political engagement may evade a broader political view of conflicting social forces at play and impose limitations on the construction of a political project that can be embraced by different collectives.

Youth political participation has sparked important discussions of late. There is much concern that the decline in political engagement among young people today, reflecting an alleged apathy and mistrust toward institutionalized politics, represents a threat to democracy and its institutions.[1] The exercise of politics, in the sense of participating in formal institutions of government and political parties, seems to have become less attractive, leading youth to opt out and seek less conventional modes of political activism.[2]

Breno Bringel and Enara Echart note that there is a tendency in traditional studies of politics to focus on the *instituted* domain, focusing on the kind of impact of social movements and collective action on existing political structures.[3] This approach, they argue, ignores the *instituting* and innovative aspects of social action. According to the authors, it is necessary to take into account what

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[1] Centre for Research and Study of Contemporary Childhood and Youth, Institute of Psychology, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Corresponding Author:
Conceição Firmina Seixas Silva, Centre for Research and Study of Contemporary Childhood and Youth, Institute of Psychology, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
Email: conceicaofseixas@gmail.com

occurs in unconsolidated spaces of society. Most of the time, these social movements question existing structures and propose new forms of political organization.

Studies that focus on electoral behavior and other forms of institutional participation fail to take into due consideration different ways that youth express their political activism. Nuno Augusto and Lucia Rabello de Castro discuss whether youth rejection of conventional democratic processes can be regarded as "apoliticism," given that such attitudes often reflect a questioning of political models erected by prior generations and a confrontation with political elites and the regulatory power of institutions.[4] In this sense, youth's novel ways of participating may indicate a reaction to the way democracy works and the introduction of new avenues of political expression.[5]

Researchers in Brazil and other countries have called attention to an increased participation among youth today toward more decentralized and informal collectives.[6] The decision to join such collectives often reflects a rejection of institutions that make decisions from "top-down," or that are insensitive to the demands of youth themselves. While distancing themselves from traditional modes of political behavior, younger generations have shown a desire to experiment with different ways of living and doing politics that emphasize creativity as well as freedom and autonomy of action.[7] Thus, a different conception of politics and political action seems to be under construction, as young people seek to engage themselves in groups that both possess a much more fluid or even informal organization and are not formally political, though concerned with issues of social transformation in areas such as education, culture, ecology, and others.

Given these significant changes in the scenario of contemporary youth collective action, this article focuses on alternative forms of political participation among Brazilian youth. Our aim is to analyze how these new youth collectives in Brazil construe their political engagement and what they intend to achieve with their actions. Furthermore, we seek to analyze how these collectives are organized and how they confront the broader social structure. The main thrust of this discussion deals with the affirmation that less conventional forms of activism exert a greater appeal on youth today. This entails the exploration of how youth engage themselves in nonhierarchical collectives whose strategic action tends to focus around local demands in social spaces within youth's vicinity—their neighborhood, community, and school.

Youth's alternative modes of participation comprehend a gamut of diverse engagements. In Brazil, these concern a wide range of groups working in community projects oriented toward low-income people or groups focusing on ecology and human rights, and groups concerned with remedial courses for college entrance exams. The hallmark of these diverse engagements points at the way these youth seem instigated by a desire to effect change in social problems. It seems disputable, though, whether these engagements can be considered sheer voluntary work, a *bénévolat*, a humanitarian search to mitigate the other's suffering. We argue that a certain vision of conflicting social forces is at stake, conforming youth's narratives, even if it is sometimes shortsighted as it tends to reduce the complexity of the analysis of social issues. Besides, the adhesion to nonhierarchical, noninstitutionalized collectives is often made as a preferred option in comparison with conventional modes of participating in formal institutions, such as political parties.

A brief discussion of the present social and political scenario of Latin America seems necessary as it helps to understand the conditions under which youth opt out from instituted forms of political and social participation and undertake alternative forms of social engagement.

The Emergence of Alternative Forms of Political Participation

From Statist Politics to "New Collective Subjects"

Although Latin American countries are very diverse with regard to social, political, and economic conditions, their historical processes share certain similarities. One arises from Latin America's

colonial past characterized by slavery and an enforced servitude of the native population that had lasting effects on the social scenario of almost all countries of the region. These effects are reflected in current political struggles of the populations that suffered and continue to suffer the consequences of centuries of social inequalities.[8]

Latin American countries share similarities in terms of the nature of their national states. In most countries of the region, the independence process was a consequence of a reconfiguration of the "coloniality of power" upon new institutional bases by a domestic elite.[9] Many Latin American social scientists described this process as the emergence of an "internal colonialism."[10] As Aníbal Quijano writes, "these new States could in no way be considered national states, unless one believes that this tiny minority of colonizers in power was the genuine representative of the colonized population."[11] This paradoxical situation of a renewed colonialism in the form of independent states persisted in the Latin American continent throughout the twentieth century. Access to and influence on governmental circles were restricted to a small and privileged part of the population and, as a result, subaltern and excluded groups came to regard politics as the "business of elites."[12]

Relations between society and the state in Latin America were thus characterized by an arbitrary and authoritarian power. The authoritarian tradition continued in the form of populist political regimes. In the 1960s, most countries of the region came under the rule of dictatorial regimes installed by military coups.[13] The state has been regarded as the only decisive arena of power relations, the relevant target of political struggle, therefore construing a "statist vision of politics,"[14] which has predominated in Latin America.

