
PRIVATE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND THE DEMOCRATIC IMAGINATION: PROJECTS, AND PARADOXES

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Abstract: *Based on ethnographic research in one private elite preschool in Rio de Janeiro in 2002 that sought to imprint citizenship notions on young children, this article discusses the relationship between educational practice, early childhood education, and the meanings, possibilities, and limitations of a critical and democratic pedagogy. I begin with a description of the school and its discourses of citizenship education. Next, I show how the everyday practices through which children learned to become citizens through the production of a “citizenship habitus” focused on the importance of politics and on being a responsible citizen. I then discuss the paradoxes of this project, given that it was a private and elitist school; despite its egalitarian intentions, the school also served as a site for class reproduction. Still, I also suggest that, when young children cease to at least take inequality for granted, a small step is taken in the right direction.*

Keywords: *citizenship, critical pedagogy, democracy, early childhood education.*

Resumo: *Com base em pesquisa etnográfica numa pré-escola de elite no Rio de Janeiro que se propunha a “ensinar” cidadania a crianças pequenas, este artigo discute as relações entre (a) prática educacional, (b) educação infantil e (c) os sentidos, possibilidades e limitações de uma pedagogia crítica e democrática. Início o artigo descrevendo a escola e seus discursos sobre essa “educação para a cidadania”. A seguir, mostro como as práticas pelas quais as crianças aprenderiam a ser cidadãos através de um “habitus cidadão” se concentravam na importância da ação política e em como ser um cidadão responsável. Trato então dos paradoxos desse projeto: como essa era uma escola privada e elitista, apesar de sua proposta igualitária ela continuaria a servir como um espaço de reprodução de classe. Apesar disso, concludo*

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sugerindo que quando crianças tão pequenas passam a pelo menos questionar a desigualdade, está-se dando um pequeno passo na direção correta.

Palavras-chave: *cidadania, democracia, educação infantil, pedagogia crítica.*

Introduction

In our politico-pedagogic practice, we seek to promote the transformation of the present society of the oppressed into a society of equals [...] we seek to construct a space where children and adults are active producers of the society we live in, and [where] we exercise our citizenship. Our practice is, therefore, participatory and dialogical. Attentive to an education directed at human rights, we seek to promote sensibility, the capacity to react, and solidarity [...] [our project is that] of a praxis whose central, fundamental challenge is that of, and for, a democratic school. (Excerpt from O Sonho's "politico-pedagogic project," 2002).¹

Let's think about all the children of this world [...] Let's wish that all children of the world may have the right to be a citizen. (Poster at O Sonho school).

I collected this data – excerpts from a school's politico-pedagogic project and a poster hanging by one classroom's entrance – while doing ethnographic research on the links between schooling and citizenship education; or rather, on the possibilities of what some in the anthropology and sociology of education have labelled a "critical democratic education" or a "critical pedagogy" (Darder; Baldotano; Torres, 2003; Giroux, 2003; Hantzapoulos, 2015). There might be nothing surprising about this particular text, given that on some level all education can be seen as being about the making of citizens (Levinson; Foley; Holland, 1996) – were it not for the fact that this was a day care center and preschool catering to children between three months and six years of age. What was it about this preschool, I wondered, that made it naturalize such political language and target it at such young children? And what might this politicization teach us about schooling, education, and citizen- and democracy-making, especially as applied to early childhood education?

¹ To protect the anonymity of all involved, I have changed the school's name as well as any other names mentioned; throughout the text I only use pseudonyms.

This article offers an ethnography of this particular space of early childhood education to examine the assumptions underlying its proposed form of citizenship education. I focus on a double assumption embedded in this endeavor: one, that small children can be “taught” how to become citizens, and two, that they are seen as particularly apt targets of democratic citizenship education, so malleable that they almost become *tabula rasas* to be molded into “model-citizens.” The notion of children as citizens, and its fabrication in school settings, raises interesting questions. After all, they are very particular kinds of rights-bearing subjects, not the least because they are not necessarily capable of making political demands on their own behalf, thus fitting only uneasily into the notion of the free, autonomous, and independent subject that a liberal-democratic citizenship presumes – the younger they are, the more they depend on adult care for their very survival.

To engage in this discussion, the article focuses on the discourses and practices I observed in this particular school and the ways it proposed a “radical critical pedagogy” (Giroux, 2003). That this data comes from late 2002 makes this study even more salient, not the least because the political climate was so different then: Brazil was getting ready to elect its first Worker’s Party president, Luís Inácio Lula da Silva who, after running in three other elections, finally won with over 61% (around 53 million) of votes. In early 2017, another Worker’s Party president has been impeached, seemingly halting the democratic hopes and expectations of a decade and a half ago. When I conducted this fieldwork in the second semester of 2002, democratic hopes and anticipation were much higher, especially for those hoping for more democracy and less inequality.

This anticipation was part of an even wider process. As political scientist O’Donnell has noted, there was an initial enthusiasm with procedural democracy in Brazil in the early to mid-eighties, right when the military dictatorship ended and general elections were heralded, but this was quickly sobered by continuing inequality and rights violations, on the one hand, and the need to universalize the concept of citizenship, on the other (O’Donnell, 1994, p. 56). O’Donnell (1994) thus saw the need for a “second transition” in Brazilian re-democratization, namely, the effort to expand the ideals of a “culture of democracy” onto all realms of social life. Electing a left-oriented president with a discourse of more equality, democracy, and policies for the poor seemed like a move in the right direction.

