CULTURAL DISPLACEMENTS AS POLITICAL AND IDENTITY ACTS: BRIEF ESSAYS ON SOME BRAZILIAN CASES[1]

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Abstract

We begin with the concepts of identity and difference to try to point some relationships existing between the social construction of identities and its geographical and regional link. As to delimit the conceptual and interpretative use, this text, written purposefully in essay format, restrains the bibliography to authors in the area of Cultural Studies. We depart from a brief presentation and description of some Brazilian situations. Our objective is to exemplify how social appropriation and reproduction of the concepts of identity and difference may help to build an identity and, therefore, to intervene in social reorganization. Our study is inserted in what has been called southern studies, that is, studies thinking and produced from southern epistemologies. Although the authors used also dialogue with other fields of study, we try to explore the analysis by thinking from the south. Departing from the cases we present we intend to contribute with expanding the studies on the objective/subjective relationship between identity and territory.

Keywords

Identity, difference, territory, cultural acts, southern epistemologies, southern studies, global south, Latin America, South America, Brazil

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[1] This version has been revised and expanded with new considerations. The first version of this text was published in Portuguese. *Cf* . Araújo, V. B. & Suzuki, J. C. (2019). Afirmar é negar: Vitor Ramil, um caso fronteiriço na música popular brasileira. In T. da S. Capaverde & L. R. Silva, (Orgs.), *Deslocamentos culturais e suas formas de representação. Coleção Expressão, vol. 2* (pp. 112-130). Boa Vista: Editora da UFRR.

КУЛЬТУРНОЕ ПЕРЕМЕЩЕНИЕ КАК ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЙ И ИДЕНТИФИКАЦИОННЫЙ АКТ: КРАТКИЕ ОЧЕРКИ О НЕКОТОРЫХ БРАЗИЛЬСКИХ КЕЙСАХ

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Аннотация

Начиная с понятий идентичности и отличия, авторы статьи попытались выделить некоторые связи, существующие между социальным устройством идентичности и ее географическими и региональными взаимосвязями. Чтобы очертить границы концептуального и интерпретативного использования, этот текст, написанный целенаправленно в формате эссе, ограничивает библиографию до области культурологии (Cultural Studies). Авторы начали с краткого изложения и описания некоторых ситуаций в Бразилии. Цель исследования состоит в том, чтобы продемонстрировать, как общественное присвоение и воспроизведение концепций самобытности и различий может способствовать формированию идентичности и, следовательно, вмешательству в социальную реорганизацию. Данное исследование включено в так называемые Южные исследования, т.е. исследования, основанные на южных эпистемологиях. Хотя авторы использовали также результаты других областей исследований, "южный" подход был в приоритете. Отталкиваясь от представленных примеров, авторы намерены внести свой вклад в расширение исследований объектно-субъектной связи между идентичностью и территорией.

Ключевые слова

Идентичность, различие, территория, культурные акты, южные эпистемологии, южные исследования, глобальный юг, Латинская Америка, Южная Америка, Бразилия

1. INTRODUCTION

When we think in small groups or social categories, we hardly pay attention to the fact all these are, without exception, fruits of the same culture. That is to say, these are social subjects ruled by a certain social order mostly processed and incorporated in daily life. Many times we do not know why we act or think in a certain way or with certain social assumptions. Thus, this stance ends up to affirm, or to reflect, our social category in the game of mirrors which permeates the social construction of identities.

The objective of this essay is to present some processes of social construction of identities when we analyze the stance of social groups or categories, specially those whom make use of discourse for self-assertion in contrast to some prevailing social or cultural norm. Thus, we understand the affirmation becomes an artifice of negation of the opposing party or of the norms to which one is opposing to. This happens because to affirm something is also to negate something (and usually one denies the norm, the supremacy). Therefore, all affirmations come always loaded with the desire to negate someone or something representing the status quo. Otherwise, the affirmation is not necessary, as there is consensus.

