

Towards a Model of Inclusive Exclusion: Marginal Subjectivation in Rio de Janeiro¹

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Falta a fala. Fala a bala.
Paulo Lins. *Cidade de Deus*

I

One does not have to be a fierce advocate of dialectics to consider the claim that the exercise of dystopic imagination may represent a necessary stage to think a better world. If it is good to know the worst, that does not mean, however, that cognition of the truly bad is immediately accessible or unproblematic. Such knowledge demands rather that one walk the tight rope between turning the object of scrutiny into an example, thus weakening it of its impact, diluting the pain it generates in a chain of causality; or granting it the status of

¹ This paper is an extended version of a communication originally presented at the 2005 meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association. In order not to distort the text, some oral traits had to be maintained. I would like to thank Rachel Price and the other members of the panel “Imperial Designs” for their suggestions and comments.

the absolutely singular, which approximates it to the ineffable (always so dangerously close to the religious) or the monument (solidified history ready to be sold). The idea of the model, as developed by T.W. Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* and *Critical Models*, for instance, offers a fruitful way out of this dilemma. For just as constellations or force fields, two other of his favorite figures of thought, models are ad hoc constructions, “not causal examples for, or explanations of, critical theory. They *are* that theory, but always at the same time reflection, objective discussion and intervention in consciousness, which needs to be criticized when it is no longer a reflex of reality, but just comprehends and affirms what merely happens.” Models furnish, in other words, the illustration of a thesis they themselves only suggest; they constitute the “extension [*Ergänzung*] of a theory that only in them is unfolded” (Demirovič 7).²

This methodological framework is particularly adequate for dealing with such hazy notions as that of subjectivity, a category that is at the same time both too broad and too narrow, too general to be handled in abstract, but also too specific to be immediately extrapolated. The case here, however, is less that of subjectivity as such than of subjectivation, the *production* of subjects under determinate conditions. This stress on process rather than constitution allows one to eschew the false opposition between determination and freedom, structure and agency, for the production of subjects is both a precondition for and the result of the dynamics of *social reproduction*. Only through the incessant engendering of determinate subjects, in other words, is society able to continue to exist as such; on the other hand, subjectivation is never truly seamless, domination is always incomplete and countered by resistance (perhaps even ontologically preceded by

² See also my review of this important book, “Uma Iniciativa a ser Emulada” (2004). Also available online.

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it).³ The tension involving these two drives, which may be translated, *mutatis mutandis*, into the contradiction of forces (resistance) and relations (domination) of production, or reinscribed into a dialectic of nature (as in Adorno & Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,⁴ where subjectivation is produced through the interiorization of sacrifice, a practice of exchange)—this tension is responsible for social change and transformation.

That the social process of reproduction is ultimately both acephalous, and non-teleological—no matter how sophisticated or advanced systems of policy making may be, or how forcefully ideology may try to impose itself giving a meaning to life—is but a consequence springing from all that. It represents one of Marx's greatest achievements, and has inspired all traditions of Marxism ever since.⁵ But such acephality and lack of a telos at hand has reached an extreme degree today, for when the crisis has become endemic and war (in its diverse forms) a perennial state (Hardt & Negri 2004: 1-96), much if not all of the controlling powers, both governmental and ideological, are devoted solely to maintenance of the status quo, the sheer administration of turbulence, with no predictable exit in sight. In Rio de Janeiro, the raging coexistence of domination and resistance, repression and revolt can no longer be concealed; it fills the daily news and seems dangerously to trigger the opposite reactions of either proto-fascist aspiration for total oppression, or sheer resignation in anomie. Marginal subjectivation plays a fundamental role in all this—"marginal," indeed, in its useful double meaning in Portuguese as both "peripheral" and "criminal," an adjective that most appropriately links the

³ To demonstrate this is one of the greatest achievements of Hardt & Negri's bestseller *Empire* (2000), a strong influence underlying this text. The reader will notice, however, that the main difference, the one allowing for the tense mediation of the Frankfurt School lies in the handling of the notion of lack, which Hardt & Negri's Deleuzian ontology refuses to take into consideration.

⁴ See also Alfred Schmidt's clear exposition of this in his *Der Begriff der Natur in der Lehre von Marx* (1993).