Significantly, the plight of Brazilian children, in the form of disproportionate child poverty rates and rights abuses (Neri; Costa, 2001), was centrally targeted as one major problem the new democracy must face in its quest for more universal citizenship (O'Donnell, 1994). In fact, several in the Worker's Party were then quoted as saying they would treat the "question of childhood" as their "absolute priority" – as did Benedita da Silva when she briefly took office as governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro in April 2002 (Veloso, 2003).

This prioritizing of childhood echoed, of course, the 1990 *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente*, perhaps one of the world's most advanced pieces of legislation on children's and adolescents' well-being and rights provision (Brasil, 2016). Matters such as child poverty or violence against children were now framed in terms of rights and citizenship, and a view of children and adolescents as both an "absolute priority" and rights-bearing, democratic subjects emerged (Brasil, 2016).

Also to situate this school, in 2002 the Ministry of Education had just issued an ambitious educational reform project targeted at young children (Brasil, 1998, 1999). Its key documents were the 1998 *Referencial Curricular Nacional para Educação Infantil*, whose focus was to reconceptualize even early childhood education as also a form of citizenship education (Brasil, 1998), soon followed by the 1999 *Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para Educação Infantil* (Brasil, 1999), which described the steps educational facilities must take to ensure, for small children, "the integral development of their identities" in order to make them "capable of growing as citizens whose rights to childhood are acknowledged" (Brasil, 1998, v. 1, p. 5).

That this was a school in Rio de Janeiro is also significant. Poverty and rights violations, on the one hand, and the need for more democracy, on the other, have always been especially visible there, due to both the proximity between elite neighborhoods and *favelas* and the prevalence of "street children" (Veloso, 2003). But, in 2002, a few key episodes further escalated both the matter of rights abuses and the fear of violence that, by definition, threatened democracy (Holston, 2008): a journalist was tortured and killed most horribly by drug traffickers, and in September 2002 one drug gang, for the first time in a Rio elite neighborhood, forced all stores to close for an entire day. That these children were privileged does not mean they, and their parents and teachers, need not contend with the threats of daily urban violence.

Democratic and egalitarian ideals embodied in a soon-to-be working-class president, urban poverty and violence, children as a national priority, the notion of children as rights-bearing citizens, and the need for all schooling to promote such citizenship all came together in this school's daily practices. It has espoused progressive ideals since its inception in 1980: it was and is a member of the UNESCO "Education for Peace" network of over 7,000 schools in 171 countries and a big proponent of Paulo Freire's "pedagogy of transformation" (Freire, 2003), which presumes an active subject able to critically engage in the educational process. In all my years studying this topic, I have yet to find a school where the ideals of rights, participation, democracy, and responsibility were taken more seriously and were more deeply integrated into the curriculum.

Over several months accompanying this school's four- to six-year-olds, I had many occasions to witness how seriously it took its "politico-pedagogic project," a document required by the Ministry of Education where each school, pre-school, and day care center must state its basic educational purpose, as well as its commitment to children's citizenship education. From my experience at other schools, though, I knew that most viewed these documents as simply one additional requirement in order to receive permission, by the municipal board of education, to operate as an early childhood education facility: before choosing O Sonho, I visited ten other schools, public and private; in most, "citizenship education" only meant, say, staging a mock election to name a school pet, or watching a movie about child poverty with the children. Not at O Sonho, though: there, the entire staff seemed intent on putting the school's "politico-pedagogic project" in practice.

But there were other particularities about that school that made its democratic pedagogy even more interesting as a research setting: this was a private school located in an elite neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro that, obviously, catered to upper-class parents' child care and early education needs. Housed in a remodeled one-family home on a quiet street in this prestigious neighborhood, its interiors (and people) were firmly hidden from public view by a tall wall, a metal gate, bars on each window, and a security guard. Moreover, given that its tuition rivalled that of the city's best private high schools, this was a deeply segregated and exclusive environment by definition.

One question this raises is: what could such "citizenship education" possibly entail, given that it was being taught in a deeply private, privileged, and

segregated site? Another question is, why bother looking at such spaces of privilege, when much of the anthropology of education has, since Paul Willis' groundbreaking study, preferred to look at underprivileged educational sites to understand the role of schooling in the reproduction of inequality (Willis, 1977)? This article chooses to look at a site of educational privilege *because* it is privileged; to understand inequality, it is also important to look at elites. This school was a useful case to investigate such issues because, while it was undeniably an elite school for elite children in an elite neighborhood, it was also remarkably apt, and creative, at developing young children's citizenship education. This article focuses on both the school's intentions and the paradoxes it faced while tentatively teaching rights, citizenship, and participation to its young, privileged children.

Research was conducted as follows: over a period of six months, I visited the school from Monday to Friday, and accompanied the entire afternoon shift (about five hours per day). I designed the research in this manner because I wanted to accompany as many school activities as possible, and since they were scattered over the week, it was necessary to be there every week day. Research methods were a combination of observation, when I would be asked to "find a corner for myself" and stay there as quietly as possible so as not to disturb the children or divert their attention from their scheduled activities, and other data gathering techniques, such as interviews or analysis of curriculum materials. Occasionally, I would be allowed to talk with the children, or to participate in games, storytelling, and other activities.

I tried to interfere in the school dynamics as little as possible, and tended to only participate in such practices when invited. With the slightly older children (between four and six years), it often was the case that they were asked to perform a particular task by themselves, and those moments were used to interview teachers and other staff. I also regularly conducted open interviews with the school directors and other personnel. Interviewing children themselves was not welcomed due to their tender age.