Our theoretical references are based especially in the concepts of identity and difference as approached by authors connected to Cultural Studies. Among them, we highlight: Tomaz Tadeu da Silva (2014), Stuart Hall (2002, 2013, 2014) and Kathryn Woodward (2014). Tomaz Tadeu da Silva has an important role on this discussion in Brazil, because besides having quite a significant production, he also translated referential studies on the subject. In one of these works, titled Identidade e diferença: a perspectiva dos Estudos Culturais (Identity and Difference: the perspective of Cultural Studies) (Silva, 2014), composed of three articles, Tomaz Tadeu da Silva publishes an author paper and translates two papers, one by Kathryn Woodward and another by Stuart Hall. It is, above all others, upon the research developed by these three authors from this book we develop our own research.

The present essay brings a brief description of some cultural acts, which we will further comprehend as political acts, above all in Brazilian urban reality. We especially highlight the case of Brazilian musician Vitor Ramil (see Araújo, 2016; Panitz, 2010). In each case, we point to some cultural displacements used for the construction, affirmation or redefinition of the desired identities.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPTS OF IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

We know the creation of an identity is important insofar as, through similarities in identity, any group in confront situation or while being a minority may demand for itself a social and political space for action and representation. Identity becomes a vital concept for contemporary social groups.

The context in which the identity is built and evoked is an elementary factor to comprehend the real necessity for the formation of a group. Many times, there is the creation of a wide identity aiming at giving more visibility to the group, which usually was subject to a process of historical erasure. This creation is linked to ideology, that is to say, to the prevailing system of values, which may be shared by the group. In this situation, when a corpus of political individuals constitutes itself, the differences existing among the group itself tend to be erased to promote the larger corpus.

Self-definition is linked directly to the form in which one group decides to confront another: this is a fight of divergent or even conflicting, but dependent systems of values. Self-representation serves both for acting in front of the other and for the evaluation of this situation. The other is always a fundamental component for the formation of conscience itself. The *identity* is usually linked to dominant value systems while the *difference* (the other) is outside, opposing itself against the dominant system. In other words: the *identity* tends to be ideological while the *difference* tends to be counter ideological. When I affirm my identity I am always negating other identity or identities. Therefore, regardless of ideological disputes, *identity* and *difference* are dependent. In the words of Tomaz Tadeu da Silva: "this reflects the tendency of taking what we are as the norm by which we describe or evaluate what we are not" (Silva, 2014, p. 76). Or still:

> *To fix a certain identity as the norm is on of the privileged forms of creation of a hierarchy of identities and differences. Normalization is one of the most subtle processes through which power manifests itself in the field of identity and difference. Normalize means electing - arbitrarily - one specific identity as parameter against which all other identities are evaluated and put into a hierarchy* (Silva, 2014, p. 83).

This leads us to complete the argument, also according to what is said by Woodard (2014, p. 13). He affirms identity is relational, while

difference is established by a symbolic marking regarding other identities: *difference* tends to be a shadow of *identity*.

In this context marked by more conflict, the term multiculturalism[1] is frequently sought to justify or at least to calm the disputes at stake. The idea of diversity is particularly problematic because it tends to be benevolent in its appeal to tolerance and respect towards difference. Many times it obscures the real conflicts (Silva, 2004, p. 73). On the other hand, specially after 1990, we notice increasingly more categories and many cultural groups being claimed as a form of identification and differentiation. We understand there is a weakening of the micro-identity idea on behalf of subdivisions with specific and minority interests and identities. This same stance also seems to be emerging more widely in the current international and geopolitical scenario. Thus, the discussions regarding *identity* and *difference* are once again on the spotlight of big means of communication. Many times these discussions come on the form of coverage on nationalism and globalisation[2].

Having said that, we will see how Tomaz Tadeu da Silva, Kathryn Woodard and Stuart Hall (all of them are linked to Cultural Studies) analyzed and comprehended the concepts of *identity* and *difference*. It is important to note the theory developed by each author about these same concepts. As identity is a social construct, the definition and specially the use of these conceptual tools end up impacting the analysis of social phenomena and, ultimately, the disputes in daily life.

Tomaz Tadeu da Silva (2014) studies aspects from the construction and use of the concepts of identity and difference, such as the social construction departing from affirmations and negations of language, the definition and social fixation of identities and the performativity of *difference* in the social field. To the author, identity, such as difference, is a social relation and, therefore, is subject to power relations. "The affirmation of identity and the enunciation of difference convey the desire of different social groups, situated asymmetrically, to guarantee privileged access to social assets" (Silva, 2014, p. 81). Identity and difference do not share the social sphere harmoniously, because they are impositions and they dispute hierarchies.

