

Lopes de Barros, Rodrigo. *Distortion and Subversion. Punk Rock Music and the Protests for Free Public Transportation in Brazil (1996-2011)*. Liverpool University Press, 2022. 360 pp.

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Around the year 2003 some friends and I from “el way,” the self-referential youth slang the alternative music scene and subculture members used in the Dominican Republic, started attending meetings for the youth political group Juventud Rebelde at the borrowed backyard of the left-wing political party Fuerza de la Revolución. The yard had a gazebo-like structure with a cemented floor and a zinc roof under which foldable chairs were arranged in a circle. There we participated in multigenerational study groups to discuss radical communist and anarchist texts in relation to current political issues, we heard talks and report backs on topics such as squatting and the anarcho-punk scene in Spain and we also attended punk shows. This was during Hipólito Mejía’s presidency (2000-2004), during which the country experienced multiple mobilizations, including a 48 hours general strike in January 2004 due to inflation and the devaluation of the Dominican peso, resulting from the collapse and Central Bank bailout of three private banks and neoliberal free trade agreements (Franco).

As young punks, we also frequented other all-ages and Do-It-Yourself (DIY) venues such as *La casa de la abuela* (the backyard of a punk scene member’s grandmother), high school talent shows, dive bars and social clubs. Not many of us had cell phones then and most of the publicity about shows, protests against the government and the economic crisis, political meetings and hangouts, happened by sharing event flyers in schools and through online chats—including the forum in the local punk website *Punkdominicano.com*.

Distortion and Subversion: Punk Rock Music and the Protests for Free Public Transportation in Brazil (1996-2011) by Rodrigo Lopes de Barros, revived these memories of

my teenage punk and activist years. His book “[constructs] a detailed and documented history of the protests for free public transportation and against fare hikes (and their main driving force after 2005, the Free Fare Movement, or MPL) vis-à-vis the punk rock scene in Brazil from 1996 to 2011” (5). For this purpose, the author employed a “cyber-archaeology methodology,” whereby he “dug” through digital archives to excavate early 2000s activist websites and chat forums, activists’ publications and posts, and mainstream media news articles. Therefore, this is a work of contemporary punk/youth/activist history that heavily relies on punk cultural productions and counter-archives. Lopes de Barros also interviewed activists and members of other subcultures and countercultures that participated in mobilizations. The author also analyzed multimodal artifacts such as album and cassette inserts that contain songs, lyrics and flyers from punk shows and other events that provide a rich variety of materials weaving together the series of events that took place during the Free Fare Movement (FFM) years. The combination of this variety of primary and secondary sources provide a thorough picture of the events surrounding the FFM across various cities and of the perspectives and versions of those who partook in the movements.

The incorporation of various semiotic elements associated with punk subculture, and of the Brazilian punk movement, is crucial to understanding the politics of punk(s) and of the free fare movement. As semiotic artifacts, punk show flyers related to the FFM, and similar mobilizations, had key communicative functions. The textual information related to the events: address, date, location, band roster, talks and workshops, etc., was often accompanied by images, including burning bus turnstiles, of the cities’ decaying urbanscapes and skylines with emplaced graffitied slogans related to the movement (such as, *tarifa zero* [zero fare]), as well as other graphics representative of the given show’s reason and intent. In this sense, punk show flyers can

also be considered “planning documents,” as Mike Amezcua proposes. Amezcua studied the emblematic neighborhood of Pilsen in Chicago where Los Crudos, one of the most important Latinx punk bands in the United States, emerged more than three decades ago. The author states that punk show flyers contain a planning schema similar to official city planning documents and grassroots plans by anti-gentrification neighborhood organizations. Punk flyers as planning documents, “creatively [interpolate] the built environment for the staging of DIY shows and consciousness-raising.” Punk flyers as plans “[offer] a cartography of subversion that [reexamine] built spaces, their uses, and their utilization for the crafting of new messages about empowerment, disenfranchisement, and systemic critiques” (Amezcua 2022: np).

Lopes de Barros situates the preamble of the FFM in Brazil within the broader international economic situation and the social movements that responded to it. The inspiration and influence that Brazilian FFM activists found in earlier mass mobilizations, such as the neo Zapatista uprising in Mexico in the early 1990s and the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization in 1999, speak to the internationalism of the Brazilian activists involved in the FFM and other campaigns.

The book is distributed into seven sections: an introduction, five chapters and an epilogue. Each section begins with an epigraph taken from lyrics or quotes from interviews with activists and members of the punk community. Chapter one introduces the Independent Media Center (IMC), a platform and network for activists to communicate, which stemmed from Seattle-based Indymedia that emerged during the late 90s anti-globalization protests. Highlighting the internationalism of the movement and the importance of the mobilization of autonomous media and organizing tools within the anti-neoliberal globalization scenario. The IMC was used by

punks and other FFM activists as their channel for dissemination of news and propaganda, as discussion forum and even as their “historical archive” (39).