I begin the article with a description of this particular school setting, paying special attention to its utopian notion of democracy-making. Next, I show how children were drilled into this form of democratic activity, in what I call the production of a "citizenship habitus" that focused on (a) learning the importance of politics, and (b) becoming a responsible citizen towards the underprivileged. I then locate this project of participatory democratic

education in an elitist, privatized, and commodified setting. Rather than argue that this was merely a paradox, I show that the project was utopian to begin with, and thus could only be enacted in such a segregated, secluded, secure space, isolated from the many entrenched inequalities and imagined “perils” of urban violence that are characteristic of Rio’s complicated social milieu. In the final section, I argue that, despite its self-stated mission of a democratic education, the school could not help but reproduce some of the very privileges it sought to overcome through inculcating in children a notion of “responsible citizenship.” As such, it ended up acting as a site of class reproduction which, as the anthropology of education has long shown, is typical of most schooling (Bourdieu; Passeron, 1977; Bowles; Gintis, 1976). Still, I also suggest that, when young children cease to at least take inequality for granted, a small step may be taken in the right direction.

Daily citizen-making

I never expected to find something like O Sonho in the very midst of an upscale Rio neighborhood. Everything about the school was intended to create what one might call a “prototype” of democracy for fostering children’s “critical thinking.” Such thinking, in turn, was conceived as important because it was to be the means through which students would participate in the making of “a more fraternal and egalitarian society” (according to the school’s politico-pedagogical project).

For O Sonho, therefore, citizenship was fundamentally about each individual doing his/her job in building a better society. In this vein, during regular school activities, the teachers would consistently discuss issues of poverty, labor, or politics, always under the assumption that their children needed to learn how to be individuals concerned with the common good. More specifically, this form of citizenship education was a very concerted effort to politicize children, by teaching them the importance of taking an active stance in public life.

The teachers and other staff members shared this concern with societal transformation and democracy, as well as a general commitment to left-wing politics: all of the staff members I interviewed were Lula supporters, for example. Issues such as the problem of street children in Rio, or the threat of armed urban violence, were commonly discussed in class, from the time when

children were about three years old. And, because the pedagogical methods employed presumed that children should critically engage in class discussions, it was assumed that they would gradually come to develop an active involvement in such issues. Even the weekly arts and crafts class was often used as an opportunity for social reflection, such as when the four-year-olds were asked to make drawings about how children were affected by urban violence. Other topics that they should turn into arts projects were the importance of peace, the presidential elections, environmentalism, and “national disarmament day.”

But, more importantly, the children were encouraged to literally take action. In this spirit, they were once asked to bring their toy guns to school, where they would be thrown away, together, in a big pile, so each child could “symbolize her own commitment to peace.” On another occasion, all children – and their families – were asked to engage in a school-wide campaign for food donations. Starting with the two-year-olds, all students were to collect basic food staples from their neighbors and in their own street, and then accompany the teachers in delivering the food to a nearby day care center for needy children. The children would also sporadically be taken on short field trips in the neighborhood. On Labor Day, for example, the teachers took them in small groups on a walk around a commercial street, and encouraged them to talk to merchants about their work. “But do you know what interested them the most,” said their teacher to me, smiling, “it was when they saw a street child. They started asking him questions about why he was living in the streets, why his parents weren’t there, and why he needed to work. I was so proud of them!”

Notions such as the right to choose, the right to voice one’s opinion, and the importance of participation were encouraged at every level of the school organization. Children were allowed to voice their own opinions about teachers or particular classes, for example, or to refrain from participating in a specific activity if they did not want to. Through being allowed to choose the path of their own intellectual pursuits, the children were assumed to be learning precisely this kind of “important citizenship lesson,” as another teacher noted:²

They are allowed to choose, and to participate. This is how they learn to become independent. They are able to develop their full potential because they

² Interview, September 2002.

participate actively in this. It is not mandated [by us]. They do it on their own. Isn't this beautiful? This is what citizenship is about.

A class called “bodily expression” was one among many learning tools through which children were drilled into basic liberal democratic notions. One day, for example, I sat down with the children for their weekly class. Usually, the teacher had them enact small plays, but on that day, she announced that they would be doing something different. She said that there would be a very special presentation, to celebrate the “Day of the Child.” Then, she took out a sheet of paper, and began to read:

All children have the right to life. All children have the right to a name. All children have the right to a nationality. All children have the right to express their opinions freely. All children have the right to be protected against maltreatment, against drugs, against any form of violence [...]³

When she had finished reading, she explained that those were the basic rights of all children, all over the world, and that they would be doing a presentation based on those rights. The teacher then divided them into two smaller groups, and began rehearsing the lines with them. Each of the younger children was to memorize one smaller portion of the text, while the six-year-olds would be getting the longer lines. But, as they usually did in that class, the children seemed less interested in the teacher than in fooling around, making jokes and tickling each other. She became impatient, and explained that each child was big enough to be able to participate in that activity, and to control herself so as not to disturb the others. The children calmed down somewhat, and began to happily recite their lines. Suddenly, the school principal entered the classroom, explaining that simple reciting would not do. “Make sure they understand what they are saying,” she said to the teacher, “they all need to really get into the spirit of this. Otherwise, it will be useless.”

The children became very quiet, and listened carefully while the principal took the sheet of paper from the teacher's hands and began to read it aloud. After each line, she would pause, look each of the children in the eye, and patiently explain what it meant. The scene quickly turned into a workshop

³ 09/23/02

on children's rights, where she would ask questions that the children needed to think through, then voice their opinions. "All children have the right to life," she began, "what does this mean? Who knows?" "It means that all children need to be cared for," said one girl. "Yes," the principal replied, and complemented:

This means that every child has the right to exist. Everyone is equally important, and needs to be equally protected. Your mommy and daddy made you with much love, and care for you very much. But for many children, their parents didn't even want them to exist. But they were born, and they are as important as you and I. We all need to make sure that they have the same right to exist that you do.