⁵ An up-to-date, masterful exposition of it can be found in David Harvey (2003).

logical/topographic to the juridical. In its two senses, then, marginality in Rio did not originate in a plan; on the contrary, it was the result of a long history of failed attempts at planning the city and its environment – but one more illustration of the Third World’s curse of eternal beginnings and miscarried projects.⁶

I would like to approach marginal subjectivation in Rio as the product of three intersecting vectors combining into a dynamic model. The first one concerns the withering away of the performative effect of the law’s universality. That all are equally subject to the law represents one the greatest achievements of the Enlightenment in its struggle against privileges of birth; underlying it is an assertion of immanence against transcendent justifications for the structure of the world, as, say, totemic narratives or theories of divine right. The coming into being of the law’s abstract nature corresponds to the transition from closed to open societies, as it was influentially developed by Lukács in his early *The Theory of the Novel* (1971). This seemingly far-fetched transhistorical observation is justified here inasmuch as Brazil’s partial insertion in modernity, its preservation of colonial pre-/non-/anti-modern social traits, has long been a familiar topos in Brazilian critical theory, where they were either blamed for hindering modernizing efforts, or lauded as the other of capitalism. It so happens, however, that in this case no residues are to be found anymore: the law’s claim for universality can no longer be ignored by anyone; its former strength, that is, its potential to approach, summon and mobilize subjects to transform an unjust reality has been completely exhausted. For as a result of increasing social interaction generating a totally socialized society,⁷ with the transformation of Rio into a metropolis, the

⁶ For a recent good overall description of Rio’s history see Lessa (2001).

⁷ The expression (*vergesellschaftete Gesellschaft*) comes from Adorno’s sociological writings and designates a social formation totally mediated by the principle of exchange. In my reading below I substitute

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spreading out of systems of communications and the like, the call of the law is no longer a novelty, and the subjective effects it once certainly generated are no longer available. It is important to emphasize this because of the somewhat different valence of the law in Brazilian theoretical discourse, for here, where the institutionalized struggle for equality has a quite recent history, its positive side is more easily seen, whereas in the so-called First World the oppressiveness of the law's universality may be more immediately apparent (hence the emphasis on transgression and so forth). In sum, then, the claim for equality—its currency—is by now so widespread that no matter how distorted or mediated it has lost the power to liberate subjects, it has become a commonplace.

Of course, taken at face value, this is not something to be regretted. It represents rather a social achievement; it is one face of progress, insofar as it conceptualizes citizenship as *formally* all-inclusive. Nevertheless, it is in sharp contrast to actual social exclusion, the second vector to be considered. Be it in terms of access to welfare, to education, public health, housing programs, or in relation to the consumption of goods, the marginal population in Rio has very little or no access to them. To be sure, privation is a complex concept to handle, for it is always mediated by culture and the specific degree of development of the forces of production. Calling attention to the former, Adorno remarks that hunger, “considered as a natural category, can be satisfied with grasshoppers and gnats, a repast to many wild animals. To satiate the concrete hunger of civilized men, it is necessary that they received something that does not disgust them, and in disgust and its contrary the whole of history is reflected” (Adorno 1972: 392; see also my “Adorno in Brazil”, 2004). This means that needs, however deep and rooted in

the concept of interpellation for it, which seems to me to be particularly relevant in a situation of material scarcity and symbolic overabundance.

psychological/physiological impulses, are never merely natural (one may die of hunger surrounded by grasshoppers and gnats), but it does *not* mean that they are merely cultural. Since, as Adorno claimed very early on, history is natural and nature is a historical category,⁸ particular needs must be measured against the background of the total development of the forces of production, which always points to a dialectics of nature. It is very different to starve in a tribal, “primitive” society during a drought than to do so under the rationalized control of nature—hence, of course, the absurdity of capitalist crises, where privation is caused precisely by overproduction.