In her turn, Kathryn Woodward (2014) presents some approaches on the construction of the concepts of identity and difference. To this author, identity is relational, besides being a symbolic and social construction

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[1] According to HALL (2013, p. 57), the term *multiculturalism* "refers to strategies and policy adopted to govern and to manage problems of diversity and multiplicity generated by multicultural societies".

[2] See, for example, the interview of Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari. Available at: <https://www.ted.com/talks/yuval_noah_harari_nationalism_vs_globalism_the_new_political_divide?utm_source=meio&utm_medium=email>. Access: August, 16th. 2018.

marked by history. On the other hand, *identity* is established by a symbolic marking in relation to the other identities and commonly sustained by exclusion, usually because it is not associated to the essentialist aspects of identity. The *difference* may as well be seen as more or less important, depending on the particular places and moments, what may characterize a higher or lower value for this position. Woodward points two versions of identity essentialism: one is founded in the "truth of tradition and the roots of history", the other is founded on the "'natural', fixed category, in which truth is grounded on biology" (Woodward, 2014, p. 38). Therefore, identity essentialism may be historic and cultural or biologic and natural. The commonality between the two is an *unified* conception of identity.

In his turn, Stuart Hall (2014) dismisses the concept of essentialist identity and presents a strategic and positional concept, which focus on using resources from history, culture and especially from discourse for the production of what, as the author argues, we want to become. For Hall, identities are fragmented and fractured. They are constituted during discourses, practices and positioning which may agree or disagree. "Identification is, in the long run, conditional; it is, in the long run, housed on contingency. Once established, it will not nullify the *difference*" (Hall, 2014, p. 106). Identification thus becomes a "suturing", never reaching complete adjustment.

It is important to note each author uses distinct forms of social analysis to develop their interpretation of the concepts of *identity* and *difference*. Silva appeals to language studies and to social performativity mediated by hierarchy impositions and disputes to comprehend what exactly is the conflict between the hegemonic and the subordinate. For Silva, conflict is one of the central questions in the debate. Woodard appeals to the historical and cultural context which can change interpretations, and also to biology which ends up impacting directly the acting out of roles played in the social arena. For Woodard, the essence of *identity* and *difference* may be comprehended with historical and cultural or biological assistance. In either case, it tends to build a more stable and unified identity. Finally, Hall analyzes identity as a strategy, which appeals to diverse elements (historical, cultural, social) for the social construction of an argument. It is never definitive nor unified, as at all times it interacts with interests and strategies of representation.

In our perspective of analysis, we think Stuart Hall's approach is the most adequate to what we intend to explore and understand: the construction of the identities as fruit of speech and narratives, therefore, as a social construct with certain flexibility, specially when *surplus value* is incorporated. In other words: identity is molded or "sutured", as Hall

prefers, when *surplus value* is incorporated. This way, identities are increasingly strategic. They try to draw near to the social speech in the spotlight.

However, there is a duality seemingly always present: *identity* versus *difference*. If identities are socially molded, consequently narratives and social disputes are also displaced to speech. This way, the dominant identity is always in conflict with the dissonant identities, that is to say, with *difference*. *Difference* here is what or whom differs from hegemony, sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally. Nowadays, we notice it has been happening in an increasingly intentional way and with very diverse needs for affirmation.

3. CONFLICT AND NEED FOR AFFIRMATION

For the need for affirmation to exist, there needs to be a duality of *identity* and *difference* as antagonistic stances. What we see here is *identity* as the *norm*, which tends to direct social life and, therefore, to hold hegemony instead of minorities, and *difference*, which tends to contrast to the hegemonic model and, therefore, it deviates from predominant social norms. However, we must pay attention to the fact that *identity* and *difference* are dependent. Otherwise we would have consensus again. From this, we may conclude there is no mediation between this concepts, but conflict. Conflict is a key element in this dispute for representation.