The children suddenly became very excited, and, at each new line that was read, more willing to express their opinions. By the time they reached the part about protection from maltreatment and violence, the class had become a lesson in democratic participation: "See," the principal said, "this is very important. You all have rights, and other children have them too. But many children suffer because their rights are not guaranteed." "Yes," yelled the children, "there are children with no food, no home, nothing." "Yes. And how can we help other children's rights?" "By voting," shouted a six-year-old boy. "Exactly," replied the principal, visibly pleased, "we vote so we can tell politicians what we want to happen. We all need to participate."

Following that lead, she started discussing the coming elections with the children, and asked them to name their parents' candidates. Some children even knew how many candidates there were, as well as their names. "I'm voting for Lula," said the principal. "So is my mom!" "So are my mom and dad!," volunteered other children. What had started out as a bodily expression class turned into a lesson in politics, culminating in the following scene:

Child: My mom and dad don't vote.

Principal: What? How come they don't vote? I'm sure they do, ask them.

C.: No, no. They don't. They don't like politics. They don't vote.⁴

⁴ Voting is of course mandatory in Brazil. What the child meant was that her parents chose to make their votes void or blank.

P. (enthusiastically): Darling, there is no such thing as not liking politics. Everything you do is politics. If I put my foot here, I'm doing politics. If I choose to put it there, I'm doing politics. If I go to the bathroom, I'm doing politics. Everything is political, don't forget this.

Throughout my time there I was to encounter many examples of what could only be described as the drilling of children into participatory democracy.⁵ One time, about one week before the presidential elections, a six-year-old asked me: "Are you voting for Lula, too? I hope you are, he is the best candidate." On that same day, the arts teacher confided that she was "very pleased" with them: "Can you believe," she said to me, "that I asked them to draw a picture of a [presidential] candidate, and only Pedro didn't know what they looked like? All the others made pictures of Lula. Aren't they wonderful?" All children had made pictures of Lula, beard and all, and some had even drawn a red star, the symbol of the Workers' Party.

By far the most interesting moment in the six months I spent there was the "presidential election" held by the school, two days before the actual election took place in October 2002. Much like that other, "adult" election, the staff had been preparing hard for the upcoming event, and even special "picture Ids" and "electoral cards" had been crafted for the children. For almost an entire month, parents had been instructed to discuss the election – and their own political choices – with their children. I was observing the five- and six-year-olds at that time; their teacher had been especially focused on the meaning and purpose of a democratic election.

The children were very excited when, finally, the great day arrived. Parents were asked to make sure that each child came to school carrying the appropriate "documents" the school had made; no one would be allowed to vote without proper identification. I arrived and found the children's excitement mounting. When it was time to cast the votes, I left the classroom with the children, and suddenly found myself in the midst of what looked like a real electoral site. A Brazilian flag had been posted just beside the ballot box, where a five-year-old boy was sitting at a table. He was the "inspector," and his role was to check that each voter had the appropriate papers, and that no

⁵ I worked her from July to December, 2002, and these comments and quotes are all based on that fieldwork.

one cheated. He was also holding a small card box with tiny pieces of paper in it, each marked with a candidate's name, number, and photograph – a useful addition for those voters still unable to read. At his side, a six-year-old girl was holding a pencil and a sheet of paper marked with the candidates' names. Her job would be to record the votes. In an orderly manner, the children, all ranging from three to six years of age, had formed a line and were holding their electoral documents. Whenever a child's name was called, she would take a few steps forward and present her papers. Then, deadly serious, she would look into the card box for a piece of paper showing her candidate's picture, pick it up, and deposit it in the ballot box.

When all votes had been safely deposited, the children returned to their classrooms. It was now time to count the votes, a task entrusted to three students especially proficient in their math skills. My job was to oversee the counting, and I was amused to see the children cheer at each new vote for Lula – who, just like in the later, “adult” elections, won by a large margin. The three then proceeded to visit each classroom and scream out the winner's name. Those visits were met by much cheering and dancing on the part of the teachers and the students. Soon, the whole school was chanting “Lula, Lula” – even in the toddlers' class.

After it was all over, I sat down to discuss the election with the school principal. “This was wonderful, wasn't it? Not one of those children will ever refrain from participating in any kind of election,” she said, “they'll be true democrats, and they'll love it.” And she was right: the children did seem extremely excited about the whole affair, and very proud of their own participation in it. “Did you see me vote?” a girl asked me after Lula's victory was confirmed in the news, “I helped make him win. I'm so happy!” Even more amazing was that, against my initial assumptions, not all the children were replicating their parents' choices. “My dad will vote for Serra,” a five-year-old boy commented just before the school's “election,” “but I'm not sure. I think that Lula will be better for us. He will do good things for people. Especially poor people.” Filled with pride, another five-year-old boy exclaimed just the day after the “real” elections: “I actually voted! I pressed the button in the computer, Lula's face appeared and smiled at me, and I pressed ‘ok.’ I voted!”⁶

⁶ He meant that his father let him press the button on the electronic ballot box.

It would be tempting to regard this episode as only one idiosyncrasy of one progressive preschool. But, from another angle, the school was simply taking to their logical conclusion the above-mentioned guidelines by the Ministry of Education (Brasil, 1999, v. 1, p. 13). Through this mock practice of voting, the children were assumed to be learning a most basic democratic lesson: that being a citizen means to be inscribed in the democratic project, and that this opportunity is both universal and centered on this universal citizen's right to vote, and to thus participate in the nation's politics.

