

INSURGENT SUBJECTIVITIES AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

Notes on Brazilian Hip Hop¹

Bethania Assy

Associate professor of philosopher of law at Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and State University of Rio de Janeiro / bethania.assy@gmail.com

Abstract

The grammar on a phenomenology of social injustice calls for understanding the embroiled connection of subjectivity, experience of injustice, and political community. In the current theoretical debate concerning the subject of a theory of justice, the well-known dichotomies run mainly over between formal universality versus substantial localism; abstract equality versus particular identities. This article aims to reach another dimension on a phenomenology of social injustice. The main claim here is that beyond biopolitical capture, concrete experiences of injustice can engender empowerment and resistance, namely, the political empowerment of the subjects of social injustice. Instead of focusing on biopolitical diagnoses on the victimization as major injured ingredients of historical events massacre, human rights victims of facts, governments, or economic systems, the emphasis on social injustice here relies on reflecting on certain levels of creating empowerment and political resistance by the vulnerable ones. Injustice resisting invisibility and enforcing political empowerment and action will be framed here by constituting subjectivity. The Brazilian hip hop *Racionais MC* will be particularly considered.

Keywords

Political subjectivity; experience of injustice; resistance; empowerment and political action; Hip Hop Racionais MC.

The grammar on a phenomenology of social injustice calls for understanding the embroiled connection of subjectivity, experience of injustice, and political community. In the current theoretical debate concerning the subject of a theory of justice, the well-known dichotomies run mainly over between formal universality versus substantial localism; abstract equality versus particular identities; Neo-Kantian universalism versus Aristotelian-Hegelian communitarianism.² It stands, on the one hand, a-historical proceduralist normativity, regulative idea, impartial and instrumental rationality, and neutralization of the political; on the other hand, historical particularism, specific cultural contexts, practical rationality and, identity politics.³ Summing up, in the complex composition between subject and society, there are two recurrent ways of describing the subject of a theory

of justice, either the predominantly Neo-Kantian argumentative practices presuming universality or the value relativism and its concrete community of values (*Sittlichkeit*). In the first case it mainly refers to the demands for formal equality and abstract pretention of inclusion; in the second case, it stands the identitarian requests of social justice by constructing identity minorities. The archetypal morphology of the rule of law mainly reproduces the same representational schema. The subject of law often adopts, either the shape of the national state or the form of the cosmopolitan normativity, the same representative diagram.

It is worth noting how depoliticized is the current debate on the nexus of identity and cosmopolitanism. It attempts to combine moral and cultural discourses, in spite of no reference to the deep conflictive and irreconcilable political dimension on identity politics.⁴ This current philosophical process of cultural globalization replicates a sort of universal moral language in which "disagreement" is described as a minor step towards spaces of agreements, evaluations, and translations.⁵ Their methods of complex cultural dialogue "promise" an interpenetration of traditions and cultures in such way that blinds the multiple contradictory dialogues within the social goods of a tradition. In such grammars, cultural complexity means that the different cultural traditions have been mixed within the cultures themselves. That means basically we have the other and his/her diversities inside our culture. Nonetheless, this very vocabulary still maintains the same ontological structure of a pure *I*, and a pure *other* mixed either historically or culturally; it leaves aside any reference to economic and cultural unreconciled conflictive politics.

The subjects of social injustice, mainly in its variety of social and political invisibilities and oppressions, are not automatic by-products of a submissive willing towards the law of reason, mere subjects among others in a general equivalent system of rights and duties. The emblematic figures of those normative invisibilities stand suspended under the positivity of a given law or under the ontology of an autonomous free-will: the pariahs, the no-subjects, the dispossessed, the outsiders, the defeated of history, the social invisibles, the marginalized subjects of the social movements, the nameless ones of police confrontations, the insane ones from psychiatric hospitals and streets, the illegal immigrants, to quote few examples of so many national and supranational un-represented subjectivities.

It is a matter of fact that the current theoretical vocabulary of biopolitics already permits us to confront either the well-known Kantian normative terminology of proceduralist justice or to identify the bare life of identity politics. In terms of developing a grammar on biopolitical captures of the vulnerable lives in order to consider social injustice, it has already been done, on a large scale, by referring, among others authors, for example, to

Agamben's terminology on the biopolitical *nomos* of insignificant lives.⁶ Agamben's sharp approach on the defeated subject denounces the historical mechanisms of the production of bare life and its juridical-political apparatus. Political invisibility produced by the rule of law can reach a level beyond the social imaginary; it refers literally to the invisibility of the body itself, this last spot of resistance.