In the 1970s, emergent social struggles in Brazil began to focus on culture and action engrossed by an academic debate on social movements.[15] Collective subjects, represented by popular movements of noninstitutionalized collectives and composed of groups traditionally excluded from political participation (blacks, women, and indigenous peoples), began to criticize the modus operandi of political participation.[16] "New collective subjects"[17] entered the stage, opposing the authoritarian political culture and calling for grassroots democracy and autonomy with regard to political parties.

The popular movements sought to redefine the meaning and limits of politics itself (its participants, processes, agenda, and field of action), distancing itself from preexisting collective references (the state, the vanguard, and the party) to establish alternative projects of political participation. This project was based on exercising democracy at a grassroots level, in neighborhoods, workplaces, and in their communities. Social change was increasingly seen as something that should be conceived from the "bottom-up."[18]

The struggle for autonomy with regard to the excesses of state regulation bolsters an idea typical of popular movements, that is, "the people as subject."[19] The new movements enthusiastically adopted the ideas of "people" (*pueblo*) and "popular participation." According to Ana Maria Doimo, the motto of the period was "break the chains of traditional populism and recover the active capacity of the people by transforming them into subjects,"[20] that is, into subjects of their own history. As Paulo Freire explained, the struggle aimed for the creation of "a society that, being its own subject, regarded man and the people as subjects of their history."[21]

Youth Participation and the Relevance of Practical Action

The reconfiguration of spaces of social struggle brought forward profound changes in the political experience of Brazilian youth, no longer exclusively identified with a student identity. Ann Mische analyzes the political participation of Brazilian youth in the 1990s as indicating an identification with a "citizen conscience" rather than a student condition.[22] According to Mische, a characteristic of these commitments is "the subordination of the political discourse of young people to a more expansive, universalizing language of citizenship."[23] The student condition, a crucial feature of youth identity given the centrality of the world of work in society, gives way to other modes of youth

subjectivities. Young people became mobilized and organized around diverse issues—racial, ecological, gender, cultural, and especially "youthhood"[24]—producing other possibilities for political intervention.[25] Other spaces for participation were created outside the universities.

The crisis of political representation, the exhaustion of political parties and the student movement, and the perception of politicians as increasingly distant from people and their problems contributed to a reappropriation of the political space by young people oriented by a wide range of interests and actions.[26] Art and culture in particular have become increasingly significant references for the experience of young people in Brazil.[27] Political demonstrations through hip-hop, rap, and graffiti have become quite popular, especially among young residents of the periphery who use the product of their art (the lyrics, drawings, dances, and so on) to express and expose what goes wrong in their neighborhood and city, while at the same time modifying the repertoire of collective action.

Thus, conventional objectives of social transformation and modes of action, such as those professed by political parties, were found short of being adequate to express the dissatisfaction of youth and the plethora of demands for a different and fairer society. The experience of various forms of social injustice and humiliation instigated the search for meaning and social belongingness. Thus, individuals' motivation to engage in social activism did not necessarily have a direct relation with a preestablished political identity but evolved, often precariously, out of their own experience of social injustice and humiliation.[28] These modes of participation have not occurred in a systematic fashion with the explicit goal of promoting grand political projects but rather have been directed to sum up forces around a collective action, whose goal is to offer public alternatives to established practices.[29]

Marcos Mesquita's investigation has pointed at disruptions in the modes of Brazilian youth contestation, considering the emergence of a "new militant sociability."[30] Based on a different logic of militancy, youth have opted for groups that are more autonomous, democratic, and horizontal, and at the same time have opposed those social practices that reproduce the institutionalized logic of political action.

Given the distrust young people have harbored toward institutions, political parties, and professional politicians, horizontalism and autonomy have become highly valued aspects of political activism. Molecular forms of participation that favor fluidity in the associative process have been developing fast. The motivation, far from consisting a call to strengthen the unity and identity of a particular ideological group, is directed to "practical/concrete action" and to the possibility of beholding concrete results for their actions. As Regina Novaes has noted, young people want to be different, personal, and visible in their actions.[31] Instead of acting in the name of an institutionalized collective, they want to see their engagement as an expression of themselves and of their individualities.

Youth Participation in "Fluid Collectives": In Search for New Values of Collective Action

The empirical investigation drawn upon here consisted of a qualitative exploratory research[32] based on in-depth interviews with twenty young people (eleven boys and nine girls), residents of the city Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and between 18 and 25 years of age. The interviewees came from diverse socioeconomic background, namely, residents of *favelas* (slums), peripheral areas, and wealthy neighborhoods.