Not by coincidence, the school had spent a month prior to the "elections" drilling the children into two main points: their right to choose whomever they wanted, and the crucial importance of voting at all. In exercising their true right of choice, many of the children chose two candidates who ran for office under the names of Garotinho and Rosinha.⁷ Surprised, I asked one teacher if many of the parents were voting for those candidates, especially since I knew that it was mostly Lula who enjoyed their support. "Oh no," she replied happily, "this is just because they like the names. With those names, they think they are really voting for children. But, you know, it's their right of choice."

Apparently, the only "right" the children were not allowed to exercise was the right to refrain from voting. When a three-year-old girl was the only child unwilling to vote at the play election the entire process was stopped, and the principal was summoned for help. "She has to vote," she insisted, "make sure she votes. If she doesn't, this will leave a very strong mark in her, and she'll never forget it."

Early childhood education and democratic utopia

The O Sonho environment was a minutely planned undertaking designed to serve as an educational laboratory where children could learn precisely such a notion of "active citizenship." The assumption was that, in being encouraged to *act* as mini-citizens, the toddlers and preschoolers would gradually acquire habits of participation and choice. Of course, the extension of democratic thinking and participation to this level of everyday practice is just

⁷ Anthony "Garotinho" was a presidential candidate, and his wife "Rosinha" (Rosângela Matheus) was elected governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro.

what, according to O'Donnell (1994), is required so that real democratization can finally be achieved.

In its constant preoccupation with developing their young charges' critical thinking and democratic solidarity, O Sonho was intended as something we might call a democratic utopia. In this small haven of democracy, children as young as a couple of years old could spend part or most of their days learning about "active citizenship" (Mouffe, 1992). This was how this school enacted its self-stated mission, according to its politico-pedagogic project: to give children an "education for human rights and citizenship" conducive to "a solidary social practice."

The utopian undertones of this project seem clear and are similar to other utopian projects: in its proposed "theory of transformation," the "radical quality" of this proposed education is presumed to ideally "colonize [all] that which exists around it" (Holston, 1989, p. 57) – so much so that children were encouraged to discuss their recently-learned views with their parents, or to move around the neighborhood and interact with those less fortunate than them.

To make sense of this argument, it is useful to turn to another study of modern-day utopia in Brazil. In his masterful study of how an entire city was constructed in Brazil to serve as a model for new, more egalitarian social relations, Holston (1989) has provided an illuminating account of modernist utopian thinking. The city of Brasília, he argues, was conceived as "blueprint utopia" by means of which a desired future could be produced (Holston, 1989, p. 85). Each detail, from the built environment to the social relations it encouraged, was intended to serve as a blueprint through which a much-desired transformation in Brazil's profoundly unequal social practices could be achieved (Holston, 1989, 1999). In this utopian environment, all buildings looked the same, and persons of all social classes ideally shared the same buildings and neighborhoods, under the assumption that people inhabiting this space would be "forced" to adopt "the new forms of social experience, collective association, and personal habit" (Holston, 1989, p. 21-22).

As a modernist plan, says Holston, this idea was also millenarian, for "it propose[d] to transform an unwanted present ("the rest of Brazil") by means of a future imagined as radically different, based on pre-established exemplars, and already scripted in master plans" (Holston, 1989). By the same token, in portraying this imagined and desired future, Brasília "represented a negation of existing conditions in Brazil. This utopian difference between the two [was]

precisely the project's premise. Yet, at the same time, [it was] intended [...] as a means to achieve this future – as an instrument of change” (Holston, 1989, p. 5). Thus, more than the mere planning of the new national capital, the project presumed an imagined future inhabited by “new subjects and subjectivities” that would constitute the new “projected nation” (Holston, 1999).

I suggest that the educational environment idealized at O Sonho functioned much in the same manner as the Brazilian utopian project described by Holston – and not coincidentally so. Both were intended as “blueprints” for achieving a radical transformation in Brazil's unequal and anti-democratic social practices. In the case of Brasília, an entire city was built to serve the wider purpose of changing the nation. At this school, both the scope of the project and its immediate aims were more modest – but, I suggest, no less millenarian and utopian. An entire school was built around the premise that educating the young in a true democratic fashion would, almost single-handedly, induce an idealized social transformation through the transformation of habits and subjectivities of individuals. Hence, it was certainly no coincidence that the phrase that I recorded most often during my stay at O Sonho was that “we need to change society...” But how to achieve this in such young children? In the following section, I discuss how the democratic utopia proposed by this school was predicated on the presumed inculcation of what I call a “citizenship habitus” in children.

The production of children's “citizenship habitus”

After I had been visiting O Sonho for a few months, I began to realize that, even against my own initial assumptions, most children did seem to gradually acquire an interest in the school's political concerns. It was very common, for example, to find groups of five-year-olds discussing politically charged issues, such as poverty, the environment, or the rights of children. Even in the realm of their own relationships, with their teachers and among the children, I recorded endless examples of the children's usage of terms such as “participation,” “rights,” and “choice.” One day, for example, four girls were sitting at the drawing table, each working on her own arts project. Another girl approached the group, and asked if someone wanted to do a puzzle with her. No one was interested, and she started crying, begging one particular girl to play with her. That child, on the other hand, said: “No, I don't want to. I have the right to

choose what I want to do,” prompting the first girl to cry even more. One of the other little girls then addressed the teacher: “[Teacher], can you believe that she even cries because of other people’s rights?” To resolve the issue, the teacher took the opportunity to engage the children in a discussion of what it meant to have rights: “She doesn’t want to play with you. It’s her right. You have to understand this, your right ends where your friend’s rights start.”