This article however aims to reach another dimension on a phenomenology of social injustice. The main claim here is that beyond biopolitical capture, concrete experiences of injustice can engender empowerment and resistance, namely, the political empowerment of the subjects of social injustice. Instead of focusing on biopolitical diagnoses on the victimization as major injured ingredients of historical events massacre, human rights victims of facts, governments, or economic systems, the emphasis on social injustice here relies on reflecting on certain levels of creating empowerment and political resistance by the vulnerable ones. Injustice resisting invisibility and enforcing political empowerment and action will be framed here by constituting subjectivity.

One of the main categories of shaping subjectivity here relies on the factual experience in itself. In the case of social justice, the own experiences of social injustice one are exposed to, namely, marginalization, social death and political invisibility. By assuming that neither the abstract subject of law nor the communitarian skeleton of fixed identities can fulfill the representational gap left by the factual experience of social injustice, it leads us to inquire its *anthropos*. The attempt here is precisely to assure that the creative processes of subjetivization and political action are bounded together in framing subjectivity and political communality, the singular and the common. And, my claim is that this process brings to the fore a new protagonist on the approach of singularity and community: the empowerment of the subject of social injustice, beyond his/her biopolitical capture. And I did not mean here bounding subjectivity and political community by negative common misrecognition,⁷ but rather, by empowering subjectivity through out political action beyond representational politics, either neo-Kantian or Neo-Hegelian.

So, my concern here relies on the own process of subjetivization by facing social injustice. Considering the variety of political and cultural experiences of merging social injustice and resistance let me exemplify what I call insurgent subjectivities. Among many others experiences of such kind of empowering processes of subjetivization, I consider some notes on a particular Brazilian hip hop/funk. It has its origins in the favela street parties of the early 1980s where American funk and hip-hop were played. Paying a particular attention to a group called *Racionais MC's* (Mano Brown, Ice Blue, Edy Rock and DJ KL Jay),⁸ one can highlight the remarkable impact

of their music not only by the strong political criticisms on inequality -- after all well-known as one of the main hip-hop moot -- but mostly by an unconventional powerful agenda for fighting oppression by creating new processes of subjetivization and political resistance.

In *A Vida é desafio's* video clip (*Life is challenge*), one of their emblematic songs, Mano Brown, before starting to sing asks: "You have to believe. Since early, our mothers say: 'son, as black, you have to be twice better.' Then, some years later, I thought: How to do twice better if you are at least a hundred times behind? By slavery, by history, by prejudice, by neurosis, psychosis. ... Twice better, how?? You do what is near your reality! Twice better! Who was the scoundrel who created that!? Wakes up to life, brother!" Then, the song says: "In the richest metropolis [São Paulo], its various contradictions; It is countless, unacceptable, relentless, inevitable; See the miserable side subjected to crumbs, favors."⁹ It is clear the protest on historical social injustice, actually recurrent in many of their lyrics. "Do what if the "crazy" (the person) did not study?!; 500 years of Brazil and in Brazil here nothing has changed"¹⁰ And following: "Desperation there, crazy scene; Invaded the market armed, "farinhado" (under cocaine's effect) and a little more; This is the reflection of our present; This is the ultimate mirror of reality."¹¹ Even though deeply embedded into social-political contestation, there is something else, and that is precisely what I want to emphasize, namely, the insurgency of a kind of empowered subjectivity as well as a sense of political empowered communality. The first line of the song is emblematic: "It is always necessary to believe that the dream is possible. That the sky is the limit and you, brother, is unbeatable."¹² In *Life is challenge*, by describing Brazil's social historical inequality, and particularly, the lack of opportunities left for the young in the Favelas, Mano Brown asks: "Will that be instinct or conscience to live between dreaming and the survival's shit?"¹³ And in one of the last paragraphs, Brown answers:

*Believe that dreaming is always needed
It's what keeps the brothers alive
Usually when problems arise, We're off guard, right?
Wrong!
It is you who lost control of the situation
You lost the control of the situation
You lost the capacity to control the challenges
Particularly when we run away from the lessons
That life makes us face it
You think you are unable to resolve...
Thinking is the creative power
The tomorrow is illusory
Because it is not yet
Today is real
It is the reality you can interfere."¹⁴*

