

La creación está en el aire: juventudes, política, cultura y comunicación

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The creation is in the air: youths, politics, culture and media

A criação está no ar: juventudes, política, cultura e comunicação

Amanda Nogueira de Oliveira¹

Abstract Published in 2014 UOC publishing in Barcelona, the book *La creación está em el aire: juventudes, política, cultura y comunicación* (*Creation is in the air: youth, politics, culture and communication*) is a dialogue on contemporary youth. It discusses the role of young people as a plural social category based on their cultural and political presence, which is reinforced by technological communications devices. These devices are perceived as platforms for visibility, identity construction and the production of meaning. The book also presents in-depth discussion on youth as a minority as well as public policy aimed at this category, justifying mapping as an essential theoretical and methodological tool to investigate this group.

Keywords: Youths; Culture; Politics; Media

Resumo Publicado em 2014 pela editora UOC, de Barcelona, o livro *La creación está em el aire: juventudes, política, cultura y comunicación* propõe um diálogo acerca das juventudes no cenário contemporâneo. Para isso, discute o papel das juventudes enquanto categoria social plural a partir de sua atuação político-cultural, que é reforçada pelos aparatos tecnológicos comunicacionais. Tais aparatos são percebidos como plataformas de visibilidade, de construção de identidades e produção de sentidos. O livro traz ainda profundas discussões sobre

¹ Universidade Federal do Ceará – UFC, Fortaleza, CE, Brasil.
E-mail: olivanog@gmail.com.

as juventudes enquanto minoria e, ainda, sobre as políticas públicas voltadas para essa categoria, justificando a cartografia como possibilidade teórico-metodológica essencial para a investigação do cenário juvenil.

Palavras-Chaves: Juventudes; Cultura; Política; Mídia

Alexandre Barbalho's book, *La creación está em el aire: juventudes, política, cultura y comunicación* (Creation is in the air: youth, politics, culture and communication), published by UOC publishing company in Barcelona, is a rich and diverse dialogue about a social category that, in the last century and particularly since the 1950s and 60s, has attracted increasing attention from sociologists, anthropologists and other researchers around the world: young people.

The result of continuous research by the author, the book is one of the most significant present-day contributions to discussions on youth. It reflects on the use of technological devices to promote their practices and improve visibility, and on the cultural policies resulting from the category, either in terms of their manifestations in public arenas or how they create areas and circuits of "production, circulation and use", regardless of borders, routes and defined spaces. The discussion also centers on the viewpoint previously addressed by the author regarding social minorities, a term which he feels most accurately defines contemporary youth.

Alexandre Barbalho is a professor in the Graduate Programs of Public Policy at Ceará State University (UECE) and Communication at the Federal University of Ceará (UFC). His career includes work in the fields of communication and culture, with an emphasis on cultural, communication and minority policies, and as an author and co-author of different books on the theme, including *Relações entre Estado e cultura no Brasil* (Unijuí, 1998); *Brasil, brasis: Identidades, cultura e mídia* (Fundação Demócrito Rocha, 2008); *Comunicação para a cidadania: Questões teóricas e metodológicas* (with Bruno Fuser and Denise Cogo — Intercom, 2010); and *Comunicação e cidadania: Questões contemporâneas* (with Bruno Fuser and Denise Cogo — Fundação Demócrito Rocha, 2011).

The key points put forward by the author during the book are: a) the conceptual understanding of young people in contemporary society, conducting gradual historical assessment of the category; b) discussion on the affirmation of this social category as a minority; c) debate on the need for public policies targeting this group; d) comprehensive

qualitative and quantitative research conducted by the author based on texts submitted by the research group Communication for Citizenship (*Comunicação para a Cidadania*) of the Brazilian Society of Interdisciplinary Communication Studies (Intercom) between 2001 and 2009, of which he is a member; and e) the idea of youth involvement (so-called *protagonismo juvenil*), still sustained and highly debated, as controversial term for young people in Brazil².

Given the complex and sometimes fledgling concepts addressed throughout the book, one can understand the author's need to provide a brief contextualization of the concept of youth. Barbalho discusses the plural ability of young people, establishing them as a social construct in addition to praising their potential, language diversity, organizational capacity as a form of political expression and identity construction, contrasting with the view³ of youth as an age category or period of transition, based solely on biological aspects.

At the same time as interest in discovering the actions, customs, rites, rituals and languages of these new young people increases – as a type of sociological discovery – using them as a new possibility to expand consumption becomes important in this new social cycle. This can occur in the form of products to be directly consumed by young people, or by strengthening youth as an ideal standard for existence, providing “models of conduct and consumption for other generations”.

