

“The class, race and age of activists in Brazilian social movements is becoming more diverse”

[Democratic Audit](#) interview with Marilia Pontes Esposito and Raquel Sousa, by Cheryl Brumley.

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Marilia Esposito (ME): The first Brazilian youth-led movements in the latter half of the 20th century were carried out almost exclusively by middle class university students. Back then, the middle classes were in the process of upward social mobility and they also had access to a higher-level of education. They led protests throughout the 1960’s -- the counter-culture and the hippie movement were predominately led by them – and they were especially opposed to the Brazilian military dictatorship.

After the dictatorship, as re-democratization took place, working class movements expanded, and an intense presence of young people from lower income classes took center stage in clashes; and new forms of protest were expressed through arts and culture. Gender issues and race matters also came to the fore. So for example, more recently we have seen an increasing number of protest movements by young black women. What we have today is a tendency for a greater diversity of social origins within these movements in which young people are taking part. And therefore I, personally, no longer consider it to be a mainly middle class activity.

In fact, it is quite the opposite, and even more so with the expansion and reiteration of affirmative action towards easier access to higher education in the past 10 years. The university students that are engaged in collective political activities within or outside the institution itself, are not just from middle class backgrounds but also, and possibly even on a larger scale, from the lower income classes that have recently gained access to a higher education.

Raquel Sousa (RS): It is interesting to think about how people are organising themselves according to traits that characterise them – so things like social status, race or gender. There are political organizations that clearly focus on some groups more than others and that also express themselves in very distinct ways, but sometimes their actions are limited. Take the “Right To the City” movement, which is an action movement for those who live on the periphery of cities. They are not on the streets and earning supporters. Why? Because it’s very difficult to mobilize people to come to the streets, especially when you’re addressing an agenda that concerns poor, black, young people. And part of it is due to their fears of how the police will react to their street protests. For example, the security force’s reaction to the Passe Livre Movement, which advocates for free fares on public transport, was extremely exaggerated and violent. It just so happens that for those who are black, this is a rather common practice. If every protestor is more or less afraid of being beaten by the police at some point, then a protestor who is young, black and from the slums has an even greater fear of this. It’s an even more intimidating scenario for them.

ME: It’s interesting what Raquel is talking about because, the rights to the city or social privileges demanded by these groups are more visible and usually attract young people from different social statuses. But when it comes to race, when you have movements for affirmative policies – like the right to equal vacancy quotas in Universities for example –

these are demands that appear from black people from many different age groups. And these demands are posed to the executive or legislative power because street movements for black young people are harder to actualize and this is because police violence towards this group is higher than any other, especially as Raquel says if you are young, black and poor. So these three characteristics stand in the way of these movements from taking on a more active political stance, but it doesn't stop these movements from developing different forms of expressions underground.

RS: A good example for me of diversity amongst social movements outside of mainstream politics are the "Slut Walk" events which took place in Brazil and around the world. It is carried out by young women, generally, who are not necessarily engaged in political parties but have their demands towards public policies and express them in ways that don't particularly relate to parties, commissions or councils. They take their voices to the street, with sloganed t-shirts and power chants. These individual strategies are adopted because many of their issues are not always on the ballot box – like the abortion bill is.

ME: I would also mention that you can find groups that have only this expressive dimension to them. They have an agenda of social criticism but not policy change. Take for example the Hip Hop, Rap, or Graffiti movements, that are very strong among young people, and were particularly strong around the 1990's and during the past decade. The power of these movements are their ability to stimulate social awareness and to denounce, things like racism, but they are not demanding a direct change towards political or judicial institutions.

So young people are present in these different spectrums of action but it is also important to note that we still have young Brazilians who are also actively engaged in political parties. But even for young political activists that have taken a more traditional political route, they still want to find in politics a space where they can fulfill their personal goals, not just a collective agenda. This is in itself very different from the traditional militant approach to politics in which the collective's needs overcome the individual's. One of the differences that I believe happen within non-traditional political activist groups is the horizontalism of participation, without this need for a hierarchy or rather, verticalism, seen in more traditional political groups. In general, in these new groups there's the presence of self-sufficient, horizontal collectives with flexible leadership. They are the networks of political movements who disregard a high-leveled view of institutionalism.

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