I want to highlight a particular attention to the status of experience/event/act in framing empowered subjectivity.¹⁵ Beyond the abstract subject of law, one of the few alternatives left for legal/social inclusion has been mainly done by identitarian verification. I rather take into account the discussion around the notion of *universal singularity*¹⁶ beyond identitarian communitarianism and, of course, outer of Neo-Kantian's prevailing abstractions. From that, it derives the reinforcement on *factual life* in the process of subjetivization. Subjectivity molded not by essentialist attributes/identities, but rather shaped *by the order of what occurs*, by social and political experience, neither structural, nor axiomatic nor legal.¹⁷ The commitment here is towards a situated claim, even though not substantially reduced to that claim (petition). In *Life is challenge, Racionais MC's* highlights that *today* is the reality you can interfere, one can understand as a way to emphasize subjective molded by how one is affected by reality here and now, how one uses his/her creative power to frame subjectivity. In another song named *Capítulo 4 Versículo 3 (Chapter 4 Verse 3)*, its final verse writes:

*If I was that guy who humbles himself in the traffic light;
For less than one Real [Brazilian Currency], my chance was little;
But if I was that boy with covered face [a way to describe a robber];
Who triggers the gun barrel in his mouth [...];
But no ... I remain alive, I go on mystically;
Twenty-seven years contradicting the statistics;
Your commercial TV do not fool me;
I do not need fame or status;
Your car and your money no longer seduce me;
Or your blue eyes bitch;
I'm just a Latin American guy;
Backed by over fifty thousand brothers.*¹⁸

Here relies not only the idea of contradicting the predictable tragic outcome of the favela's youth, but mainly the sharp self-reflective criticism and negation of reproducing the same social imagination proper to the wealth bourgeois youth Brazilian society. Still in *Chapter 4 Verse 3*, Mano Brown says: "Violently peaceful, truthful; I came to sabotage your reasoning."¹⁹ It recalls for the constant reassignment of What differentiates us, the uncertainty of our own predicates, and a permanent condition of openness towards a creative potentiality of how one interferes in reality, in her/his own process of subjetivation, rather than establishing and reproducing endured identities, or the social marginalized roles the structures of society imposes upon its vulnerables. Thus, I underline what I call provisional Identities. Under the influence on the current debate on Paul's political theology, it leads us to the notion of singular exteriority,

which basically means singularity without inward concept, without properties.²⁰ By this I by no means suggest we establish no political identities. It is a matter of fact that someone connects oneself politically and establishes his/her subjectivity through some particularities unavoidably framed by some kind of identity background. After all, we are exposed to, pushed to establish identities all over our social, cultural, and political life. Nevertheless, what I claim here is rather to articulate identity as provisional, non-essentialist, in the sense that they are expressed through punctual concrete, and sharing political demands and struggles, rather than substantial determinations of *who* someone essentially is. Acting together exceeds the current vocabulary of identity politics. Even though clearly surrounded by identitarian predicates, singularity can stand for a political experience of empowerment not deducted to identitarian sharing grounds.

It lead us to a core question concerning which conception of situated universality can be approached without following either an essentialist approach, or reduced to the vocabulary of identity politics. Or, in a broader sense, how can social, political, cultural bonds, the idea of the common, be considered outside the scope of either identity politics or pure normative commitment towards abstractness? *Universal singularity* relies rather on a sort of situated universality, modeled by each concrete social-political experience one is connected with.²¹ Therefore, singularity, as political distinctiveness, is approached neither as a domain of substantial identity nor in terms of mere abstract universality, but rather through the social and political struggles one is engaged to, one is affected by.

It may be rather considered as part of the process of subjetivization in which operates an ontological symmetry within concrete political actions, a permanent political ontological dimension that *realizes itself in act*. In the redemptive political time of the event, subjetivization and political action happen at once. In another words, my claim is that what puts us in common in framing political subjectivities, can be precisely acting together *as a form of life*, engaged on a concrete political demand. I would say, *action together could be considered as an identity without identity*.

