

Emily Carroll  
HIST 18  
Professor Cox  
April 7, 2004

### Globalization, Neo-Liberal Political Policies and “Meninos da Rua”

Four children, cuddling under blankets, lay passed out following either a glue-sniffing episode or as a result of smoking crack. These are the “street children” of São Paulo, Brazil as documented in 1996 by photographer Sebastião Salgado. In one of the largest and most populated cities in South America, these children face hardship everyday, from hunger to violence at the hands of drug dealers and police. Globalization and its accompanying political ideology produced these “street children” through social disintegration by creating inferior social conditions such as inadequate employment, scarce low-income housing and the loss of funds for social programs.

Globalization, as described by Thomas Friedman, is the “integration of markets, finance, and technologies” that quickens the pace of the entire world and diminishes the limits of geographical distance (par. 2). In the economic sphere of globalization the Bretton Woods institutions of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have dominated policy-making. These institutions began enacting economic reforms following World War II. The policies first called for Keynesian economics but later shifted toward the neo-liberalism of Reagan and Thatcher. This change occurred as a result of the decline of the US economy during the 1970s and called for the privatization of industry, reduction of government funds on social services, decreased role of government and a liberal policy movement.

The outcome of globalization and the neo-liberalism movement has created a global economy shaped as an hour-glass. There are a large number of high-wage, high-skilled laborers at the top and a large portion of low-wage, low-skilled workers in the bottom (Mickelson 14-15). A version of this economy can be found in Brazil where the richest 10% of the population received 44.1% of the total earnings in 1990 while the poorest 10% received only 0.8% of the total earnings (Library of Congress Country Studies, par. 6). The difference in wealth distribution has increased with time. In 1960 the poorest 10% of Brazilians received 1.9% of the total earnings with the richer portion only receiving 39.6 per cent.

The result of Brazil's unequal distribution of wealth has illustrated what many critics find wrong with globalization: increased economic growth along with increased poverty. Not only has globalization created a high influx of low-wage jobs, but also aided in urban unemployment with the characteristic of sending jobs out of cities (Mickelson 17). However, even those citizens who do have low-wage jobs will have difficulty finding affordable housing within the city because another ironic attribute of globalization has included the decrease in low-income housing with the increase in low-wage labor in cities (25).

Low-income housing vanished with globalization because urban property value increased dramatically with globalization. The land became of high interest to commercial institutions. São Paulo underwent a boom in commercial property development during the mid-1980s through the early 1990s (De Magalhães 446). The reason land became of value in São Paulo is the unstable economy. Since the economy is still developing and lacks an established investment market the status of property

increased as it became the most solid form of investment (448). Land was the lowest-risk asset a business could buy.

This increase in status of property has a detrimental effect on the urban poor because it pushed their housing arrangements to the outer edges of city limits. Marques and Bichir explain how the land is distributed among social groups within the city of São Paulo. The rich live in the center of downtown surrounded by the middle class, just west of the lower middle class. The poor class lives on the outer fringes of the city (819).

In Brazil the housing market allows squatting but also involves free-market housing. The poor class, living on the outer limits of the city, act as squatters building homes in a *favela*, or shantytown (Mickelson 25). Housing in the *favela* is the only shelter these people can afford and unfortunately is far from the low-wage employment in the city. This situation accounts for a number of the street children who must supplement their families' income by working odd jobs on the street.

The *favelas* (also referred to as *periferias*) are generally in poor conditions because of lack of support from the state (Marques and Bichir 811). A lack of government funding for social works is a common trend within globalization since it is a basic precept of neo-liberalism policy. Ramonet accounts for this philosophy because globalization is entirely based on money. Those in power do not plan for the future or for the needs of the community and do not attempt to solve inequalities or social problems because they are “dazzled by the glimmer of fast profits” (par. 11).

São Paulo has experienced this drought in funding for social programs. According to an article by *The Economist* in 1996, 3,800 projects in the state of São Paulo are crippled due to lack of financial support. The funds are absent as a result of

debts owed by the city for excessive spending during the late 80s. Another article from 2000 calls for the authorities to worry less about “balancing the books and repaying greedy creditors and spend more on social services” (par. 8).

São Paulo has faced another problem when it comes to government funds being given to social projects: corruption. Another article by the *Economist* reveals that much of the city hall’s income has been “skimmed off by corruption”. The limited funds that have been granted are more likely to go to companies or institutions with an intimate relationship with the decision-making powers (Marques and Bichir 816). The corruption and “networking” among city officials does little to help the poorer classes to improve their living situations.

Another reason for such poor social conditions is the migration of rural citizens to the cities. In Brazil this trend began before globalization, but was related to the industrialization processes of the 1930s (Library of Congress Country Studies chap. 3). In the 1940s only 31.3% of Brazilians lived in urban areas while in 1991 75.5% of citizens resided in cities. Salgado portrays this trend with the picture of the young woman arriving in São Paulo wearing her best clothes. The people grasping the gate behind her symbolize the millions of fellow city-dwellers she has just joined. Although urbanization cannot be considered a negative result of globalization, “chaotic urbanization” can be considered a consequence. The neo-liberal policies which take money away from social programs do not grant the government any opportunity to adjust the cities to make room for the new migrants.