Puzzled, I often asked the staff how it was that children often as young as three years of age would use such vocabularies. In return, I would always, inevitably, get some variation on the theme that “children internalize this after a while,” or that “you know, it’s their habit. They just do it.” But it only dawned on me that what was really being proposed was the inculcation of an enduring “citizenship habitus” during this conversation with one teacher:⁸

Question: But how can you teach something as complex as citizenship to such small children? How do they learn this?

Teacher: Well, this is how we teach our children about citizenship. We respect them as citizens. Here, every child can say what they want. We listen to them. They learn they have a choice. They are free. It stays with them for life. It’s in their bodies. They incorporate it.

One day I asked the teachers what would happen when the children moved on to grade school where, presumably, they would not find similar “radical democratic” environments. None of the teachers in the group saw a contradiction there. In fact, they informed me that, no matter where their children continued their education, they would have “internalized” the principles they had so fastidiously been taught at O Sonho.⁹ One of them explained: “our children are very easy to recognize, anywhere they go, for three reasons: they know they have a will, they have self-control, and they know how to think for themselves.”

The notion of bodily habitus has been extensively appropriated by the anthropological literature (Comaroff; Comaroff, 1992; Weiss, 1996). However, the fact that, for Bourdieu, habitus is acquired, fundamentally, through the early experience of children, has not found its way into the anthropological canon

⁸ October 2002.

⁹ November 2002.

quite as often. As “enacted belief,” he says, the habitus is “*instilled by the childhood learning* that treats the memory as a living memory-pad” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 68, emphasis added). Early childhood, from this point of view, is a key moment in the embodiment of habitus. Presumably, implies Bourdieu, this is the time when this “pre-verbal taking-for-granted of the world that flows from practical sense” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 68) is more prone to being “learned.” While children are growing up, in this argument, they progressively learn to embody the habitus, so that each individual body, where the habitus is located, comes to reproduce the social order.

By extension, as Bourdieu (1977, p. 94) has also taught us, projects of social reform that seek to produce “new persons” – through the reconfiguration of human subjectivities – often start by targeting bodily habits (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990, also cf. Comaroff; Comaroff, 1992, p. 70). Commonly criticized for leaving little space for social change in his theory of social reproduction, Bourdieu was however well aware that, for the same reason that embodied habitus condenses the basic structures of any given society, concerted attempts at intervening upon habitus also bear the possibility of social change. All societies that seek to produce new persons through processes of “deculturation” and “reculturation,” says Bourdieu (1977, p. 94), tend to intervene upon details such as dress, manners, and other codes of behavior, because “treating the body as a memory, they entrust to it in abbreviated and practical, i.e., mnemonic, form the fundamental principles of the arbitrary content of the culture. The principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness.”

In fact, the making of this particular democratic utopia required precisely such a theory of embodied learning, – as the “bodily expression” class only too clearly exemplifies. In this class, attended by all children over the age of twelve months, the child’s body was treated as “memory” in a very literal manner. In reciting the school’s version of children’s rights, and in staging a public performance of those rights, to which both staff and parents would be invited, the children were, indeed, taught to embody rights-bearing citizenship. Their bodies and minds were thus, through this pedagogic instrument, made to condense the basic meanings of democratic citizenship that this school espoused so dearly. And, as miniature “blueprint utopias,” they were presumed to not only condense the parameters of desired participant citizenship, but to actually serve as embodied instruments for achieving that change.

Private early citizenship education and its contradictions

Much fine anthropological work has looked at the minute practices through which societies try to reconstruct citizenship (Holston, 2008; Holston; Appadurai, 1996) or democratic participation (Paley, 2001) under conditions of rapid social change. In addition, the important work of Aihwa Ong (1999, 2006) on citizenship as a mode of subject-formation has made the case that one must not take “citizenship” as a political category for granted, because it is constructed on a daily basis by actual persons inserted in actual social contexts; citizenship is a process rather than a given, and as such can and should be the focus of ethnographic analysis.

In this article, I follow this lead and investigate the ways that actual persons come to configure themselves (or are configured) as “citizens.” In the case I examine here, this question can be rephrased as: when, why, and for whom does “citizenship” suddenly become a meaningful category, a definition of people’s very mode of being in the world? Why, in other words, does it seem meaningful, in Brazil, to teach ever younger children how to become citizens? What does “children’s citizenship” mean in such a context, and why are so many efforts directed at its practical production?

Chantal Mouffe noted, over two decades ago, that “a radical, democratic citizen must be an active citizen, somebody who *acts* as a citizen, who conceives of herself as a participant in a collective undertaking” (Mouffe, 1992, p. 4, emphasis in original). In this light, it seems fair to argue that O Sonho was a carefully planned undertaking designed to serve as an educational laboratory where children could learn precisely such a notion of “active citizenship.” The assumption was that, in being encouraged to *act* as mini-citizens, the toddlers and preschoolers would gradually acquire habits of participation and choice. To this end, everything was painstakingly designed to provide a “special” space where young children could be indoctrinated in such habits.

But there was also contradiction inscribed in this project. This was because, in being a private school catering to middle and upper-class children, some of its logics were the same as in any elite school in Rio: in an effort to protect their students, all are highly segregated environments. Their secluded buildings are always protected from intruders by high-security walls, gates and bars; often – like at O Sonho – children are literally hidden from outsiders’

view due to the walls' sheer height. Also, the fact that these schools are private establishments, commodified and highly selective, means that cost of tuition itself acts to mark their separation from other persons and predicaments – schools like O Sonho are modes of distinction in themselves (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). With their expensive location, segregated spaces, costly tuition, and highly qualified personnel, they are elitist by definition.

