Politics beyond institutions: a genealogy of June protests in Brazil

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Abstract

The series of protests which began in Brazil during June of 2013 reveal several new developments in the political scenario of the country which deserve careful analysis. This paper explores the political and organizational aspects of these protests, as well as the relationship between activists and traditional institutions such as labor unions, political parties and governmental authorities. Despite the wide range of interests, demands and strategies of the individuals and groups, the demonstrations have put into question key principles of liberal democracy such as political representation and legitimacy of collective action. Bureaucratic institutions, which are typically inaccessible to ordinary people, are unable to communicate with or gain the trust of leaderless grassroots movements whose spokespeople are dispersed and most of them skeptical or radically against the centralization of political power. The emergence of Black Blocks reveals the level of political discord and anger among activists. This confrontation questions society’s values regarding property, human rights, social order and the extent of political actions.

Key-words: collective action, representation, black blocs, democracy, anarquism.

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Introduction

Since 2012 Brazil has been experiencing one of the most exciting and challenging political times of its recent history. It is not due to the electoral victory of a specific party or politician, nor a new set of laws endowing more or less rights to citizens, nor the establishment of a new political or economic regime. Real politics is now taking place outside institutions, without leaders, and has been showing little inclination towards empty negotiations, usually performed by supposed representatives. This new politics radically introduces informal political participation, demanding autonomy as an important characteristic of action, into the public sphere.

A new global wave of dissatisfaction is bringing people together around common demands, creating forms of resistance and mobilization despite the state and elites’ initiatives to demotivate them. Democratic innovations, such as the participatory processes experienced in the country in the last two decades, have also been incapable of overcoming the dominant political and economic forces. An increasing amount of people have lost their fear at expressing anger against the social conditions in the country and have become aware of the violence from the state and the contradictions of capitalism.

When the images of millions of people taking to the streets in more than 350 cities and towns started to spread around the world in June 2013, many people couldn’t believe Brazil had entered the group of countries that since 2011 were experiencing large social protests. This surprise could be easily eroded if we consider that there were more than enough reasons for social disrupt in a country with one of the highest rates of income concentration, inequalities in social rights and terrible conditions in public services. The World Cup was just a window of opportunity for this political outbreak.

This article reveals and analyses the current socio-political conflict in Brazil, expressed through street riots, direct actions, strikes and strategies of control and repression from different levels of Government. We focus in the relation between activists, established organizations and the public space. In the first part will be discussed the limits of political institutions and representative leaders to deal with radical political dissent, which is better explained by the distrust of protesters with the capacity of political and social representatives to really represent the collective interests. That is obviously not a random skepticism, as such incapacity had the up scaling of political polarization as the most visible effect. This will be further discussed in the second part of the article, which narrows down the focus to analyze a strong expression of political dissent and collective resistance to participate in representative institutions: the black bloc tactic of street protest.

Emerging the dissent

One can hardly argue that the events of June 2013 in Brazil were unforeseeable. Since 2008, the number of strikes in Brazil had been already growing. In 2012, the year before the protests, the country faced 873 strikes, the biggest number
since 1997 (DIEESE, 2013). In the public sector, the strike of the technical-administrative workers of the federal universities, which comprised more than 100,000 workers, lasted for 124 days and the strike of the 72,000 mail workers lasted for 9 days. In the private sector, the strikes of the civil construction workers in the city of Fortaleza, as well as in the oil and metal companies, mobilized more than 50,000 workers each. There was also a national strike of banks’ employees that reached the number of 280,000 workers who stopped working for 10 days. Compared to 2011, the amount of hours on strike was 37% higher in 2012.

The absence of a single political actor (collective or individual) able to take the leadership in this scenario is remarking, as it is very different to what happened in the late 1970s with the Union of the Metal Workers’ strikes, which served as the root of ex-president Lula’s political history. Nevertheless, the aforementioned strikes, despite showing an increasing tendency to social conflicts among Brazilians, are still strongly linked with organized groups, such as traditional labor unions.

The new cycle of protests that emerged in June 2013 seems to be more independent from traditional organizations. One example is the successful strike of garbage collectors during the last carnival in Rio de Janeiro. The initial reaction from the Mayor’s office was to discredit the strike, comparing strikers to “delinquents” and calling the police to protect those willing to work. After negotiating with the City Council, the Union achieved a pay rise, however much smaller than expected by the workers. As a consequence, they rejected the agreement and no longer accepted the Union as a valid representative of their interests. As popular support for the strikers increased and garbage accumulated in the streets, the Mayor’s office decided to negotiate and accepted the demands directly expressed by the workers. This struggle shows signs of a new political trend, based on the confrontation with hierarchical authorities and the affirmation of autonomy.