Chapter two outlines the genealogy of the Free Fare Movement from the Bus Revolt in Salvador Bahia in 2003 to the Turnstile Revolts of 2004 and 2005. The racial and class composition of the movements across different cities was markedly different, while Bahia’s was predominantly Black-led and of lower income and working-class background (representative of the city’s demographics) in Florianopolis activists were predominantly of European descent and of middle-class background. The Campaign for Free Fare (CFF) eventually underwent a process of predominantly youth-led decentralization and horizontalization. This move by middle schoolers, influenced by anarchist and autonomist politics, also attracted more anarcho-punks into the mobilizations. The shift towards decentralization, manifested the differences in ideology and praxis between the varied political organizations involved; such discrepancies were narrated in punk songs critical of electoral politics, such as “Voto nulo” by Republicaos. Furthermore, punk shows also served as events for organizing meetings and political discussions related to the movement. This perfectly illustrates Zavella’s notion that with punk shows and through “punk songs as political music [and discourse],” punks participate in the creation of “discursive political spaces” (2012).

The next chapter continues the focus on Florianópolis after the bus system was transformed into the Integrated System of Transportation. This resulted in worse and more expensive service that led to the mobilization and radicalization of different sectors of society. This chapter also covers the importance of the symbolic battles by militants of the CFF that started in Florianópolis in 2003 and that later resulted in the national Free Fare Movement of 2005. The hikes were suspended on two occasions due to the intense revolts and direct action from a

diversity of tactics that ranged from punk shows, to the occupation of government buildings to mass street mobilizations.

Chapter four turns to Belo Horizonte and delves into the frictions between members of the punk scene and other activists, as well as other aspects of Brazilian (sub)culture. Punks mobilized against the country's quincennial celebrations, including its famous carnivals, dubbing the festivities the "500-year-old class war." Punks critiqued the carnival as a celebration that promoted passivity and false happiness and traced the links between these celebrations and the dictatorship's propaganda decades before. However, a different sector of the left saw a mobilizing potential in carnival culture and celebrations. In 2002, the first *Carnaval Revolução* took place in Belo Horizonte during the three-day national carnival festivities. This revolution carnival was a get together of artists "to discuss forms of anti-capitalist resistance and the creation of a new society" (186). Besides musical performances that featured queer punk bands and performers, there was an educational and activist-organizing component to the festival that included workshops and discussions on gender and sexuality. The *Carnaval Revolução* was another exercise of the punk community to prefigure the world they envisioned.

The chapter also speaks of the radical punk festival *Verdurada*, whose organizers later became associated with the FFM. *Verdurada* was a veganism and animal rights-centered series of events organized by straight-edge punks, an offshoot of hardcore punks who consider the fight for animal rights as anti-capitalist, as anti-industrialization, anti-militarism and thus, one that should be fought in tandem with the fight for human rights and "free and unrestrained mobility" (245). This DIY festival, which started in the 1990s, included political discussions, debates, workshops and vegan dinners. At the intersection of art, culture, activism and anarcho-punk politics, *Carnaval Revolução* and *Verdurada* reinforce the radical community-centeredness of

punk subculture. These types of events and activities also gave punks and organizers the opportunity to reach broader communities, a crucial step towards building and maintaining coalition.

The mass mobilizations against fare hikes also included the ritual-like public burning of turnstiles. Semiotically, in show and event flyers, the illustrations of turnstile jumping or their destruction, transformed the turnstile from a physical device that controlled the form of entry to a bus into a symbol of the struggle against fare hikes. Turnstiles shifted from a boundary that needed to be transgressed, to the symbol of the fight for freedom of movement, autonomy and, echoing Henri Lefebvre, of the right to the city. Subsequently, during the ritual burning and, undergoing a process of resemiotization of sorts, turnstiles went on to represent authority and “the administrative bodies of the government” (260). Burning turnstiles was political statement that “[proposed] a socialist world, which could be achieved only through the destruction or at least the radical transformation of the status quo” (260).

Towards the end of the chapter, the author notes that all of these proposed fare hikes and the mobilizations against them occurred during “the left-wing presidential government of Lula [Da Silva (2003-2010)]” (256). This section would have benefited from a deeper discussion on this apparent paradox of the proposed and implemented fare hikes during a left-wing government and the military police’s violence and repression that tried to suppress dissent.

In *Distortion and Subversion* Lopes de Barros inserts these actors and episodes in the history of the Free Fare Movement, experiences and a context that might have been left out of mainstream narratives and news coverage of the protests. The book depicts the political potentials of movements from the margins and reveals the power in decentralized and autonomous movements. The events Lopes de Barros describes allow us to prefigure other

possibilities of social organizations and the book's methodology allows us to prefigure different ways of conducting research, one that considers counter-archives and centers voices that might be marginalized by mainstream media and traditional academia. One of the book's strongest contributions is this cyber-archaeology methodological approach that yielded a range of multimodal sources that contributed unique perspectives and versions of the history of the FFM. In continuing with the archaeological metaphor, the author invites scholars to continue the analysis of other sources left to be excavated.

Distortion and Subversion contributes to the areas of urban studies, geography, cultural studies, sociology, Latin American activism, mass mobilizations, among others. The book is an important contribution to the literature on student-led and youth-led movements as well as on punk counterculture and subculture, particularly because of how all of these groups are often dismissed as apolitical, apathetic, and inactive. This is why I opted to draw connections between Brazilian punks' involvement in the FFM and Dominican punk activism. There is a clear interconnection and transnational dimension of the punk ethos and urban youth activism that responded to the far reaches of neoliberal policies that resulted from agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other international financial powers.

Works cited

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