Globalization and the political ideology of the time period have created low-level wages, produced a lack of low-income housing, decreased the funding for social projects

and imposed the “chaotic urbanization” upon the migrants. All these social consequences have an effect on the families of the society and in turn the children. The economic and social conditions have aided in creating “meninos da rua”, the children of the streets.

There are many different types of children spending significant time on the street in major world cities. UNICEF defines street children as “those for whom the street (broadly speaking) more than their families has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision, or direction from responsible adults.” (Mickelson 27-28) This definition separates the children who remain in contact with their family from those who live entirely independent of their family.

Most children on the street in Brazil do in fact have a home and a family but were forced to live on the street temporarily as a result of economic crisis within the family (qtd. in Mickelson 26). These children return to their families with supplemental income they have earned working on the street. A small minority are the children without homes or families. These truly homeless children tend to form a “fictive family unit among their associates on the streets” (26).

In São Paulo there are considerably more homeless single men as opposed to children. *The Economist* reported that during a census taken in 1999, the researchers discovered over 8,000 homeless men while only 609 homeless children within city limits. Of the children younger than twelve, at least 50 were unaccompanied by an adult relative. The publication of this census calls this a small number considering São Paulo is a metropolis of 10 million.

A study for the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* surveyed fourteen children between the ages of 7 and 12 who lived on the streets of São Paulo. The children’s reasons for

leaving home described “a history of crisis and rupture in the family structure” (Ribeiro and Ciampone 45). Major causes included the absence of the mother and violent behavior by their close relatives. The study discovered all the children to be addicted to glue, which distanced them from their families even more. Some children progressed to crack or cocaine (46). Salgado has provided evidence of dependency problems among street children through his photographs as previously mentioned. These dependencies on glue and drugs lead the children to life of crime and violence with drug dealers and police. Salgado’s photograph portrays the absolute helplessness and despair of the street children through their lifeless positions in the photographs.

Ribeiro and Ciampone offered two plans of action to improve the future of children on São Paulo’s streets. First the authors call for political action to fulfill the needs of both the children and the families. Secondly, social programs such as welfare and educational programs should intervene on behalf of the children already on the streets (48).

There have been previous government attempts in aiding Brazilian homeless children. In 1990 the President Costa offered the Child and Adolescent Statute, which would bring assistance to the children. An example of a change through this statute includes the end of the policy of holding street children in institutions with juvenile convicts (Mickelson 28).

The government needs to take further action. As citizens of the world, the Brazilian lower classes deserve adequate housing, sufficient employment and social programs to protect their welfare. Globalization and the political ideologies of the time period have not fulfilled these people’s needs. Salgado provides a lasting image of the

link between globalization and social disintegration with the photograph of an orphanage. Brazilian babies abandoned by their families sit in the foreground of the shot. The infants seem to reach an infinite number as they continue past the horizontal length of the photograph. In the background, the economic symbols of prosperity tower over the children. The skyline of São Paulo looms over the forgotten children of globalization.

### Bibliography

de Magalhaes, Claudio Soares. "Social Agents, the Provision of Buildings and Property Booms: The Case of São Paulo." *International Journal of Urban & Regional Research*. 23.3 (1999): 445-463. Academic Search Elite. EbscoHost. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 1 April 2004.  
< <http://eresources.lib.unc.edu/>>

"Down and Out in Brazil." *The Economist*. 356.8179 (2000): 36. Academic Search Elite. EbscoHost. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 1 April 2004.  
< <http://eresources.lib.unc.edu/>>

Friedman, Thomas and Ignacio Ramonet. "Dueling Globalizations." *Foreign Policy*. 22 Sept. 1999. LookSmart's Find Articles. 29 Mar. 2004.  
< <http://www.findarticles.com>>

"Hope for the No-Hoppers." *The Economist*. 357.8202 (2001): 43-44. Academic Search Elite. EbscoHost. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 1 April 2004.  
< <http://eresources.lib.unc.edu/>>

Library of Congress Country Studies: Brazil. Apr. 1997. Lib. of Congress, Washington. 1 Apr. 2004. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov>

Marques, Eduardo and Renata Mirandola Bichir. "Public Policies, Political Cleavages and Urban Space: State Infrastructure Policies in São Paulo, Brazil, 1975-2000." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. 27.4 (2003) 811-827 Academic Search Elite. EbscoHost. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 1 April 2004.  
< <http://eresources.lib.unc.edu/>>

Mickelson, Roslyn Arlin, ed. Children on the Streets of the Americas. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Ribeiro, Moneda Oliveria and Maria Helena Trench Ciampone. "Homeless children: the lives of a group of Brazilian street children." *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. 35.1 (2001) 42-49 Academic Search Elite. EbscoHost. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 1 April 2004.

< <http://eresources.lib.unc.edu/>>

"The Black Hole of São Paulo, and Others." *The Economist*. 338.7949 (1996):41-42. Academic Search Elite. EbscoHost. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 1 April 2004.

< <http://eresources.lib.unc.edu/>>