From this viewpoint, it is impossible not to see that the definition of privileged children's citizenship, here, was based on teaching them about their responsibility vis-à-vis social inequality. While this may be a laudable intention in and of itself, at the end of the day it does not actually challenge privilege. In fact, it might even contribute to its very reproduction. After all, only those who were already privileged were having the luxury of learning about this idealized citizenship, even while they were learning about their responsibility towards the less fortunate. Thus, not only was O Sonho's dream of prototypical participatory citizenship contradictory in that its notion of democratic participation could only happen within a segregated, commodified, and elitist space, it was also limited in that it reinforced children's privilege through the very act of making them see the less fortunate conditions of others, and making them care.

Quite ironically, therefore, O Sonho's project of prototypical democracy for young children was actually predicated on the spatial – and, in some way, also symbolic – segregation of its children. In fact, this was the very condition of its possibility: to make child citizens, the school needed to create a bounded, utopian space where every detail was intended as a negation of the outside world. Inside its high concrete walls and iron bars, an idyllic democratic haven was created, where toddlers and preschoolers could experience egalitarian, participatory, and rights-bearing democracy. Within this space, they were taught about the less-than-ideal predicaments of that outside world. Still, they received those lessons at the very same time that they were being symbolically and practically separated from that same outside world through walls, bars, and costly tuition.

This irony, of course, did not go unnoticed by either the staff or the owners. In fact, the two owners repeatedly spoke about how frustrated they felt because poor children, served by the public school system, were prevented from experiencing the same kind of citizenship education. "Everything is too

expensive,” they would often tell me, “the materials, the teachers, everything. It’s a shame that public schools can’t do this.”¹⁰

As such, this preschool would seem to reinstate one of the basic arguments made in the anthropology (and sociology) of education since, at least, Paul Willis (1977, also Bourdieu; Passeron, 1977; Ogbu, 1978): that schools are crucial sites for the reproduction of class differentiation. One way that they accomplish this, as Peter Demerath (2009) – following Willis (1977) – has suggested, is through their communicative labor: the work they do in passing on, however covertly, their society’s class stratification logics to children. Another is that put forth in Bourdieu’s and Passeron’s (1977) landmark study: schools are key sites of social reproduction because they inculcate, and thus reproduce, a specific class-based habitus which, to borrow Bourdieu’s phrase, “goes without saying” because it underlies the level of discourse (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 84).

At O Sonho, both ways were at play: in communicating to children their own right to choose and to participate, and also their responsibility *via-à-vis* the less-privileged, the school was also restating the children’s higher social position, and in doing all their teaching in the safety of their segregation, it could not avoid inculcating an exclusionary habitus in the children. Thus, though in discourse the school was self-statedly “revolutionary” and committed to a more egalitarian society, it could not come even remotely close to scratching the surface of deep-seated structures of distinction and class. To the contrary, the school both reflected and reproduced them. Inside O Sonho’s high concrete walls and iron bars, an idyllic democratic haven had been created where toddlers and preschoolers could experience egalitarian, participatory, and rights-bearing democracy. Within this space, they were also taught about the less-than-ideal predicaments of the outside world. But, intriguingly, it was their very separation that enabled them to become “responsible citizens:” from their position of safeguarded privilege, they could look down at their less-favored counterparts and “help” them.

To make the argument more nuanced, perhaps this is precisely the key for understanding the potential that lies beyond these limitations: it was not any kind of citizenship that was being imprinted on these children, it was not

¹⁰ Interview, September 2002.

a citizenship focused only on choice and individual autonomy. Rather, it was conceived as a “socially responsible” citizenship, deeply aware of the rights and needs of others and always ready to take action on behalf of fellow human beings. Perhaps *this* is the most important aspect here: the sheer effort put into the construction of very young children as responsible citizens.

The case I describe here has important implications for the anthropology of education. Most significantly, since the arguments I present are also arguments about class, they relate to the field’s insistence that we look closely at particular, concrete curricula and schools, as well as at their encompassing cultural systems, in order to make explicit their hidden class assumptions, beliefs and concerns and how they relate to wider structures of inequality (Demerath, 2009, p. 6). From this perspective, it is significant that this was a preschool for privileged children and, as such, it was reproducing their charges’ pre-existing class privilege. In fact, it could only teach its “radical democratic” (cf. Mouffe, 1992; Hantzopoulos, 2015) views *because* the children were privileged in the first place.

This case is thus helpful for understanding the role of education in perpetuating, and reproducing, social inequalities: class ideologies were very much present at this school, tied into everyday school practices. The notion of “class culture,” as initially put forth by Willis (1977) and taken up later, for example, by Demerath (2009, p. 10), is relevant here: it highlights how class-based practical logics orient everyday practices in fundamental ways, in and out of schools. Class, in this formulation, is less about a fixed position vis-à-vis, say, relations of production, and more about how, on a daily basis, the meanings associated with a particular class are reproduced, not only in discourse, but also in practice, by all involved – much like when, at O Sonho, children spent their days walking around the neighborhood to see how “the other half” lives, but then came back to their enclosed, elite surroundings and made drawings about what they had seen. True, they were learning to care, but they were also reinforcing their own subject position as belonging to a different class.