In Rio de Janeiro, need must be considered in the context of successive failures in development projects, of industrial modernization and “catching up” with developed countries.⁹ Resulting from the coexistence of these two vectors, the exhaustion of the performative force of legality claims and the incomplete, probably already doomed inclusion of the country in the so-called First World, a baleful kind of enlightened skepticism takes shape. Since the ideology critique of equality is immanent to life itself (people experience it everyday), and since the claim for equality is ubiquitous, the latter can be neither ignored nor really believed in. Since legality becomes that which is foreign, and no overall social project can really be envisioned, any political plan of action not emerging inside the community of the excluded—including those genuinely alternative or progressive political projects—are likely to be met with disbelief if not with animosity.¹⁰

⁸ Cf. “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte”, in *Gesammelte Schriften* 1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1971); English translation “The Idea of Natural History”, in *Telos* No. 60, Summer 1984.

⁹ In this context, it is worthwhile to call attention to Robert Kurz’s *O colapso da modernização* (1999), which had a particular strong impact in Brazilian critical theory, especially through of Roberto Schwarz’s review of it (1999). The vicissitudes of Brazilian developmentism have been exhaustively analyzed by Celso Furtado.

¹⁰ This has been sadly confirmed by the general disappointment with the Lula government so far. If Lula does not manage to bring about significant social change until the end of his term, the consequences for the Brazilian political imagination will be disastrous.

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The third vector is related to the discourse of commodities, which here generates an interesting case of inclusive exclusion. This is produced by means of the clash between the universality presupposed by advertisement, ever more indissociable from all commodities,¹¹ and the very restricted access the poor have to them. The language commodities are structurally formed in does not differentiate addressees, but summons all within its reach; again, modernization plays a fundamental role here, insofar as semiotic overproduction occupies all available social spaces in Brazil. Thriving on a tradition that never fully separated the public from the private,¹² the audiovisual sector found no barriers to its expansion. In Rio, but also in almost all populated areas of Brazil, all interstices can be accessed by any of the means of transmission of signs, radio, TV, or outdoors advertisement.¹³ Even (or especially) the dispossessed cannot help being bombarded by signs; semiotic silence has increasingly become an expensive commodity.

The fundamental category to deal with this state of affairs, an overwhelming proliferation of messages in a context of material scarcity, is that of interpellation. Originally theorized by Althusser in his famous “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1971), the concept has been widely criticized by both social scientists and (Lacanian) psychoanalysts.¹⁴ Althusser’s focus on the state seems outdated in times of neoliberalism and governmental deregulation, while his concern with disciplinary procedures achieved their most refined form in Foucault, who furthermore, theorized the

¹¹ See here Christoph Türcke’s discussion of the formula *esse est percipi*, being is being seen, as the fundamental ontological tendency in postmodernity, in his pathbreaking *Erregte Gesellschaft*. (2002).

¹² The reference here, of course, is Sérgio Buarque de Holanda’s characterization of the *homem cordial* in his fundamental *Raízes do Brasil* (2003).

¹³ TV in particular occupies a central position in Brazil, much more so than elsewhere. Its role in Brazilian culture is fruitfully investigated by Kehl and Pucci *Videologias* (2004).

¹⁴ It would be beyond the scope of the essay to reproduce the whole controversy involving the concept. Reference should be made however to Pêcheux (1997), Žižek (1989; 1999) and Butler, Laclau & Žižek (2000).

passage from discipline to control as the dominant feature of social domination. On the other hand, however, Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) has rehabilitated the concept for the process of subject formation. According to Butler, there is a logical impossibility involved in the constitution of the subject: through the call of the other it is established by means of a self-referential movement, a turning to itself that in the same gesture inaugurates the self. Discussing a passage where Althusser describes a policeman hailing someone, Butler observes: "It is important to remember that the turn toward the law is not necessitated by the hailing; it is compelling, in a less than logical sense, because it promises identity" (108). Now, this description can be easily adapted to describe the pragmatics of commodification, for by means of advertisement commodities simultaneously approach and shape subjects. Their "hey, you!" is rigorously universal and increasingly inescapable. Moreover, this partial reformulation would not be unfaithful to Althusser's own intention, for with the publication of his notes under the title of *Sur la reproduction* (1995), of which "Ideological State Apparatuses" is a part, two points become clear: first, that the project was a tentative one, open to different re-elaborations; second, that the emphasis should fall on the process of social reproduction, and should likewise have society as its core. This would be a proper rebuke to Dolar (1993), who argues that Althusser fails to account for a remainder in the process of subjectivation, that "little bit of surplus" (92) or excess that would correspond to the presence of the Lacanian Real. The problem here is one of focus, for due to its own theoretical framework, its concerns and not least its own past and scope, psychoanalysis must *somehow* be related to the individual and her symptom. It is by definition unable to treat society as a changing whole and to explain how, by being self-contradictory, it can *reproduce* itself. In order to do this it would have to

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acknowledge that the remainder and eventually the Real is a product of society in its dialectical relationship with nature, a heresy to the Lacanian creed.