Rejection to representation

Demonstrators and strikers in many cities in Brazil show little compliance with those willing to be representatives of their claims and demands. This tends to show the incapacity of old institutions, such as labor unions and political parties, to represent the people, but it also shares common features with what could be understood as a global crisis of political representation. The rise of public transport fare (both at municipal and state level) sparked the revolts in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in June 2013, but we should remember that in the past 10 years, every capital in Brazil has experienced at least one protest related to public transportation issues (Ortellado, Judensnaider, Lima, & Pomar, 2013).

In June 2013, after several displays of extreme violence from the anti-riot police, demonstrations quickly dominated the political agenda and kept growing in the following days, in an uncoordinated way, reaching the whole country. Although these actions were not always organized by the local Free Fare Movements (MPLs), they played an important role in lambasting current transportation policies, marked by corruption and focused on private profits. They showed how a very concrete demand –

Amongst those, 53% happened in the private sector, but the ones in the public sector mobilized more workers for a longer period. Some of these strikes should be highlighted for their significance (in terms of amount of workers mobilized).
that of cancelling the 20-cent rise in the transportation fare – went against the market interests and forced better agreements between the government and the companies. As a result of the mobilizations, the movement managed to cancel the fare rise and to get more visibility to their main demand of a free bus transportation system, whose costs would be paid by the wealthiest.

MPL strategy would fit in Zizek’s analysis about Occupy Wall Street (OWS): “A great art of politics is to insist on a particular demand that, while thoroughly realist, feasible and legitimate, disturbs the core of the hegemonic ideology” (Zizek, 2012, p. 89). It is also important to observe that, although São Paulo’s and Rio’s City Council gave, they had great difficulties negotiating with the MPL, which is organized horizontally, in a federal way, with consensual decision-making and no leaders. As the demonstrations increased and spread over the country, more demands were incorporated besides the initial one, for better and costless transportation. In this sense, the political dynamic at stake resembled a frequent criticism directed at the OWS, denouncing a vague agenda. “You are not telling us what you want!” was a sentence often repeated in the United States when the movement started to enlarge. In Brazil, movements were mostly demanding a better health and educational system, denouncing corruption, small salaries and the public expenses for the World Cup.

Since June last year, the polls show that support for the demonstrations has changed significantly. In June 2013, 81% of the population supported the protests, a number which dropped to 52% in 2014, according to Datafolha Institute (2014). However, the number of people opposing protests has also been increasing: from 15% in June 2013 to 42% now. As the social uprisings were growing throughout the country, it was possible to notice the increasing popularity of a discourse drawing a “line of purity” between two types of demonstrators: the “good citizen”, entitled to express his opinion, always in a “pacific” way, given that “we live in a democracy”; and the “vandals”, whose only goal, according to this frame is to destroy public property and provoke chaos through violence. The emergence of the “black bloc” tactics in Brazilian streets6 were highly used as part of the discourse on the “line of purity” by conservatives and government members to criminalize social movements. In the common narrative (also incorporated by part of the left) black blocs are formed by violent and non-politicized criminals. These critics don’t recognize the political character of direct actions and, by doing so, end up legitimizing police brutality. But the images of violent repression perpetrated by the military police during the first demonstrations in June 2013 were also vital for raising solidarity among the population, acting as a catalyst in the social enlargement of the mobilization.

On July 14th 2013, Amarildo, an assistant bricklayer, father of six children, disappeared after being taken by military policeman for interrogation at the headquarters of the Pacifying Police Unity (UPP) during the “Operation Armed Peace” in Rocinha, the biggest favela of Rio de Janeiro. After massive public pressure, the information came out: he had been tortured and killed by the police. What happened to Amarildo is emblematic of the current situation of basic human rights violations in Brazil, where police brutality happens almost everyday in poor suburbs.

**Institutional attempts to control social conflicts**

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6 Whose existence can be traced back to the 1980s in Germany and which gained more international visibility after the WTO (World Trade Organization) protests in Seattle in 1999.
Under the command of the Governor of the State of São Paulo, and with the support of the Federal Government, since the events of June, the police have been training, developing and recycling tactics of violence. Furthermore, in late 2013 the Ministry of Defense (the civilian cabinet responsible for managing the Military in Brazil) published a legal order establishing the guidelines for the use of the Armed Forces to “guarantee Law and Order”7. In the document, addressing the growing discontent towards the World Cup, social movements and social organizations are described as “opponent forces to the military operations” and are to be treated as such. After been extremely criticized by many sectors of civil society, the document was redrafted by the Ministry under Workers’ Party rule8.