In looking for collectives that were not formally institutionalized, our choice had to be made on the basis of informal indications by youth themselves. The twenty selected young people of the present investigation belonged to collectives showing different social and political engagements. Our aim was to analyze how these youth addressed ampler social problems through their

actions and how they articulated their political engagement with a vision of conflictual social forces in Brazilian society. Thus, rather than aiming at a sample of this not yet known universe of youth activism, we prioritized the choice of collectives sharing some common characteristics that were thought to be worth investigating. First, their nonformalization; second, the absence of an assumed political partisanship; and finally, group activities with some degree of organization, mobilization, and collective undertaking. It is important to note that this research follows and adds up to previous research projects,[33] the focus here being to further understand how the idea of participating alternatively was put into practice in the process of organizing and mobilizing a "collective subject."

The group of interviewees included a range of social engagements not only in terms of localities and social spaces but also in terms of the aims of their social action. The interviewees were involved in various types of activities, mostly in community social projects for low-income people: community remedial courses for youth; circus, *capoeira*, and origami classes to kids and other youth; community radios; recreational activities for children and young people; and social projects related to health and violence. There were also groups focused on ecology and the preservation of local culture, human rights in schools, social intervention workshops in favor of national culture, fund-raising for cultural events of small nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and associations that promoted social actions, social solidarity actions for disadvantaged children and young people, and promotion of world peace encounters for children from different countries.

The interviewees had different previous trajectories. Some had become involved in social and political issues only recently, while others had had a long trajectory of militancy, having taken part in student associations, leftist parties, and NGOs. The latter had opted out for engagement in smaller autonomously organized groups.

The interviews were carried out individually and tape recorded with the consent of all. All were conducted in locations chosen by young people themselves, generally at the headquarters of their collectives. The interview questions were designed to learn about the trajectory of the interviewees in the collective, their motivations for entering the group, the history of the collective, its origin, activities, and objectives, as well as about what vision of Brazilian society and its main social problems the group members shared, and which other collectives they interacted with. Of particular importance were the meanings these youths attached to politics, political representation, and the political dimension of their engagement, and what subjective dispositions he or she had toward social and political participation. Finally, we tried to find out how they dealt with different points of view within their groups, what conflicts and difficulties they encountered, and what they expected to achieve as a result of their participation. The interviews were analyzed according to methods of discourse analysis, especially those that take discourse as historically situated and speech as a set of statements that require interpretation.[34]

The various types of social activism mentioned earlier encompassed different forms of social intervention, though all of them were directed to improve a state of affairs invoked as being unfair or causing widespread suffering. The question remains then whether and how such a wide range of engagements can be related to acting politically. As we said earlier, it remains to be shown to what extent these "new collectives" are engaged in resignifying the political, or whether their affectation by the suffering of others simply updates a humanitarian move toward the disadvantaged.

A main analytical axis of the following discussion deals with the meaning these young people attribute to politics and how they relate it to their own action. By that, we also imply how youth articulate their action with the broader context of Brazilian society and its inequalities and see it in relation to conflicting social forces. A second main analytical axis contemplates the character of the collectives in which youth act, especially their objectives, their form of action, and the difficulties they face.

The Meaning of Politics: To Feel Responsible for Local Social Problems and to Act Collectively to Change Them

Politics understood prima facie as professional politics exercised within, or by political parties, stood as the backdrop of these young people's reflection on their own practice. Many of our interviewees made a distinction between conventional politics and politics as they acted it. The issue for them was to work with an "extended view of political action." However, some interviewees were not concerned at all with this distinction, and preferred not to envisage their activism as political action, naming it as a conscientization process or a solidarity engagement.

For those interviewees who had in mind conventional politics but made a point of remarking the distance of their militancy from it, formal politics was nevertheless considered the space where structural change really occurred, given its potential to impact society as a whole. It was seen as a more powerful and all-encompassing way of acting politically. This view was mainly held and put forward by those interviewees that were university students who happened to be those who had already taken part in some institutionalized collective. João,[35] who had been a member of a leftist political party before entering a collective of remedial education for low-income students, noted that "political parties can and should be national in scope and outlook, our parties are national. The community prep courses are local in scale."

Others, however, were explicitly averse to conventional political groups, an aversion perceptible in Andre and Juliana's responses, "I have a lot of contempt for the university student movement in Brazil today, a lot" and "To be honest, I don't like, and don't think about participating [in any formal group]. Maybe I'll change my mind someday, but right now, I wouldn't want to be a part of it. I wouldn't join any political party." For these young people, these movements were "bureaucratic," "boring," and riddled with "corruption." Andre and Juliana, two college students, had never been members of any political party and were very critical of institutionalized groups in Brazil. For them, formal students' groups were elitist, cultivating an overly intellectualized atmosphere based on "Marxist booklets" and distant from concrete social problems. Moreover, they criticized the strategies used by many members of the students' organized movement to gain positions in government.