The performative, subject-creating interpellation of commodities can be fruitfully inserted into an “actantial” framework *à la* Greimas. Patrick Charaudeau discusses it in an unpretentious work (1983) that presents important and unexpected resonance for marginal subjectivation. For according to him,

advertisement sets up a narrative organization in which the addressee occupies the place of an actant endowed with a Lack, in such a way that becoming aware of his or her lack incites him or her to become the Agent of a Search (to overcome the Lack) in which the Object is presented through that which the Product offers. The Product thus functions as the Helper in this Search (122).

“Incite” (“*inciter*,” in French) could be translated here as “summon,” or “enforce an interpellation,” in a kind of discourse that subjectifies in the process of multiplying lack(s), and inserts/includes the subject in a narrative where it only exists in the process of consumption, from which it is excluded.

Summing up, then, these three vectors—first, the weakening of the performative equality-claim of the law; then, material privation, poverty, and lack of access to welfare and the like, and, finally, the overwhelming summoning of commodities—frame a situation in which the pair inclusion/exclusion presents itself as multi-layered. In its formal character, the law includes all (for one thing, the police and the judicial apparatus do not let one forget that); on the other hand, material exclusion is a social fact; the appeal of commodities, finally, is ubiquitous. The explosive nature of this combination should be obvious, deriving as it does from the interaction among abstract/formal legality, concrete need and the universal, even coercive stimulation of desire carried out by commodities. Its utterly dystopic nature should also be clear: in sharp opposition to Leftist hopes of the past

the excluded prove to be, not revolutionary subjects, but their opposite, precisely those who are the most included inside a capitalist logic of desire.

What is less evident is that such dystopic picture also poses important problems for (literary and political) representation, which are in fact related to the question of handling two contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, approaching scarcity and poverty groups is no easy task; it requires an inside view on the part of the author/writer, who normally belongs to another social class. In order not to project his or her own desires onto the excluded (there are so many such projections: naiveté, purity, spontaneity, revolt, authenticity, solidarity etc.) the researcher must find ways of bridging the gap and of speaking naturally a language that as a rule is not his or her own. What is more, unlike traditional ethnographic research with indigenous groups, working on/with the socially excluded may involve a clash of classes, sometimes being even dangerous for the middle class scholar. The other difficulty is of a different nature, namely that of discovering procedures to deal with an abundance of messages and signs constantly bombarding subjects. In this case, in other words, the kind of language needed is not that of the ex-centric, but that of the negative itself, a kind of language that in the process of countering semiotic overproduction becomes aware of its own semiosis, of the fact it cannot but reproduce that which it is against: how to deal with excitement in writing, which is the fundamental aim of advertisement, without reproducing that which should be shunned.

II

All these remarks could be taken as a preface to Paulo Lins' pathbreaking bestseller *Cidade de Deus* (2002) [City of God], which in turn must be viewed as working them out. Indeed, the book is a perfection of mixtures, more the result of the tense cohabitation of

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opposites than of the celebration of hybridity or difference. The first of them concerns the precariousness of the opposition of reality and fiction. Originating in a project on cultural anthropology supervised by Alba Zaluar at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), the novel is made of “true” stories that circulate in the apartment complex Cidade de Deus, properly named a *neofavela* by Lins. The housing project itself stands as a perfect example of a failed attempt at modernization. Originally planned to be a workers’ heaven to house the victims of the 1966 floods which destroyed several favelas in Rio, the place very soon became a no man’s land where the State (read police) had only intermittent control. This poses interesting questions as to the text’s status, its right to be literature and to be called a “novel.” *Cidade de Deus*’ claim to literariness comes actually from a compellingly original interaction between form and content, where the latter stands for oral raw material collected and the former for its narrative structuring, the organization of the tales and the development of a proper style of presentation, sometimes endowed with a puzzling lyrical quality. The sense of fictionality is derived from this combination of elements into a totality, whose precise nature will be discussed below, but which appears intentional and gives the text the semblance of an artifact; the sense of reality comes with the undaunted exhibition of the stories told, so unlike anything else in the Brazilian literary tradition: a mixture of local-color typicality with unheard-of violence, at first only imaginable at the highest degree of urban depersonalization. Given the absurdity of reality, this is one of those typical cases when its faithful rendering coincides with a seemingly delirious working of the imagination.