The scaling up of protests throughout the country illustrates the traditional dichotomy between organization and spontaneity in social movements. Without leaders, without representatives, without official spokesperson, mobilized by groups formed on the internet, a surprising amount of people gathered to express their political dissatisfaction: some denounced corruption, or public expenses for the World Cup, while others demanded better public services, or revolted against the political and economic system. Without formal institutions to guide demonstrators, it allowed a huge range of political activists with different ideologies to express their views. Politicians, academics, media and the police were lost, each one of them trying to interpret the riots through their own frame.

Assuming that the events in Brazil are part of a global cycle of struggles, it is natural to see them as rooted in a deep distrust of representation and traditional political institutions. The current configuration of what is called ‘democracy’ seems to be mostly constituted by a group of institutions and practices concerned to mitigate dissent in certain parts of society. Consensus building, majority approval and minority participation in public institutions have been a common strategy to improve public policies and to legitimize governmental decisions.

In the past years, the World Cup became a symbol of dissatisfaction with the misspending of public funds (in the benefit of a small fringe of businessmen in Brazil) in a country with serious problems of infrastructure and bad quality of public services. Ironically, the event was initially perceived, by some opinion leaders, as something able to strengthen the national sense of belonging through the production of a common imaginary, in which the idea of Brazil as an emergent power in the international arena played an important role. Indeed, the World Cup became a useful catalyst for a process of social convergence, but of a different kind, sparking dissent. Besides the huge investments in stadiums – almost 15 billion dollars in private and public expenditures –, people in many cities also got angry at seem how poor families were expelled from their houses that were destroyed to give place for stadiums and other facilities around it. The absence of dialogue between government and the population affected by the urban renovations was remarkable. Several social movements emerged to denounce it, to organize protests, to resist and to create important registry of human rights violations and consequences of the World Cup. The most prominent is the Popular Cup

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Committee, which is present in each host city and counts with a national organization and an informative web site.$^9$

The global dissatisfaction with contemporary democracy shows that most activists are not willing to participate in institutions to be controlled by governments and to legitimize previously taken political decisions. The emphasis on ‘dignity’ as a political demand from squares around the world can be translated in general words as social justice, and power to the people. This has been called “real democracy”. The distance between reality and self-government denounced by the activists can be related to the exhaustion of the latter concept in the past decade. When everything becomes ‘participatory’ (even some police stations in Brazil are called that way), the word loses a lot of its potential; democracy itself loses its meaning, as it no longer refers to self-government. It becomes more about governing the state with electoral legitimacy than governing the common through empowered collective decision-making.

The constituents struggle to be recognized as sovereign citizens could lead to the transformation of the established power. However, their strength is located only outside the state. At all levels of governments, there has been a clear lack of concern in empowering the several popular assemblies that started after the June events. In this sense, demanding “real democracy” may not only result in criticizing the representative tradition, but also in acknowledging the need to radicalize the creation of popular power. Interesting enough, many of the demands coming from the streets could find responses in mechanisms intending to increase transparency with popular control over public expenditure.

Building alternatives

So far, we have described the current political scenario in Brazil as part of a global cycle of struggles. One common element in these struggles is the refusal to recognize in the traditional political institutions the same legitimacy attached to the previous political generations. This goes hand in hand with an intense criticism of the idea of leadership. The crisis seems to be related also to a generational dynamic, with the youth being more affected and having less economic stability. In this regard, the struggles of the last few years have opened an intense process of collaborative learning. The occupation of the squares, the streets and the public spaces in general, is creating new possibilities for political experimentation. From a cognitive point of view, this also seems to be a characteristic of this new generation of activists: they are open to experiment and are also searching for adequate tools. Thus, waiting for the institutionalization of these social forces to assess their impact does not make much sense nowadays. There seems to be more potential in the idea of reclaiming the public spaces and the public budgets as common properties, following Negri’s proposition:

So, what is a common property? A common property, from a juridical point of view, is easily defined: it’s a public property that, instead of having public bosses or public owners, belongs to subjects that are active in that sector or in that reality; it is managed by them. The common property is this act through which the subjects manage, for instance, the urban network of transportation because it belongs to

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them, because the common has become or been recognized as a condition of life, as a biopolitical condition. What does it mean a metropolis without transportation? Nothing. [...] The common property is not simply defined by the state, it is defined by what singularities make of this common space, by the way they use this common space [...] (Negri, 2005).