Thus, conventional political action stood at the heart of many of these young people's concerns as they thought over their decision to adhere to the collectives they took part in. Their evaluation of formal politics was accounted for either as a more encompassing way of acting politically, though not always the only or the most effective one, or as a worn-out institutionalized practice that should be overcome and even refused once it seems to exist only to reproduce itself.

A relevant difference among the interviewed youth was observed with respect to how they related conventional politics to their collective action. For those interviewees from underprivileged classes, institutionalized politics had a clear-cut configuration, that is, it conveyed the figure of the professional politician who approached poor communities and their residents in order to secure votes during election periods. For this reason, these young people made it a point to distance themselves and their action from the negative connotations associated with conventional politics. They were emphatic to say that their activities had nothing to do with (institutionalized) politics. Fernando, a former homeless person who now works with homeless youth, insisted that "people here don't like politics." Fernando described the nature of his collective as a "movement." As such, it was concerned to change the status quo and not to reproduce it, as it was the case in conventional political action. In fact, our interviewees with little access to education showed more distance from politics as an institutional body with its institutionalized practices and norms.

Like Fernando, Rafael, a resident of the *Complexo do Alemão* (a slum community in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro) and a member of a health service group, believed that organized political bodies were detached from important issues, such as poverty, violence, and especially the demands

of poor communities. In addition, Rafael argued that in institutionalized groups political action is characterized by paternalism and condescending assistance in offering improvements to communities but are not concerned to promote real change in them. Rafael and Fernando's views on politics were grounded on their personal history of living in these poor communities. As is the case in many of these communities, given the realization that formal politics is an arena far from people's real daily problems, the political has come to be resignified as a denigrated public activity, so that politicians' speeches, especially during elections, are not to be taken seriously.

By and large, the "extended meaning of political action" was presented in different ways throughout the interviews. According to João, politics is any social action collectively undertaken. Additionally, politics was seen as an "exchange of interests" in which the benefit of the collective is at stake. Complementing his idea, João believes that, for the exchange to be political, one group must take into account the interests of the other. In this case, politics is the construction of "inter-ests"—or, as we would say in Portuguese, *inter-esses*—that is, "between-them," referring to a collectivity and not the sum of individuals' positions or isolated groups.

Rafael produced a similar conception as he considered politics an instrument for mobilizing people, for articulating diverse groups at the institutional or individual level. Politics, in his view, always takes into account the welfare of all rather than that of just a few. As a collective enterprise, Rafael believed politics should not be restricted to the level of governmental action. He considered his engagement as political, which, though not associated to a given political entity, involved mobilizing the residents of his poor community, broadening their awareness about the need to participate in collective decisions. The idea that political action as these youth viewed it had to involve the commitment to "other" interests was then quite frequent.

Another extended view of political action seemed to include the idea of social responsibility for the world we live in. As Jessica notes, individuals grasp the importance of social responsibility when they begin to see the world they live in as theirs, thus understanding that the world is the product of their actions: "Our collective takes the social to mean something that is ours, that we have to build together." They perceive the world not as something imposed from the outside, but as a product of what they do, what they decide not to do, or what they simply cannot do. Jessica belongs to a collective whose objectives include raising young people's conscientization with respect to their rights and their demands of social justice in the *Complexo da Maré* (a slum community in the north zone of Rio de Janeiro). Jessica was careful to point out that young people's difficulties were related not only to poverty but, even primarily, to the existence of prejudice against slum residents that made it harder for them to apply for a job, to get electric power and telephone services installed in their homes, or even walk around the city. For young males living in slum areas, prejudices take place when they are stopped, searched, and frisked by police officers almost every time they leave their homes. Jessica and other members of her collective argued that these issues were often ignored by conventional political activism. This collective had as a major goal that political action should take place through taking responsibility for one's surroundings, as when one struggles for justice in all spaces of daily life, from schools to other spaces of the city.

The feeling of responsibility with regard to local social issues was most often associated with this extended view of political action. It was aroused by situations when the subject felt affected and called for. Some interviewees reported that their feeling of responsibility could be traced back to their own history of deprivation that generated an identification with others in similar situations; others who had not experienced poverty in their own lives felt an identification with those who had suffered humiliation and poverty. Therefore, the subjective identification with someone else's suffering and the internal demand to assume responsibility stood as main dimensions of the political engagement in these nonconventional collectives.