Anthropologist’s Kathy Hall’s work (Hall, 2002) adds another dimension to such discussions. She shows that, to understand the making of citizenship in the different arenas of the public sphere where it is produced – one of which is schooling – one must examine the subjects thus involved in citizenship-making: their citizen-identities will always acquire different meanings

depending on their differentiated social statuses. This was very much the case here: teachers and other staff interpreted official discourses of citizenship depending on the children's original class position, and the children learned a mode of citizenship that was, ultimately, based on their previous and ongoing class position to begin with.

But things are perhaps not that simple, because this was a school that invested tremendous energy in instilling democratic, participatory, responsible subjectivities upon its privileged children; their citizenship education was one intent on giving the children opportunities for exercising democracy, rights, and participation, but also one focused on becoming an active, participant and, above all, responsible citizen attentive to the needs of the less privileged. True, brought up in privileged environments, students at O Sonho were, quite literally, the future of Rio's elites. And yet, they were learning about the plight of "street children," the intersections about class and race in the reproduction of poverty and, most crucially, the importance of politics to make things better.

In other words, they learned about their responsibility vis-à-vis the less privileged in the same breath that they learned about their own freedom of choice. Of course, this alone would never change anyone's living conditions and class positions: their differences were being continually reproduced, if not enlarged. But perhaps at least a small step was being taken in the right direction. When small privileged children at least begin to worry about others and become aware of their possible role towards a better society, through politics, this recognition may, perhaps, help build the foundations for more egalitarianism in the future.

Still, one must not lose sight of the fact that this project of turning young children into citizens concerned with the public good was enacted within a setting that was, in effect, an imagined "privatized public space." That utopia of creating a "public sphere" where small children would learn how to be public, participating democratic citizens was thus predicated on the simultaneous over-privatization of that locus of democracy. As Holston (1989) has argued, all modernist utopian projects are, by their very essence, contradictory, since utopian thinking must necessarily rest on the very same conditions it wants to overcome. The aim of modernist utopias, he says, is always subversive: "to disrupt the imagery of what bourgeois society [understands] as the real and the natural" (Holston, 1989, p. 200), but they must necessarily be constructed out

of the very social conditions that they seek to negate. As such, their transformative potential gets caught up in the same inequalities and discontents they sought to disrupt (Holston, 1989).

In the case of O Sonho, an analogy with Holston's argument may help explain its many contradictions and paradoxes, for its utopian promises were also, if not destroyed, at least profoundly complicated by their insertion in a real-life context. In a pessimistic interpretation, this privatized and elitist setting might even be seen as mocking the very concept of a "public sphere." In political thought, this public sphere refers to a space where, as Nancy Fraser (1997) puts it, a body of 'private persons' assemble[s] to discuss matters of public concern or 'common interest'. At O Sonho, however, this public decision-making space, where matters of "common interest" were critically discussed, was located in a space so private it was hidden behind iron bars and the sheer cost of admittance and monthly tuition. It thus seems inevitable that its dream of a democratic public sphere would be difficult – if not impossible – to realize in practice.

But perhaps what is most important here is the sheer effort being put into the realization of this democratic dream, and it seems fair to argue that these children's lives *were* affected in some manner. When five-year-olds start asking questions about why there are other five-year-olds living on the streets of their own neighborhood, or why their classmates are all white while all the poor children they see are black, they may be learning an important lesson in democratic participation and citizenship. Perhaps, our perverse inequalities, as this school so energetically tried to say, could be, if not overcome, then at least minimally challenged by children who no longer take them for granted.

Conclusion

The case presented here might seem almost anachronistic in 2017: a long time has passed, a Worker's Party president has been removed from power and a non-progressive government has taken her place, and the 2018 presidential elections are in no way eliciting the same hope and joyful anticipation of 2002. Then, "rights," "democracy," "citizenship," and "participation" seemed the answer to all social ills, and procedural democracy seemed almost a magical wand to counter them. The children that appear here are now eighteen to twenty years old, and I often wonder how much

of O Sonho's "radical democratic" teachings they carry with them now that they can vote: are they still Lula supporters? Do they support the even more leftist parties, perhaps? Or have disenchantment and economic crisis taken their toll, turning them towards the conservatism that is on the rise in Brazil now? When there are demonstrations on Rio's streets, as there have been since 2013, do they espouse a progressive agenda, or have they also asked for Dilma's impeachment?

I did follow some of the children for a few more years after they left O Sonho, and they mostly moved on to progressive grade and high schools. One might thus assume that much of their internalized politics may have stayed with them. But such conjectures are beyond the scope of both this article and my data. It *is*, however, possible to offer some commentary on where the school itself now stands. For the last fifteen years I have continued to examine its website with interest. Even on this superficial level, it seems fair to say that it has not deeply faltered in its democratic ideals and critical pedagogy. It no longer describes itself as a "radical democratic space," but as a "citizen-school" whose "triad" "rests on three pillars, education, democracy, and citizenship."¹¹ Projects developed with the children still focus on the idea that "doing good does us good," and on the shared responsibility of all towards the well-being of others.

At the very least, this is a case study of one school's deep commitment to critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2003, 2004; Kincheloe, 2007) – even though it is not targeting the "oppressed" (Freire, 2003). Of course, families, political and economic climates, and the very minutiae of everyday life may get in the way of how deeply such democratic pedagogy can inscribe itself onto children's bodies and minds. But that one school catering to Rio's elite toddlers and preschoolers should take its self-ascribed transformative mission so seriously, and stick to it even through Brazil's recent political and economic rollercoasters is noteworthy in itself. It makes this school into a token of what a truly democratic, participatory, and citizenship-oriented education might look like (Hantzopoulos, 2012, 2015) – contradictions, paradoxes, and all.

¹¹ Read on September 29, 2016. To protect its anonymity, I must refrain from citing the website's address.

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