The citizens of Brazilian society and of the city of São Paulo participate in the many initiatives of building democratic experiences, as they participate in the experiments tried by the various movements in their own dynamics. The subversive expressions of popular culture must not be ignored. The poetical gatherings in the periphery of São Paulo, the Hip-Hop movement in New York, the Tunisian reggae bands, the graffiti on the walls of Cairo all show a proliferation of aesthetic manifestations feeding common imaginaries with narratives of the daily efforts made to achieve dignity in the cities. Those efforts deal directly with power, resistance and hope.

It could be argued therefore that a politics of resistance follows power in that it is also capillary in nature, branching out in many different ways. It takes not simply the obvious routes of physical resistance, but also follows the paths of the imagination where resistance to power is not only said but also valued – it forms part of the narratives of everyday life that give meaning to encounter with power” (Tripp, 2013, p. 6).

The signals that have been emerging in the past months point towards an increasing social polarization in Brazil. On the one hand, Brazil experiences the continuing protests, the strikes, the direct actions by black blocs, the intensification of the processes of popular mobilization and the growing resistance of groups that organize themselves around different social struggles (such as the demilitarization of the police, the legalization of drugs, the right of abortion, sexual rights and the good quality of public services). On the other hand, one also observes an increasing violent reaction of repressive forces, be them institutional or informal. The growing number of cases of people being beaten, sometimes to death, by groups of self-declared “vigilantes” has also been brought to public awareness lately, as well as anti-riot police dissolving pacific demonstrations and even popular assemblies in public squares.

The so-called democracy is no longer showing its capacity to control political conflict or to attend to people’s demands and choices. If political willingness meets on-the-ground mobilization and popular support, a fertile ground for political innovation is set. If political parties and leaders are inclined to transform political institutions into more democratic and legitimate entities, they will have to integrate conflicts and diversity, to ground their power at the level of the street and to accept the legitimate existence of political practices outside the legal framework of the state. Political and social creativity should always be able to expand its freedom, according to its own

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10 One example is what happened with a teenage boy who was stripped naked and chained to a lamppost in Rio de Janeiro, after allegedly trying to mug a pedestrian. He was stabbed in the ear before being shackled by his neck with a bicycle lock.

desire and potential. The more the political system don’t allow this to happen, more it will have to expect radical demonstrations of dissent, as the black blocs, that we are going to discuss next.

Smashing the oppressor windows

When massive protests were happening twice or three times a week in almost every major Brazilian city, during the struggles of June 2013 there were seen some new and surprising forms of demonstrations. For the first time, emerged what could be called as an anarchist blocks of protesters performing direct action, internationally known as black blocs. Black blocs are not strategies. It is just a tactic of behaving in collective actions. It is not intended to withdraw the current president, nor the constitution, and not even to transform the global political and economic system.

To most of its participants, the tactic of Black Blocs allow them to express a vision of the world and a radical rejection to the political and economic system, but this does not means they are ingenuous enough to believe the action could develop a general theory of society and of capitalist globalization (Dupuis-Déri, 2014, p. 11).

For this same reason, it is not accurate to consider black blocs as a political group or an organization of activists, the institutionalized kinds of social movements. Young men and women engaging in direct actions such as destroying the front windows of banks and luxury car’s shops are just expressing their anger against the system. It is worthwhile to discuss, from what could actually be called black bloc, the origins of that anger and also the meanings and the consequences of expressing it in public by collective actions.

In this article, the origins of the anger of large parcels of Brazilian population will not be discussed, as it would require larger space to show how far from the ideals of social justice, political, gender and race equality the population is leaving. As an attempt to get closer to these origins, we will briefly summarize the social panorama in Brazil. The official minimum wage is, according to DIEESE, less than a third of what would be the necessary amount for adequate food, housing, clothing, hygiene and transportation. Beside the violence in the suburbs coming from drug dealers and the police, the majority of the population have to live with poor conditions of public schools and hospitals, as well as the inefficient transport system.