A permanent struggle to resist individualization—understood as a process to focus on oneself and on one's sole interests—was present in these youth's narratives. The respondents revealed

discomfort with the idea of worrying only about their own lives, professions, and particular worlds: As Flavio said, "I don't want to dedicate 24 hours of my day just to myself!" This concern was most evident among middle-class youth like Flavio, a college student who was coordinating a community remedial course. Personal issues, he believed, acquired a different meaning in the struggle for a more just social context. Juliana, another youth of middle-class origin, noted that young people should value collective forms of action as a means of resisting a tendency to focus on concerns relevant for to the individual alone, "given this individualist society, I think we should try to bring more collective forms of association between people." These middle-class youth perceived themselves as being privileged, and their action was thought as a kind of reparation for social inequalities. In this vein, Paulo remarked that engagement was triggered by a feeling that moved him toward the broad collectivity and its malaise.

The approaches of the interviewees to the issue of politics and their own political engagements showed a complex and nuanced scenario in which social origin, previous experience in formal political groups, and place of residence came to be relevant aspects in qualifying youth's militancy. However, some points of convergence can be highlighted. In general, social and political participation stood as a personal response of these youth associated with subjectivity, self-transformation, experimentation, and various forms of resistance. Political action can be undertaken anywhere. For Jessica, "participation is part of our daily lives. Participation can take place anywhere, in any space. . . . Politics is also a day-to-day affair." For her, there is no proper established place for political action; politics is not a regulated practice taking place only within legitimate institutions but can be a kind of action in the daily life of individuals. Some of them even professed a very generalized view that "everything is politics," or, as Mario and Paulo say, respectively, "life is politics!" and "living is doing politics."

Thus, the meanings the interviewees gave to politics centered on the idea of strengthening the local, putting into practice concrete alternatives for promoting social change toward a more egalitarian world on an everyday basis, in their communities or neighborhood. "Action in the present" and "practical action" emerged as significant aspects of the activism. Young residents of poor communities felt that they could intervene in their communities in order to improve the living conditions of the places they lived. Fernando, for example, a radio host for a poor community radio station, sought to help local artists. According to him, "this is what community radio is for, to give a voice to the excluded." "Action in the present" thus seemed incompatible with acting through representation in formal institutions. Interviewees were pragmatic, arguing that efficacy could only be achieved through practical, concrete action.

The focus on and the priority given to specific concrete actions corresponded with a lenient consideration of establishing ideological points of view on controversial issues. Very frequently interviewees reported that prolonged discussion of ideas, either to solve internal conflicts or to develop an ideological standpoint on the issue, delayed or became an obstacle to action. The fear of becoming excessively concerned with ideological discussions represented a possible obstacle that stunted effective action. In some of these groups, it was thus not surprising that members tried to deny the existence of internal conflicts. They believed that the desire to transform social reality superseded internal group problems. Therefore, to waste time discussing such problems could hinder or preclude collective action. This belief is clear in the words of Tatiana who worked with poor children, "There are people going hungry! There are people who don't have enough food to eat or clothes to wear! (. . .) You know, I prefer to do something now than wait, even if it could have been done a little better if we had spent more time discussing."

In cases where the appeal to act became an imperative, it seemed to exert a counterforce on any emergent problematization of the group's own engagement. "Action in the present" also led to a constraint on any theorization of the group's investment and goals. It also seemed to restrain the overall social perspective which informed the local action of the group. Where time for discussion

was scarce, the broader social context—with its contradictions and complexity—was taken less and less into consideration as if the "locality" could be known on its own terms, irrespective of the determinations of the broader social reality.

In Search of New Meaning for Political Engagement

> I don't have a formed ideology, I think you have to find a way to participate in causes in order to help other people. (Juliana)

How were these collectives formed and maintained? "Looseness" characterized youth's adhesion to these collectives comprehending a diverse range of political and social causes with no consistent ideological projects. The fluidity of the group organization was enhanced by identification with broad signifiers, such as citizenship, collective solidarity, and a rejection of any conventional label to describe their political action within a specific framework. When asked how they described their action, they found it difficult to answer and offered vague replies. As João responded, "That's the hardest. Look, I would say it is citizenship work that tries to transform society by turning people into political actors, but doing so in a way that expresses solidarity."

Some interviewees deliberately used terms like solidarity to describe their actions because of the broad connotations of the word. "Solidarity engagement" was used particularly by lower-income young people involved in community work. These young people were concerned with getting involved with the interests of the local community. For them, solidarity represented a different social bond than that associated with conventional political identity. It was not necessarily the result of assuming a set of preestablished values, handed down by political parties, but was motivated by the possibility of seeing oneself as an agent of change and being able to perceive the immediate effects of one's actions.