A second interesting case of blurring of boundaries is to be found in the relationship between literature and criticism. The traditional representation of it sees the latter as dependent on the former; as the expression goes, it is “secondary literature.” In the case of

Cidade de Deus the opposite is true. Were it not for the support of prominent Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz it is doubtful whether the manuscript would have found an editor, but it is certain that it would never have been published by *Companhia das Letras*, the most prestigious publishing house in the country. Furthermore, much of the rancorous character of the ensuing debate (see Mello 2000) would be unthinkable without Schwarz's review in *Folha de São Paulo* on Independence Day (Sept. 7th, 1997) praising the work.¹⁵ Regardless of the merit of novel and essay (the former a breakthrough, the latter an impeccable analytical piece), criticism in Brazil now seems to outweigh literary production; it looms sovereign even before literature is produced, let alone after it is published.¹⁶

Finally, the third case involving a mixture of opposites is a consequence of what was said above, and it concerns the reliance of recent Brazilian fiction on science and scientific methodology for working out its raw materials (Camenietzki 2000). However, this revitalizing source of inspiration and dialogue should not be considered a purely cultural phenomenon, a stylistic feature in the periodization of the present, for it is anchored in a material situation in which public universities play a fundamental role. Being really public, in the sense of being free, and in Brazil not (yet) completely destroyed by neoliberalism, they allow for the frequent encounter of the popular with the cultivated, especially in the humanities, where, due to low salaries, competition to enter the universities is very low. It is the sheer precariousness of the job market that makes it difficult for the social whole to maintain symbolic capital in the hands of the upper and middle classes. One just needs to remember that before joining Zaluar's project, Paulo Lins studied literature at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) for the following

¹⁵ The essay was republished in Schwarz (1999).

¹⁶ I owe this insight to Marcos Natali, whom I thank.

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equation to become suggestive: neofavela dweller + ethnographic methodology + literary ambition = *Cidade de Deus*.¹⁷

All these features point to a very complex stage for the production of marginal subjectivities. Critics have already repeatedly called attention to the most obvious constitutive element in the text, its overwhelming realism, the verisimilitude to the real *Cidade de Deus*. For the novel does manage to naturally inhabit the neofavela's universe, to the point that it "becomes a discursive event of a new—political and literary—subject of enunciation" (Ribeiro 128). The text is keen to exhibit a whole gamut of popular traits, including kinds of food, beliefs, and patterns of behavior that at times on the verge of the fantastic, thus uncannily blending merciless naturalism with quasi magic realism. The ghetto's language becomes most conspicuous, beginning with the names themselves, always nicknames, always given, most often in the diminutive form: "Inferninho," "Pardalzinho," "Zé Miúdo," the main characters after whom the book's chapters are named, but also "Barbantinho," "Busca Pé," "Tutuca," "Passistinha"... In the City of God, proper and last names never designate legal persons. Nouns and verbs, too, are so faithfully reproduced that even for native speakers of Brazilian Portuguese the novel demands the kind of work required by foreign texts, in which the meaning of certain words has to be derived from their occurrences and repetitions. This amazing immersion in the language is coupled with an equally faithfulness of point of view. The worldview of the *neofavelados* is never transcended, for one never feels the intrusion of a foreign voice raising itself above

¹⁷ It would be interesting to compare the kind of subjectivation proposed here to a strictly middle class one, in which case the work Mirian Goldenberg could parallel that of Alba Zaluar as a source of ethnographic inspiration. In fact, her recently edited *Nu & Vestido* (2002), a coherent pun on Lévi-Strauss' *O cru e o cozido*, provides the intellectual "raw material" for the description of middle class subjectivation in Rio through corpolatry.

the narrative material to pass judgment, moralize or analyze. The degree of immanence attained is nothing short of stunning.