> *[...] The affirmative form in which we express identity tends to hide this relationship. When I say 'I am Brazilian' it seems I am making a reference to an identity which exhausts itself. 'I am Brazilian' - period. However, I only need to make this affirmative because there are other human beings who are not Brazilian. [...] The affirmative 'I am Brazilian' is in reality part of an extended chain of 'negations', of negative expressions of identity, of differences* (Silva, 2014, p. 74-75).

There has to be some conflict so the separations and consequently the definitions are reached and better defined in each group. Usually an identity is desired or questioned when there is conflict, which may be of a social, economic, class or other nature. This allow us to affirm the conflict may be directly linked to the construction and the definition of identities and differences. Sylvia Caiuby Novaes (1993) argues this constructions are like a game of mirrors: you build yourself departing from the reflection of the other and vice versa.

The representation of oneself is, obviously, linked to the representation one makes of the other and [...] of various others appearing in the scene in a certain context. In reality, there is an interdependence relationship between the image we make of ourselves and the images we make of these many others (Novaes, 1993, p. 21).

The creation of an identity is important insofar as, through similarities in identity, any group in confront situation and while being a minority may demand for itself a social and political space for action and representation. Thus, identity becomes a vital concept for contemporary social groups claiming them. Without this definition, there is the risk of disappearance for the group.

Since identity is not a given, which we can verify, but a condition created from historical and cultural elements, its efficacy as a factor to coordinate action is transitory and will increase in proportion to its association to a emotional dimension of social life (Novaes, 1993, p. 24-25).

Therefore, the act of affirmation is also an act of negation of something, some system, some speech - usually something opposing the affirmation. In the contemporary world, we see more and more speeches of affirmation. Many of these speeches are against the *establishment*, even if they lack objective intention. When we affirm "I am a vegan", "I am a cyclist", "I am analogical", etc., all we are in some way or another negating or at least creating another way of different representativity opposed to the norm created by the capital. In a world in which the production of animal meat, of cars, and the digitalization reach a significant part of the population, we must be aware to the increasingly strengthening of some minority groups of "opposition". It is no accident many of these groups emerged in the big urban centers.

4. CULTURAL ACTS AS POLITICAL AND IDENTITY ACTS

Cultural acts always were a form of political struggle against the dominant system or at least a collective attempt of construction through another way essentially different of that bordered by the elite and the capital - which in this case are merged. *Difference* is also this: opposition and negation of *status quo* and dispute for new forms of representation and redefinition of social life departing from cultural manifestations. We know, since the colonial times in the Brazilian case, the redefinition the African

Brazilians gave to the saints from the Catholic faith - the official religion of Portuguese invaders -, which continues up to this day.

In this sense, we currently see many diverse manifestations with a cultural-ethical-political hallmark which build themselves under the same paradigm. To continue the examples, we should think about what veganism has become, much more than a food option. It became a political attitude to defend animals' rights. Therefore, the vegans refuse to consume any product of animal origin. Their diet is composed exclusively by product of plant origin. Nowadays it is also possible to include personal hygiene products such as shampoo, soap and skin creams. Among the cyclists there is a will to reinvent the cities, to produce a more humane city without cars and less pollutants. This is an effort to rethink the means of transportation used in big cities. These means of transportation usually produce gases harmful to the environment, besides occupying a space (including physical space) which could be occupied by the citizen. In São Paulo, we see nowadays some private initiatives, usually linked to startups or social business. They try to change this paradigm, offering services such as shared bicycles, cars and scooters. We may also see a technological wave offering older products, now rebranded as vintage, sometimes as a way to recover the quality offered by analogical products, other times as a way to recover privacy. In the first case, we may list the return of Walkmans and Discmans, sold by Sony starting in 1979 and 1984 respectively, now sold as vintage products. We may also see an increasing wave of old 33 rpm LPs. They first appeared in 1984 and to this day they still offer a superior quality of musical reproduction than that offered by CD, a medium launched by Sony in 1982 (Araújo, 2014). In the second case, we may list the reappearance of analogical mobile phones (common in Brazil in the first decade of the 2000s) which, besides being vintage, do not offer any resource present in smart phones (which proliferated in Brazil in the second decade of the 2000s). This is why these cellphones offer a return to lost privacy especially after the popularization of digital social media. Although the cases we cited are distinct, we may highlight the common *modus operandi*: there is an appreciation for certain technologically obsolete life and consumption styles which are coming back to daily life loaded with symbolic *surplus value,* usually opposing contemporary life style.