A *form of life* instead of any properties is here claimed as a theoretical ground for framing singularity within communality, a new approach on political communality. In *Diário de um detento (Diary of a prisoner)*, criminalization of poverty is a sentence of social death: "Each prisoner a mother, a believe./ Each crime a sentence./ Each sentence a motive, a history of tears,/ blood, lives and glories, dereliction, misery, hate,/ suffering, content, desolation, time's action./ Mixed well such chemistry./ Done: there you have a new prisoner."²² However, at the very same time, there is also a movement of potent interference towards appropriating

reality through political empowerment. In *Negro drama*, at the same time that the song is a social and political claim as well as a strong case for biopolitical capture, there is a turning point, in which the same situation that oppresses turns out into liberation. At the same song, Mano Brown goes on: "Then, the rap tuned me into what I am;/ Ice Blue, Edy Rock and KLJ, and the whole family/ And all the generation who created the Rap/ The generation that rebelled/ The generation who will rebel/ Years 1990, 21 Century/ That is the way/ Then, you get out of the *ghetto*./ Even though the ghetto never really gets out of you, don't you get brother?"²³

Those insurgent subjectivities can be described as subjectivity intersected by the *political*. They entitle the description of political subjectivity as engendering a tension within herself/himself, in the heart of the own idea of identity, which cannot be "healed" by providing some other substantial identity. The invisible subjects of injustice embrace the unrepresentability and unmediability ungraspable by law narratives. Considering that the suffering experience of injustice is structured precisely by the subject self-declaration, his/her own testimony, legal narrative cannot effortlessly grasp the subject of injustice.²⁴

Singular narratives confirm the intellectual value of those who testifies, beyond all normative horizons of representation, in which the main account of injustice is at most metrical distribution, a quite recurrent vocabulary on normative justice. The petition of this impossible *ad equation* rather calls for the commitment with what I will call the politics of the extraordinary. It is a voice "as if" without mediation, a temporal unforeseen political manifestation of words and acts towards a potentially open empowering process of subjetivization. Since thinking and announcement cannot be equalized, it is precisely by such lack of equalization that narrative keeps the present in a continuous commitment of endless renewed expectation. Thus, to speak out, to bear witness, endorses a sort of political narrative self-constituting dimension of subjetivization. That is a way to express the possibility of spread a universal experience potentially liberated in each and every individuation, not as a universal rule, but as an event, as a unique act; as an act of universal singularity.

At this point, let me finish with the Jewish epistemology on testifying, on speaking out, which aims precisely to promote a disjunction in the linear historical time, a deviation on time which leads to the impatience of the new: to an imminent expectation to act, that is, to the real promise of politics.²⁵ Upholding new expressions of subjetivization, the self-revealing narratives, the common unsuspected speaking out, holds a political domain that empowers the defeated, those so far faceless. Here it comes my last remarks. Instead of victimizing the wounded, the invisible, as a mere injured ingredient of a massacre of historical events, as a human rights

victim of a fact, of a government, or of an economy, I claim that at the very core of biopolitical capture, at the same time, it takes place an authentic process of empowerment within the process of political subjetivization of the subject of injustice. As already pointed out, I believe it operates an ontological symmetry within concrete political actions, in which subjetivization and political action happens at once. It entails a *passione* process of political subjectivity that gathers the novelty of the political action and expands political emancipation.

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Notes

¹ A previous version of this paper was published as "Soggettività Insurgent: Note Sull' Hip Hop nelle Favela Brasiliane". In: *EXPLOIT - Come Rovesciare il Mondo ad Ad Arte*. 1 ed. Roma: Bordeaux Edizioni, 2015, p. 872-884.

² Among the well-known proceduralist representatives are: Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Revised Edition, 1999, 1 ed. 1971; Habermas, Jürgen, *The Inclusion of the Other*. Studies in Political Theory. Edited by Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greiff, The MIT Press; Benhabib, Seyla, *Democracy and Difference – Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. For the main contributions on the communitarian side see: MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, Second Edition, 1984; Walzer, Michael,

Spheres of Justice – A defense of Pluralism and Equality. New York: Basic Books, 1983; Taylor, Charles, *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.

³ See: Rasmussen, David (ed.). *Universalism vs. Communitarianism: Contemporary Debates on Ethics*. Boston: MIT Press, 1995. For a very accurate defense on Habermasian Kantian universalism see: Forst, Rainer, *Contexts of Justice – Political Philosophy beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism*. Translated by John Farrell, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. Even Marta Nussbaum, in her new book on justice, still operates in terms of an enlargement of the Rawlsian rational subject. See: *Frontiers of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.