Most young people reported that they joined their groups not because of a rationalized belief in ideologies of left or right, but because of their affective liaisons with friends who were already militating and their desire to seek out new experiences. Some of the interviewed university students argued that ideological divisions, such as distinctions between left and right, had lost importance: "This thing about right–left, for me, is obsolete" (Juliana). The meaninglessness of these categories, for the interviewees, was such that they described themselves as confused with regard to political choices: "This is why I feel lost. Though I identify [with the left], I have a very hard time making up my mind in this sense" (Rafael). Andre and João shared this ambivalence, pointing to the "homogenization" of political parties:

> Before 2002 [when Lula was elected for his first term], I identified very much with the political orientation of the PT [Workers' Party in Brazil]. Today, I am totally lost at the voting booth, totally perplexed. I don't know what to do. Because I think political parties in Brazil have become homogenized. It's all the same, there's no left or right anymore, it's all a big center. There is no longer any opposition because the two extremes, the PT and the PMDB [centrist party], united against the PSDB [Social Democratic Party]. It's as if you had a 'U' and then, all of a sudden you tied the two ends together. Now you've got a circle. (Andre)

> I am still trying to put this together in my head, but I would say I identify a little with the socialist parties, but it's a sort of identification without identifying. (. . .) the left ended up allying itself with other parties with a totally different logic (João).

Another remarkable aspect that was recurrent in the interviews was that youth rejected delegation. Since their collectives were not large, there wasn't a distribution of specific roles for each member,

and for this reason they contributed according to their possibilities: as demands appeared, the group got mobilized and planned its actions. The activities of the groups relied heavily on networks of friends. Friendships were a key factor in the founding and maintenance of the group, which showed this double function, that is, it constituted a social space for taking up political actions as well as exchanging affective and social experiences. Since resources on which to count were scarce, the participants relied on the support of people with whom they were close.

> We met them [another group of student activists] and they are like us, a group of friends and university students who joined together to defend the *caiçaras* [an indigenous group]. And we ended up using their tax registration number to get money from an NGO based in southern Brazil that agreed to finance us, (. . .) and so they are our most important partners. (Tamires)

As they took part in these collectives, the interviewees were able to take action without the mediation of institutions and with the possibility of effecting change "bottom-up." Tamires and her friends had been involved with the student movement but felt it necessary to act without the bureaucracy of institutions, "We felt it lacked concreteness. We were interested in projects that didn't depend on the government, or on the private sector, that weren't planned from the top down, but by the community." In this way, projects could be planned and actions carried out together with the people of the poor communities.

Another interviewee, Maria, who together with friends started up a group focusing on ecological issues, stated that she preferred dealing directly with the people rather than through institutional ways, such as the students' movements or political parties, "[We work] with urban occupations, with the traditional communities . . . directly with people. We are in contact with traditional populations, peasants, *quilombolas* [villagers of communities descending from runaway slaves], Indians." Maria emphasized throughout the interview that her group was nonpartisan and independent, and each member had the same value and importance.

Throughout the interviews, it was noteworthy that the affirmation that these fluid, nonhierarchical collectives offered more opportunities to effect social and political changes in the present over more conventional approaches. These preferences were based on the belief that institutionalized groups did not allow individuals to question authority, as opposed to their groups, which gave them freedom to act and to construct their thoughts and identities. They viewed participating in a political party and its regimentation as limiting their freedom of action.

To feel free as an agent and at the same time to belong to a collective was contrasted with submission to a hierarchy, to the "boxing in of ideas," to institutionalization. In the same vein, it was important for the interviewees not to give up their own ideas that promoted further internal differentiation inside the group. Contradictorily enough, they feared that the exposure of different points of view might lead to unending conflicts that might demand energy and time as well as inhibit action.

The group dynamics seemed to achieve the aim of uniting members around a cause while maintaining autonomy of action for the individual. The word autonomy, in fact, appeared in all the interviews and was described as something positive, as compatible with their aspirations for the types of groups in which they wished to participate. Autonomy here referred not simply to one's own regulation of action, guaranteed by a nonhierarchical distribution of roles, but also one's own way of viewing and representing social reality and one's own lifestyle.

The value placed on individual autonomy was a point of convergence among the respondents. While responses to questions regarding their ways of engagement or their perception of formal politics differed according to the interviewees' socioeconomic background, freedom of action and ideological autonomy were common issues. Their identification with the collectives they belonged to revolved around broad signifiers. Another sense of political participation represented, for them, the possibility of acting collectively without being locked up in a group identity which would inhibit

or even prevent individual action or the individual's way of life. Thus, the idea and ideal of belonging to a collective that these young people held was one that should allow for the experience of individual autonomy, regarded as the space where individual choices, opinions, and desires could be expressed and maintained in the presence of other equals.

Conclusion

This analysis of alternative ways of political participation by young people has demonstrated a significant contrast with conventional forms of political participation and should be contextualized within broader forms of popular mobilization encouraged by Latin American social movements in general.

To engage oneself in fluid and nonhierarchical collectives seems to open up new and, seemingly, easier ways of coping with the negative effects of institutionalization, such as, the hierarchical and bureaucratic aspects of formal institutions, which are seen as an obstacle to practical action and to effective changes in the present. Like the "activists of the way of subjectivity" and "everyday makers" described by Geoffrey Pleyers[36] and Henrik Bang,[37] respectively, the youth we interviewed valued forms of participation in which there should be room for their singularities, affections, emotions, interpersonal exchanges, conviviality, and creativity.