In the same way of other movements, which are contemporary, these are emerging as an answer to social norm, such as *black cultural capital*, *black money* and *pink money*. The Black cultural capital is a movement trying to appreciate and recognize the cultural capital present in African-American culture, such as Hip-Hop, Graffiti, Street Basketball, etc. That is to say, it is appreciating cultural and sports manifestations present in black

North-American community (which is present in many Latin-American countries). It was perceived as subcapital not long ago. However, now it begins to be comprehended as Black Cultural Capital. After appreciation and recognition, it begins to confront the dominant culture. The Black money is a movement stimulating black consumption in the black community, with the stimulus to black entrepreneurship. This way black money should prioritize consumption and circulation in the community itself as to consolidate the black entrepreneurship ecosystem[1]. The same happens with pink money. This is the money spent by LGBTI community. It is stimulated to consume inside the community, as an attempt to create positive feedback inside the community. Some big companies perceive this market potential. They direct special campaigns specific to target these segments[2], specially in commemorative days, such as the Day for Black Awareness or the LGBTI Parade[3].

Therefore, when we begin to understand cultural acts as political or identity acts, we must note the mediations created and occupied by the market itself as to maintain control, reinforcing older social norms or imposing new norms disguised by integrative or inclusive speeches. The reproduction of these discourses is increasingly evident in different social strata, as they may (doubt here is purposefully brought up) not be expressing the reality of their reproducers. In this scenario, there is a social questioning about the maintenance of *status quo* and consequentially the weakening of the social norm's foundations. Thus, there are political and social questionings, uncertainties and disputes between hegemonic actors (norm) and marginalized actors (difference).

This reality - which is strengthened by the digitalization or virtualisation of social relationships - may bring losses or gains with the weakening of the norm, especially by strengthening and appreciating information from alternative circuits. We see increasingly the proliferation of alternative channels of information or even channels disguised as channels of information (as a general rule, they should only be considered communication channels). This imprecise zone about the reliability of information is producing harsh consequences in the political, social, economic, ethical, aesthetics and on other fields. The social unfolding also encompasses, in our view, discussions of *identity* and *difference* which are

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[1] About Black money, see, for example, the TV show Mundo S/A exhibited by Globo News in May 27th, 2018. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=17&v=us126L6BKOg>. Access: August, 30th. 2018.

[2] Notably, the capital has already co-opted these populations seeing in them important market shares.

[3] About Pink money, see the story "O poder do *pink money*" (The power of Pink money) in Istoé magazine. Available at: <https://www.istoedinheiro.com.br/noticias/investidores/20130531/poder-pink-money/3262>. Access: August, 30th. 2018.

disguised by speech. The conflict tends to make the extremes bloom. Now it comes disguised as discussions on nationalism versus globalisation. It disguises at least partially a dispute which could be less geopolitical and more social.

5. CULTURAL DISPLACEMENTS IN POPULAR MUSIC

The reconfiguration we are experiencing obviously hits the cultural field in its many aspects. In the case of Brazilian Popular Music, the changes seem to have occurred more strongly after the 1990s (Araújo, 2016). One of the exponents of this decade marked by important "movements" - such as Mangue Beat, Axé Music, Brazilian Funk, Pagode and the Aesthetics of Cold - is Gaúcho (from the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul) musician and composer Vitor Ramil.

In this author's work, we see many questionings relating to *identity* and *difference*, especially when Ramil still in the 1990s and living in the city of Rio de Janeiro turns his musical production - and his speech - to themes linked to his origins. It is in the heat of Rio de Janeiro's winter - it is important to remember Rio de Janeiro's winter is hot - that Ramil begins to reflect on his own Southern identity and a (possible) *Aesthetics of Cold* as a form to confront the hot aesthetics dominating Popular Music in the tropical country named Brazil.

He begins by thinking about the hegemony or the norm. Then Ramil builds an argument in a certain way of opposition to the dominant identity but which at the same time could represent himself inside his own country without making him a *persona non grata*. For Ramil, the opposition happens by the *cold*. The cold becomes a symbolic representation of opposition to the aesthetics of hot and tropical.