Barbalho highlights the importance of mapping in contributing to youth research, not only in terms of their practices and cultural constructs, but their media creations. To that end, he conceptually defines young people as minorities, justifying them as such based on four factors: their legal and social vulnerability; their ability to change and start again; their counter-hegemonic struggle against consensus and the established order, highlighting its peculiarities; and their discursive strategies. The author establishes the last factor as a priority for the actions of young

² Unlike the Spanish version, the Brazilian version *A criação está no ar: juventudes, política, cultura e mídia*, published in 2013 by Ceará State University publishers (EdUECE), contains ten chapters, with the other five focusing on young people in Ceará state.

³ Refuted by several current sociological and anthropological studies.

people as a minority and emphasizes communication as a potential tool for visibility essential to the autonomy of youth, reinforcing technology as a “more appropriate habitat” (p. 32) for contemporary youth, as a platform for their cultural policies to move beyond their immediate environment, potentially blurring the boundaries between the center and periphery.

The author consistently defends mapping as a theoretical and methodological benchmark in youth research, primarily for its fluid nature and the prospect that this tool could contribute to the externalization of young people’s affections and desires, with mapping as an essentially political practice.

Based on the author’s chosen course when discussing young people, their power and possibilities, it is inevitable not to consider them a focus of public policy, since they prompt debate on their movements, culture and politics. To that end, Barbalho explains the need to begin with a broader and even historic social universe, prompting debate on the issue using a document produced by Unesco in 2004, which describes the situation of youths the Latin American youth.

According to the document, public policy targeting Latin American youths has been formulated based on four approaches: as a risk group; as natural persons; as strategic players in development; and from a social capital and empowerment perspective. According to the author, the second perspective potentially differs from the ideal promoted by the liberal matrix, though identified by Unesco as limited. Based on these approaches, four ‘models’ are developed for young people in Latin America, designed primarily as a form of control, either of their free time, conduct, sexuality, or even their capacity for political involvement.

A gradual overall view develops of young people as apathetic, which is particularly clear in their withdrawal from practical political arenas and institutions. However, the author does not agree with this notion and, based on information from studies conducted with young people, explains that this rejection is not prompted by politics itself, but rather its hegemonic nature.

Considering the Brazilian reality, Barbalho also cites the strengthening of NGOs as government clients, “[...] reinforcing reduced State involvement” in the formulation of public youth policy. As a result, he reaffirms the need for government policies aimed at this social category, particularly with respect to the right to culture, considered a fundamental right for society as a whole, yet still not included in article 6 of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution.

With respect to the discussion on public policy and citizenship, the author conducts a qualitative and quantitative analysis based on texts submitted by the Intercom research group Communication for Citizenship (*Comunicação para a Cidadania*) between 2001 and 2009 on the youth issue. Among the studies that consider youth the focal point of research and analysis, a significant statement consistent with the author’s own dialog throughout the book is that that young people “[...] are active subjects in the communication process, that is, young communicators”, who identify most with audiovisual media and the internet. Also mentioned is the power of music, the plural nature of youth and its constitution as a minority. A minority, in fact, that is at the center of discussions on involvement.

At the end of the book, Barbalho discusses the existence of a “perverse confluence” in the Brazilian democratic struggle that is directly in line with the debate on youth involvement. The term was coined by Dagnino (2005) to describe the relationship established “[...] between the democratic and neoliberalist designs”. While the former invests in expanding democracy and the participation of civil society in areas of power, the second defends the minimal State, “[...] including the promotion of collective rights, social responsibilities and transparency”.

In other words, in the established democracy permeated by perverse confluence, the State role diminishes while at the same time identifying partners in the neoliberal perspective, that is, the non-profit sector. Thus, in the case of individuals, participation is understood as “shared participation”, considered “volunteerism”, and in the case of institutions and particularly companies, as “social responsibility”.

The prospect established based on this perverse confluence is that of young people indeed called upon and inserted into an aseptic political sphere as volunteers, becoming the objects and not subjects of governmental and non-governmental policies. More than viewing society collectively, as participants and entrepreneurs themselves, young people are permeated by the notion of developing individual skills.

However, in the midst of this heightened battle of the senses, disturbances in this process, which converge into other youthful capabilities, are made strategically viable by the relationship between culture and communication. To reinforce this perspective, Barbalho focuses on the so-called *perifativismo cultural* (cultural peripheral activism) that emerges through the involvement of residents of slums, poor and peripheral regions, largely young people who maintain the virtual public arena (the internet) and transform it into a counter-device, that is, a vital space for their peripheral activism.

It is important to underscore that, regardless of the current terms and terminology used to refer to young people as political players, there are always new forms and daily practices that lead to different perspectives and actions, sometimes contrary to those expected. This prospect is conveyed throughout the book, especially when the author highlights mapping as a potential theoretical and methodological tool in youth research, justified by its fluidity that echoes the manifestations of this social category. Young people are exercise in continuous understanding and, along these same lines, culture and communication emerge as instigators of the construction and reconstruction of meaning *for* and *by* the youth.

About the author

Amanda Nogueira de Oliveira – Master's student in the Graduate Studies Program in Communication - PPGCOM, of the Federal University of Ceará - UFC, grantee of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel - Capes.

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