It is in the neighborhood, the city, and community that these young people want to experiment with alternative militancy practices with their peers in collectives based on values they would like the political world to be built on. Their political practices thus reflect what they are fighting for, that is, greater participation of individuals in making decisions, horizontal group organization, limited delegation, and respect for plurality and freedom. In contrast to alternative youth movements in other parts of the world described by Pleyers and Bang, the struggle against poverty and social misery are priorities in these young people's activism. For some, who lived in the poor slum communities, social problems were a direct part of their lives; others, who had not experienced material hardship, felt compelled to act by the miseries they witnessed and identified with. All of them were motivated by a sense of solidarity and responsibility for the suffering of others. They shared a conception of political activism that involved the construction of spaces autonomously organized, allowing for direct action and the offering of solutions to social needs.

Individual choice and decision are shown to be highly valued. Group constraint over individual action should be kept to a minimum. In this sense, it seems difficult to see how different points of views are taken into account, or how this view can prove compatible with youth's own conception of politics as a collective enterprise.

In general, the respondents' focus was on the performance of local action. To devote time to debates of ideas and possible alternatives of action was often seen as deterring mobilization, leaving aside practical and concrete problems that need solution in order to lose oneself in "high-flown ideological debates." Once all could be united around a pragmatic agenda, that was all that should be aimed at. A schism between action and discourse could be noted, indicating a fear of confronting plurality and potential sources of conflict. One wonders then whether political action based on such a pragmatic way does not evade the crux of political life. The collectives examined in this investigation seemed to be isolated units, each devoted to its own cause. It is doubtful whether the impact of their action can be visible beyond the specific locality where they act, or even if this impact can be recognized by other similar groups. One wonders whether the emphasis on the autonomously organized group secures a self-sufficient image for the group, constraining it from difficult dialogs with possible partners.

If Chantal Mouffe and others are correct in describing politics as an arena of antagonism and struggle,[38] it seems likely that these fluid collectives are reiterating, in practice, another form of an individualized project, even though they rhetorically claim to disavow the individualistic society.

The great importance given to personal interpellation caused by social suffering dismisses other potential sources of conflict among peers regarding the determinants of one's actions, choices, and opinions. What seems at stake, then, is a refusal to compromise and deal with a wider context of conflicting forces. For them political action is tinged by a kind of voluntaristic undertaking. Such a project curtails the possibility of making sense of wider social problems and how they impinge on one's own action and on those same social problems youth would like to change.

This aspect calls for a concept of political action that extrapolates agendas based on specific local actions limited to what each individual can do. Some youth admit that permanent and ample social changes cannot be achieved by their ''alternative'' programs. Nevertheless, their activism is not purposefully directed toward changing paradigms of domination, be they economic, ideological or cultural; it seems as if there is a self-limiting contentment about what can be achieved, and about the way these changes, small as they are, can be achieved in the present by their direct action.

The loss of the credibility of formal politics, that is, of parties, government, and institutions, has distanced not only young people, but adults as well, from political engagement. However, new experiments—in the nature of political engagement, in the forms of political action—are taking place, which are closer to people's demands and expectations. As they experiment, youth are likely to face emergent problems arising from the tensions and the complexity of political processes, including the legitimacy of the social order and its distribution of powers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

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4. Lucia Rabello de Castro, "Juventude e Socialização Política: Atualizando o Debate," *Psicologia: Teoria e Pesquisa* 25, no. 4 (2009): 479–87; Nuno Augusto, "A Juventude e a(s) Política(s): Desinstitucionalização e Individualização," *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais* 81 (2008): 155–77.

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6. Lucia Rabello de Castro, "Participação Política e Juventude: Do Mal-Estar à Responsabilização Pelo Destino Comum," *Revista de Sociologia e Política* 16, no. 30 (2008): 253–68; Elísio Estanque, "Jovens, Estudantes e 'Repúblicos': Culturas Estudantis e Crise do Associativismo em Coimbra," *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais* 81 (2008): 9–41; Pippa Norris, "Young People & Political Activism: From Politics of Loyalties to the Politics of Choice?" (paper presented at Young People and Democratic Institutions: From Disillusionment to Participation, Strasbourg, Council of Europe Symposium, 27–28 November, 2003); Therese O'Toole, David Marsh, and Su Jones, *Young People and Politics in the UK Apathy or Alienation?* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Geoffrey Pleyers, *Alter-Globalization: Becoming Actors in the Global Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010).

7. Lucia Rabello de Castro, Beatriz Pérez, and Conceição Silva, "Trabalho Solidário: Em Busca de Outros Valores para a Participação Política," *Revista Praia Vermelha: Estudos de Política e Teoria Social* 19 (2009): 109–24.

8. Maria da Glória Gohn, *Teorias dos Movimentos Sociais: Paradigmas Clássicos e Contemporâneos* (São Paulo, Brazil: Edições Loyola, 1997); Maria da Glória Gohn, *Novas Teorias dos Movimentos Sociais* (São Paulo, Brazil: Edições Loyola, 2008).