Brazilians live with the contrast between modern and medieval life standards. A modern economy that is run by a medieval thinking elite, remarked with a punitivist and segregationist approach to poverty. Sexual abuse to kids, violence against women and homosexuals are in the everyday news of every major cities. Seduced by propaganda and the broad offer of credit, consumption of electronics and cars are extremely high, specially in the newly enlarged class C, which has a per capita income between 144 and 506 US Dollars. Indebted and feeling included by their increased capacity of consumption, this new middle class crowds malls and the most apppellative

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13 Between 320 and 1120 Brazilian Reais.
churches. Their satisfaction, however, seems to be only superficial as it does not change their access to culture, good education and promising jobs.

This panorama can approximate us to just a part of the reality that bring young people together to violent direct actions. There are no surveys showing who they are, to which class income do they fit or to which ideology they identify themselves. Their anonymity and precaution towards traditional institutions of power, such as the police, media and academy, makes them an inaccessible and uncontrollable group.

*Resistance to the society of control*

In the society of control (Deleuze, 1992, pp. 219-226), with so many technologies being designed to monitor and regulate people’s attitudes, the only way to scape from that is being anonymous. The performatic actions against private properties challenges the law, the police and the politics. The act of resistance works like a virus, damaging the sanctified private property, doing the impossible, the forbidden, the unexpected, acting much beyond the legal permissions, creating a space of temporary autonomous zone (Hakim Bey), in which a radical dissent is openly permitted and the private property is not seem as blessed. All the opposite, it is rejected and for being so, it is transformed into the object of the anger.

The covered faces in the black blocs is also part of the performance. The violence against window glasses is an esthetical performance and as such, could not avoid having a common visual definition among its followers. Hiding identity in the age of cameras, television, facial recognition technologies, electronic citizen IDs, is an attempt to escape from individual recognitions, individual protagonism and centralization. Escaping from identity also allows participants to change their behavior whenever they feel like. No body expect or charge attitudes from anyone, as each one is no one. The very idea of identity is put in check. Rolnik stated it very well:

> What is presented today to the subjectivities is not the defense of local identities against global identities, nor even the identity in general over the scattering; It is the very references of identity that should be battled, not in the name of the scattering (the nihilist fascination for the chaos), but to give place to singularization processes, of existential creation, moved by the winds of the events. Resituating the problem to these terms, the demand for identity could have a conservative meaning of resistance to embark into these processes (Rolnik, 1997) 14.

The affirmation of identity in the activists of direct actions would make more difficult for them to start or stop doing violent acts whenever they feel like, independently of the rest of the group. The lack of identification allows more dynamic fluxes of adhesion, free association to the groups and the practices. But this could also be a risk for the movement with the frequent infiltration of police officers willing to detain activists or to provoke damage to random properties as an excuse for the beginning of police violent repressive actions. In the other hand, not covering their faces would make easier for police forces to identify them and to a leadership role to be raised among the more experienced.

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14 Translated by the authors.
The self constitution of a political space, autonomous to what is the already institutionally set and named as public space, show an anarchist approach of resistance to the institutionalized power. Autonomist groups emphasize the self-ruling principle, respecting its own rules that may or may not coincide with the heteronomous, external established norms. This is a basic principle for freedom. These self constituted spaces of free action can be as large and evolving as many areas of everyday life as each one decides it to be. That means that it cannot be stablished by a person or an organization.

The perspective of resistance as a way of acting towards the institutions of the Estate is better understood if contrasted with the more traditional formats of incidence and dissidence, as ideal types of political actions proposed by Subirats (2005). Adapting the concepts to our interests we could identify the incidence as the direct participation and involvement of civil society in the governmental policy-making. It is the most effective way of running policies, managing and controlling populations and resources through the state apparatuses. Yet, the dissidence is the perspective of looking for social transformations, declining from certain political opportunities and spaces of institutional participation where electoral interests are predominant. However, they are still open to accept certain attempts of dialogue with governmental negotiators, demanding specific policies and struggling to change the format of political institutions.

The most skeptical and distant to political institutions are those constituted in the perspective of the resistance. Rejecting to make any contact or demand to the governments, they act in the society through an autonomous way, setting their rules, their possibilities, their spaces and their way to interact with traditional values, institutions and the society. This means that their scope of actions are not limited by the law, the moral rules or whatsoever fluxes or proceedings external to the movement. It is interesting to observe how political movements acts outside the formal political institutions, building their own frame and spaces of political action.

Liberal Democracy tends to establish the borders of the political activities inside the constitutional frame, setting elections, political parties and institutionalized social movements as the only channels citizens should express their will. But their possible expressions are only directed towards the state institutions. There is no space for a multiple, varied forms of political activities without institutions. Most political scientists not even consider acts performed outside institutions as political activities.