Ramil acted consciously or unconsciously by *difference*. There is no way to confront the norm without affirming or exposing the *difference*. To affirm is to negate, always. When we affirm something we do so to mark a difference or to oppose ourselves to something, usually the norm. It is always a dispute. Therefore, it is a dispute by the kind of representation we intend to make initially departing from *the* speech and afterwards *through* the speech itself.

Vitor Ramil's speech - associated to a redefinition of the market - ended up transforming him in a representative of Southern Brazil's music and in some moments even of Sur's music. That is to say he also became representative of the music produced in the La Plata basin, encompassing the two countries bordering Rio Grande do Sul. The gentilic used by the state gives us a hint.

The word "gaúcho" is nowadays a gentilic referring to inhabitants of Rio Grande do Sul. The gaúcho stereotype is one of the most widespread nationwide, if not the most widespread [...]. The gaúcho is a type common to Uruguay and Argentina. The difference is: in these countries the gaucho (gaúcho in Portuguese) is simply a rural man. It is never a gentilic referring to inhabitants of urban centers (Ramil, 2014, p. 11-12).

This way we understand Vitor Ramil's work produced after 1990s as a kind of frontier production, marked by difference, which maintains a dialog with musical production in Uruguay and Argentina at the same time it affirms itself in Brazil as a production deriving from the Aesthetics of Cold. That is to say, it is an aesthetics, which opposes purposefully the aesthetics of hot predominant in Brazil.

It is important to highlight the dialog waged by Ramil surpasses by far the speech and develops into partnerships in compositions (as in *Viajei* and *12 segundos de oscuridad*, with Jorge Drexler, both from the album *Satolep Sambatown*, of 2007) and shows in neighboring countries (Montevideo and Buenos Aires). Another point we must highlight in Ramil's productions is the presence and the frequent use of the Spanish language, be it via poems put to music (as in the case of poems from *Para las seis cuerdas*, book by Jorge Luis Borges, published in 1965) or even the recording of albums entirely or partially composed in the Spanish language (*Tambong en Spañol*, from 2000, and *Délibáb*, from 2010, respectively). We may also identify in his songs a certain reference to neighborhoods and cities from South America (Montevideo, San Telmo and Punta del Diablo are present in the songs *Duerme, Montevideo* and *Ana (Sara)*, both from the album *Campos Neutrais*, from 2017), something which is not common in the current Brazilian Popular Music scene.

Last, but not least, we think the reflections are synthesized especially in three works which help us to comprehend the border space of Southern Brazil invented and occupied by Vitor Ramil: the essay *A estética do frio* (2004 [1993]) (The Aesthetics of Cold) and the album *Ramilonga – A estética do frio* (1997) e *Délibáb* (2010).

6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this essay we aimed at exemplifying some evidence of socially constructed relationships between identity and territory, departing from cultural acts and displacements. In this way, what initially could be

interpreted as daily life activity may acquire new social outlines and consequently it may acquire new social representations. Identity, in this sense, may also be linked to certain urban devices and to some agendas of some minority groups or certain kinds of artistic production.

However, the factor that grabs our attention is the apparent weakening of a bigger issue (a national cause) on behalf of the affirmation of small identity groups (with diverse, but representative causes). More and more in Brazil the strengthening of subgroups becomes more evident, with the most diverse causes. There is a positive side to the larger representation and inclusion, but there is also a negative side of divisions and the growing of tensions among the groups. It is also important to affirm we have no intention of making any kind of value judgment on these agendas.

When there seems to be a natural tendency for daily life acts to be comprehended as cultural acts, our inclination is to fall into the temptation of identity affirmation in every instant - be it in minority groups or even in majority groups. In this case, the conflict may also emerge more easily. Besides, to live may turn into a frequent necessity of affirmation. Thus, we have the perfect context for the eruption of cultural wars or identity wars.

Although the main objectives (collectivity) of social relationships remain the same, the subjective principles (particularities) are being redefined at all times. Finally, this means to affirm the following: the relationships of the collective order tend to weaken in face of the particular relationships, or, still: the collectivity may lose space to the dynamics of particularity. In some way, in the examples presented, although in very brief and fragmentary form, we have some indications of this change in Brazilian social arena.

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