9. With the exceptions of Haiti, where something close to a national, social and racial revolution, that is "a true and complete decolonization of power," took place; the movement led by Tupac Amaru in Peru; and the more or less radical revolutionary attempts in Mexico and Bolivia, the process of formation of the new States of Latin America was led by a small white minority that excluded the majority of the continent's inhabitants—blacks, indigenous peoples, and people of mixed ancestry—from participating in decision making concerning social and political organization. See, Aníbal Quijano, "Colonialidad del Poder, Eurocentrismo y América Latina," in *La Colonialidad del Saber: Eurocentrismo y Ciencias Sociales. Perspectivas Latinoamericanas*, ed. Edgar Lander (Buenos Aires, Argentina: CLACSO, 2000), 233.

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15. Ernesto Laclau, "Os Novos Movimentos Sociais e a Pluralidade do Social," *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais* 1, no. 2 (1986): 41–47; Alain Touraine, "Os Novos Conflitos Sociais: Para Evitar Mal-Entendidos," *Lua Nova* 17 (1983): 5–18; Alain Touraine, "Na Fronteira dos Movimentos Sociais," *Sociedade e Estado* 21 (2006): 17–28.

16. Cicero Araujo and Javier Amadeo, *Teoria Política Latino-Americana* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Luxemburg, 2010); Leonardo Avritzer and Sérgio Costa, "Teoria Crítica, Democracia e Esfera Pública: Concepções e Usos na América Latina," *Dados* 47, no. 4 (2004): 703–28; Tilman Evers, "De Costas para o Estado, Longe do Parlamento," *Novos Estudos Cebrap* 2 (1983): 25–39; Tilman Evers, "Identidade: A Face Oculta dos Novos Movimentos Sociais," *Novos Estudos Cebrap* 2, no. 4 (1984): 11–23.

17. Ana Maria Doimo, *A Vez e a Voz do Popular: Movimentos Sociais e Participação Política no Brasil Pós-70* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Relume Dumará, 1995), 29.

18. Ângela Alonso, "As Teorias dos Movimentos Sociais: Um Balanço do Debate," *Revista Lua Nova* 76 (2009): 49–86; Ilse Scherer-Warren, *Redes de Movimentos Socias* (São Paulo, Brazil: Edições Loyola, 2009).

19. Paulo Freire, *Educação como Prática de Liberdade* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Paz e Terra, 2008), 24.

20. Ibid., 83.

21. Ibid., 43.

22. Ann Mische, "De Estudantes a Cidadãos: Redes de Jovens e Participação Política," *Revista Brasileira de Educação* 5–6 (1997): 134–50.

23. Ibid., 136.

24. Even if it is redundant to take the youth category to define itself, and it carries a certain obviousness, we are referring to the movement, composed of various actors—including social and political movements—that took shape in Brazil in the 1990s to defend the existence of a youth singularity and the struggle for achievement of specific rights for this segment, supported by demand in developing public policy proposals. See, Maria Freitas, *Juventude e Adolescência no Brasil: Referências Conceituais* (São Paulo, Brazil: Ação Educativa, 2005).

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33. Research projects developed by Interdisciplinary Centre for Research on Contemporary Child and Youth (NIPIAC) over the years, such as "Subjectivation Political in Childhood and Youth in Institutional Contexts: Democracy in Schools" (*Subjetivação Política na Infância e Juventude em Contextos Institucionais: a Democracia nas Escolas*), and "Difference and Participation: Political Subjectivation in Childhood and Adolescence Contemporary" (*Diferença e Participação: a Subjetivação Política na Infância e Adolescência Contemporâneas*). These projects were supported by Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education (CAPES), the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), and the Carlos Chagas Foundation for Research Development in the State of Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ).

34. Rosalind Gill, "Discourse Analysis: Practical Implementation," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and Social Sciences*, ed. John Richardson (Leicester, UK: BPS Books), 125–40; Ian Parker, *Discourse Dynamics* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Jonathan Potter, "Discourse Analysis and Constructionist Approaches: Theorical Background," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and Social Sciences*, ed. J. T. E. Richardson (Hove, UK: The British Psychological Society Books, 1996), 125–40.
35. All names used in the following sections are fictitious.
36. Ibid., 33.
37. Ibid.
38. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

Author Biographies

Conceição Firmina Seixas Silva is an assistant professor of psychology at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) and researcher at the Centre for Research and Study of Contemporary Childhood and Youth (NIPIAC), of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).

Lucia Rabello de Castro is a professor of Child and Youth Development at the Institute of Psychology, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where she is also a founder and scientific director of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Research on Contemporary Child and Youth (NIPIAC). She is a senior researcher of the Brazilian Council of Science and Technological Development (CNPQ) and was named as "Scientist of the State of Rio de Janeiro" by the Carlos Chagas Foundation for Research Development.