Subirats (2005) proposes a conciliation of the three tendencies (incidence, dissidence and resistance) for a new politics. But it seems to be impossible, as the hierarchical political institutions governing populations are in the extreme opposite direction to autonomous groups willing to be self-governed by their own rules, ideas and interests.

The very conception of governing populations, suggested by Foucault (2008) in his studies on the character and rationality of modern governments, the governmentality, shows that it is embedded with relations of power that tries to control everyone in a way that we act according to the objectives of the government. The governed people ended up being subject of the government, a necessary component of its machinery. This process of domination, that in the last few centuries has been performed by disciplinary institutions of confinement, now it is performed permanently, outside institutions.
That is what Deleuze (1992) called society of control. People are permanently controlled and monitored by multiple relations of power exercised in fluxes that tends to include and be accepted by everyone, as well explained by Passetti (2007):

(...) its effects are conducted no longer to the battle or extermination of resistances, but to captures that lead to inclusion. In the society of control or of government nothing can escape. (...) Now, anyone and anything could be included for the widening and strengthening of the security of citizens, workers, businessmen and programs. Security no longer depends only of the law and physical forces. It needs to get the reliance of users and citizens to the programs, and this overcomes the field of security to become a consensual way to live and to produce. (Passetti, 2007, p. 12)

As we can see, institutional participation can serve governmental interests of standardizing individual and collective behaviors with their consent. So, acting collectively inside a political space already given by political institutions may attend pre-established objectives, which could be exactly the ones being denounced and complained. Accepting existing arenas of political action, in this case, could have opposite effects to the ones desired by anti-system activists, more concerned with equality and freedom.

Subjectivity-provocative performance

In his research about black blocs, Dupuis-Déri (2014, p. 59) identified a varied range of profiles among participants. From nurses to lawyers, from teachers to social service officers, activists covered in black are not criminals and follows what for most would be an acceptable life. The black bloc tactic of protest is just one collective initiative of resisting the dominant forces in political activities. When they are not acting in direct actions, they might be serving people in need, engaging in NGOS or in stable social movements.

In any case, black bloc activists perform acts of symbolic violence as complementary to other initiatives that they may feel insufficient to express the whole dimension of their political and social disagreement. In fact, there are several issues in daily life, considered non political, that hide a strong determination from relations of power deciding how we should be, that relates to the State but are not limited to it: “the dream or the nightmare of a programmed society, colonized and dominated by the ‘cold monster’ of the State is profoundly limited as a way to make intelligible the mode in which we are governed today” (Miller & Rose, 2012, p. 239)\textsuperscript{15}. This means that a political action of resistance today would be ineffective if focuses only in the policy-making of the State and not in the values of society. The anarchist resistance to dominant ways of living needs to be diverse, multiple, multidirectional.

That is why a grass-roots struggle for autonomy today should be conscientious about the dimension of biopolitics, which affects every collective aspect of daily life and establishes what is normal and acceptable and what is not. To counter that, breaking the windows of luxury cars in a shop is an example of a performative act against the object of desire of most people in the consumerist society. It is an aggression to a symbol of capitalism and its lifestyle based on the obsession for

\textsuperscript{15} Translated by the authors.
economic success and consumerism. The act has the potential to show people that first, the desire for these objects does not reach everyone in society; second, these people have a frontal opposition to capitalism, to the obsession for work and to consumerism. After the fall of Soviet Union, many observers of social reality understood that there were no alternatives to capitalism, so stating that it is not accepted, changes that perspective of future; third, as the performed act is executed collectively beyond the normative rules, it also shows that the acceptance of the rules are not automatic nor mandatory, it just requires a subjective liberation from the fear imposed by the repressive system; fourth, breaking the rules in a collective action raises the level of political confrontation exposing a new, uncontrolled and anti-institutional arena of politics. So the spaces and the meanings of politics are not as consensual as the democratic social contract may suppose.