But the cogent reproduction of the local is here coupled with an intriguing universal-negative impulse. First, because of the undeniable inclusion of the illicit: drug dealers in *Cidade de Deus* are in fact part of a full-fledged capitalist system linked to both legal and illegal branches of production. As pawns of a system they are disposable, being either killed or arrested before long. This accounts for the radical lack of any teleology in the book; strictly speaking, the text can have a beginning but not an end, for in spite of all inside material and the excitement of particular stories they are all interchangeable in the sense that they are part of an open-ended chain of violence where motivation cannot be really differentiated from randomness. To be sure, there is a spiraling effect in the text since as the narrative progresses drug dealers become ever younger and die sooner, at the same time that criminal organization/rationalization seems to increase (Schwarz 166). Nonetheless, this is never theoretically worked out by the text and it behooves the critic to reach a satisfactory conclusion or to speculate about the possible limits at stake. The narrativization of chaos leads to a strange configuration, with negativity depriving terror of its initial impact and posing urgent ethical problems for the reader. For even the most shocking scene in the text, a detailed description of a jealous husband sawing, hammering and dismembering his newborn, does not stay for long in the reader's mind, being succeeded by several other atrocities in eventually almost boring repetition. The cinematographic nature of the writing, its vivid images and dialogues (no doubt in part responsible for the success of Meirelles' film) is undermined by a recurrent structural marginal pattern, reiterated ad nauseam: initiation of person "x" in crime → stealing, robbing and/or killing → being killed → initiation of person "y" etc.

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What is the import of all that for marginal subjectivation? It is fair to say that *Cidade de Deus* offers both less and more than ethnographic or sociological research. Less, because the novel's strength, its confinement to the community of Cidade de Deus, prevents it from establishing links with the world outside the apartment complex, in particular with other social discourses, legal or political. Even the effects of the media are but obliquely alluded to.¹⁸ To understand fully how drug dealing is inserted in consumerist society one should turn instead to Zaluar's latest book (2004). But in spite of that—or rather because of it—*Cidade de Deus* exhibits something that analytical writing cannot by definition transmit, a utopic impulse at the very kernel of a dystopic structured chaos: the overwhelming nature of desire (*male* desire, to be sure). It is not only the desire for power, which, as all drug dealers in *City of God* know deep inside, eventually leads to prison or death, but also sexual desire, as in the many (quasi) pornographic descriptions in the text, and above all a desire for happiness. This is perhaps the most remarkable feature of *Cidade de Deus*: the absence of boredom and the *unproblematic* nature of pleasure—no *ennui* or *Weltschmerz* is to be found here. Enjoyment has no side effects and in four hundred pages of narrative no guilt or melancholy is to be found.

Characterized as it is by the conflict between scarcity and abundance, modernization and tradition, inclusion and exclusion, the environment both depicted and transformed by *Cidade de Deus* may be regarded in one sense as decisive. The unbridled, ferocious nature of the desire therein (re)presented corresponds to a radical process of subjectivization, which responds whole-heartedly to an incitement to pleasure and enjoyment and that spurns that most cherished of bourgeois psychological traits: self-preservation.

¹⁸ E.g. “A quadrilha da Treze separou-se no Lazer e sbiu pela beira do rio; a de Miúdo se dividiu pela rua do Meio e pelas vielas. Os mais novos gostavam daquela sensação de guerra, encarnavam os heróis da televisão” (Lins 352).

In *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972), Marcuse argued that the multiplication of needs, without which capitalism could not reproduce itself, could eventually prove to be destructive to the system. He had in mind, of course, the relatively affluent society of the 60s and early 70s; the people of *Cidade de Deus* are witnesses of the truth of this claim in a situation of social disintegration. “Destruction” in this context, however, is a rigorously dialectical concept. As Marcuse was very well aware, it could mean intransitive destruction, sheer annihilation of life through violence, at the same time that it could represent a necessary step in the emergence of a better world. This is something that theory cannot resolve, although it can point out that such living/deadly desire is produced at a time when the conditions for the overcoming of need have long been objectively given.

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