Obviously, these meanings are not clear for everyone. Most of society do not understand or simply reject the symbolic destructions performed by black blocs. The relatively small numbers of activists engaging in the acts and the results of surveys shows that most people in society are very conditioned and disciplined into the “correct” behavior. According to a survey carried out in October 2013 by the Datafolha Institute (2013), in the city of São Paulo 95% do not supported the destruction of private and public properties as a form of protest. They were asked specifically about the black blocs. But when asked about the violence of demonstrators, the result was quite different: for 15% they were violent in the right amount. This could be read as a differentiation of protesters and black blockers, as a result of mass media attempts to criminalize them by removing their valid credential of political activists. This would certainly need more research to explain people interpretations of the acts and the results of the survey. But undoubtedly, the new political events of Brazilian streets are provoking annoyance and inquietude in subjectivities. People are confused. What was impossible for being forbidden and unimaginable for many, suddenly, and by an spectacular display of fearless actions, it became possible.

Considering the political character of the acts, it is extraordinary that activists of black blocs are not looking for acceptance. Legitimacy are usually sought by those who wants to act and speak in the name of others. Black blockers are not interested in representation or in the macropolitics of institutions and populations. This is what remarks their subversive character, a creation of a minor event (Deleuze & Guattari, 2008), which is not concerned in being accepted by majorities and the establishment. They are not looking for the approval of the society. They do not justify, explain or try to convince public opinion about the importance and the necessity of their acts. Although some activists may do it, they would be just a few and could never speak in the name of all of them. Breaking glasses in direct actions counts with the chock factor. People are expected to be amazed, surprised and challenged in their so far unquestioned certainties.

**Tangled lines and its significances**

Breaking glasses and the scenes of chaos it provokes is only relevant because it is temporary and unexpected. It could be understood in the category of

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16 The survey question was formulated as the following: “Some groups of protesters such as the black blocs adopt the destruction of bank offices, stores and public buildings as a form of protest. Do you support or not this kind of protest?” (Datafolha, 2013).
‘lines of flight’, proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (2008), in which rupture, innovation and desterritorialization marks a surprising act whose effects are unknown. An anarchist realization of freedom, setting its own space of autonomy can only be possible by experimentations that break with the established norms and costumes, and try to find its own. In each act, ‘supple lines’ and ‘rigid lines’ can always emerge from each other and from ‘lines of flight’, which presents itself as an attempt of breaking the hard molar grounds of the State. And that is what makes history to move on:

In the lines of flight new guns are invented to oppose the heavy State guns, ‘it is very possible that I will escape, but during my whole escaping I will look for a gun’. In their lines of flight the nomads use to destroy everything in their way, and found new guns that provoked the pharaoh stupor (Deleuze & Guattari, 2008, p. 208).17

Black blocs are provoking transformations in the desires and feelings about reality, bringing possible the impossible, which is a clear example of lines of flights. But they will only be able to still provoke stupor in the political authorities while it keeps its potential to chock, to challenge authorities’ power over the people. This power, obviously, is not only the coercive capacity of repressing, torturing, arresting and killing. Of course that challenging their capacity of repressing rebel activities is also important, which seems to be working well as the covered faces and all dressed in black makes each of activists indistinguishable when acting together. And also, repressing protests violently may turn public opinion against the police, as it happened in June 2013 in São Paulo, when the indiscriminate police violence in a MPL demonstration on the 13th18 drove more than 200 thousand people to the streets four days later19. On that day, 240 people were detained by the police and two journalists lost their eyes by rubber bullet shots.

The direct effects of this process is not always positive, as rigid segmentarities may arise as a response to the lines of flight. Anti-riot police are frequently called to react against symbolically violent protests and if they don’t lose control, most of society usually supports their repression. Some analysts, self-identified as left-wing, even suggests that the main effects of black blocs is to empty pacific protests, offering pretext for its criminalization, police repression and “exempt authorities to not even pretend the aptitude to negotiate” the activist demands (Scalzilli, 2014). This could be true in a short analysis, but if observed carefully, it is obvious that what actually allows police to act violently towards protests is the social acceptance of such repression. Generally speaking, people gives much more importance to the integrity of private property than of human bodies. This is like removing the democratic mask that covers all the atrocities and the human rights violations by the current regime. In any case, in both analysis, the lines of flight of breaking windows are provoking explicit, unambiguous rigid lines from the police, the estate authorities and from parts of the society supporting repression.

17 Translated by the authors.
As an effect, this is revealing the real authoritarian character of police, political leaders and parts of society. People approve brutal actions against individuals, but feel sorry about windows of billionaire banks being smashed. Even though these banks are everyday breaking families’ finances by high interest rates and the pressure they exert in the country’s political economy. This preference is obviously influenced by the mass media, which in general give much more attention to black bloc’s destructions than to the demands and complaints from social movement activists. Besides, the police violence in protests, much more common and recurrent than the black blocs, are often softened and excused by the angle it is shown on TV. Mass media journalists seems to only give more attention to it, when one of them get hurt by the anti-riot brutality.

Some left-wing social movements, with a clear exception of MPL, are critical to black blocs, arguing that they are playing the conservative game, serving them with excuses to criminalize activism and to hide their demands (Scalzilli, 2014). While this accusation only reveals the most explicit, analyzing it further we can figure out what Deleuze and Guattari warn: rigid lines may find space to express itself in his whole dimension from the flight of someone or a group, but this does not necessarily mean that rigid lines were created by the lines of flight, “the rigid segments are determined, predetermined socially, over-codified by the Estate” (op. cit., p. 208). It is what happens when a slave is captured by his master during an attempt to scape. He will suffer all the severity and the cruelty of his master, but it is fundamentally important to realize that the slave have never created that horrendous cruelty and not even the slavery property-repressive system. It is completely inaccurate and unfair to blame the victim.

Trying to scape, even considering the possibility of suffering its consequences is an obligation from every person willing to get free. Which way or act is the best to make each one free, however, will never be pre-established, predesigned, as each space of oppression, of abusive expression of power, requires different strategies of resistance. The most appropriate way of resisting will only be found with experience, after assuming the risk of experimentation.

In this context, a more coherent doubt about the black bloc tactic would be: how its results and effects will be evaluated and assessed by performers, if it is a spontaneous individual practice expressed collectively? Well, the tactic could be evaluated individually and the changes in its performance suggested informally by individuals to the group. But, as it is constituted as a form of behaving in protests and no one or no formalized group have any control of how people will behave in the streets, it is hard to change black blocs if not by participants perceptions.

The only exception is if the tactic is adopted as part of a strategy by an organization or a social movement. In this case, the possibilities of dialogue, consensus building and deliberation among its participants, make easier any change in their tactics. Nevertheless, the black bloc acts happening in several cities protesting in Brazil since 2013, does not present any evidence of being part or compromising with organizations whatsoever. There is, though, the creation of internet blogs and Facebook groups by people interested in black blocs, which helps the dialogue, the evaluation of the practice, information sharing and the mutual influence among participants.

If repetitive, predictable, established in the everyday repertoire of collective action, smashing windows may no longer challenge political institutions and social values. After a while, without reinventing itself, it could pass through a flexible line, full of ambiguity between the lines of flight and the rigid lines. If it strengthen police
repression more than the yelling of the oppressed, the authoritarianism more than spaces of autonomy, than the lines of flight would have lost its power of resistance: “The line of flight makes explode the two segmentary series, but it is also capable to blunt over the wall, to relapse into a black hole, to turn to the great regression, and to remake the most rigid segments from its random twists” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2008, p. 209).

To understand this complex scenario black bloc is getting in, it is important to stress what does it means to be a spontaneous tactic instead of a planned strategy. Let’s retake some clues from Dupuis-Déri:

Black block is not a treaty of philosophy, much less a strategy. It is a tactic. A tactic does not involve global relations of power, nor seizing power, neither tries to get rid of power and domination. A tactic does not involve a global revolution. This, however, does not imply renouncing to the action and to the political thought. A tactic like the Black Blocs is a way to behave in street protests. It could help to give voice to people protesting in the street, offering them the opportunity to express a radical critic about the system, or strengthening their capacity to resist police attacks against the people (Dupuis-Déri, 2014, p. 11).

Rationalizing black blocs we could identify two major objectives: to give voice to people protesting and protecting them from the police actions. As we were arguing before, these supposed objectives could be better assessed by some sort of organization and through participant debates. However, getting organized also may produce serious consequences. The most important is to make easier for the police officers to accuse the group and its members as being responsible for committing criminal acts.

In fact, the more organized a group the more it tends to reproduce commonly institutionalized social practices. Respecting the law, creating internal rules of conduct, distributing roles for participants, making agreements with other organizations, getting a place, a phone line, etc., could all end up in setting up a hierarchy for decision making and registering the organization into the State. It would, obviously, not make any sense from the point of view of an autonomous group concerned with radical resistance. We are not suggesting that an organized group cannot be clandestine or situating into the level of resistance. But the lines of flight, the resistance, the escaping from any standard of modern life will be much more evident the more it is remarked by informality, spontaneity, ruleless functioning, extralegal actions and ephemeral or unpredictable visual existence.

Translated by the authors.
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