⁴ Noteworthy it is the Benhabib's book on cosmopolitanism. See: BENHABIB, S. "Democratic Interaction: the Local, the National, and the Global," in *The Rights of Others*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, cap. 5, pp. 171-212.

⁵ See: Walzer, Michael, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994.

⁶ Here see particularly: Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer – Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

⁷ See: Honneth, Axel, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought. 1st MIT Press ed edition, 1996 [*Kampf um Anerkennung*].

⁸ *Racionais MC's* is based in São Paulo. Mano Brown (Pedro Paulo Soares Pereira), Ice Blue (Paulo Eduardo Salvador), Edi Rock (Edivaldo Pereira Alves) and DJ KL Jay (Kleber Geraldo Leles Simões) formed the group in 1988. They are from *favelas* (slums) around São Paulo called the *periferia*. Their lyrics combine themes of social injustice and social criminality. It is often considered among the most important Brazilian rap group.

⁹ (*Na mais rica metrópole, suas várias contradições/ É incontável, inaceitável, implacável, inevitável/ Ver o lado miserável se sujeitando com migalhas, favores*). All the lyrics are taken from: (<http://www.vagalume.com.br/racionais-mcs>). All the lyrics' translations are under my responsibility.

¹⁰ (*Porém fazer o quê se o maluco não estudou/ 500 anos de Brasil e o Brasil aqui nada mudou*).

¹¹ (*Desespero ali, cena do louco,/ invadiu o mercado farinhado, armado e mais um pouco/ Isso é reflexo da nossa atualidade/ Esse é o espelho derradeiro da realidade*).

¹² (*É necessário sempre acreditar que o sonho é possível/ Que o céu é o limite e você, truta, é imbatível*).

¹³ (*Será instinto ou consciência/ Viver entre o sonho e a merda da sobrevivência*).

¹⁴ (*Acreditar que sonhar sempre é preciso/ É o que mantém os irmãos vivos/ Geralmente quando os problemas aparecem/ A gente tá desprevenido né não?/ Errado/ É você que perdeu o controle da situação/ Perdeu a capacidade de controlar os desafios/ Principalmente quando a gente foge das lições/ Que a vida coloca na nossa frente/ Você se acha sempre incapaz de resolver... O pensamento é a força criadora/ O amanhã é ilusório/ Porque ainda não existe/ O hoje é real/ É a realidade que você pode interferir*).

¹⁵ Here I follow a messianic trend current in contemporary political philosophy to deal with the issue of committed or engaged subjectivity. One of the common key references here relies on the analysis of messianic temporality in the works of Walter Benjamin – but also in the current philosophical readings on letters of Paul.

¹⁶ See: Badiou, Alain, *Saint Paul – The Foundation of Universalism*. Translated by Ray Brassier, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, pp. 1-15; 75-106.

¹⁷ Here Heidegger's reflections on Paul on his phenomenology of religion will be crucial. His description on the factual experiences of primitive Christian communities historically begins by proclamation. It

highlights the original experience; the way worldly relations are lived (carrying-out, *Volzug*), the way of living, outside classic conceptual foundation, dogma or theory. See: Heidegger, Martin, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* (Studies in Continental Thought), Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010.

¹⁸ (Se eu fosse aquele cara que se humilha no sinal./ Por menos de um real, minha chance era pouca./ Mas se eu fosse aquele muleque de touca./ Que engatilha e enfia o cano dentro da sua boca./ De quebrada, sem roupa, você e sua mina./ Um dois, nem me viu... já sumi na neblina./ Mas não... permaneço vivo, prossigo a mística./ Vinte e sete anos contrariando a estatística./ Seu comercial de Tv não me engana./ Eu não preciso de status nem fama./ Seu carro e sua grana já não me seduz./ E nem a sua puta de olhos azuis./ Eu sou apenas um rapaz latino americano./ Apoiado por mais de cinquenta mil manos).

¹⁹ (*Violentemente pacífico, verídico/Vim pra sabotar seu raciocínio*).

²⁰ See particularly: Agamben, Giorgio, *The Time That Remains – A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Translated by Patricia Dailey, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005 [Il tempo che resta. *Un commento alla Lettera ai Romani*, 2000]. From the same author see also, : *La Comunità que Viene*. Traducción de José La Rocca. Valencia: Pre-Textos, 1996 [La Comunità che viene, 1990]; *Il Regno e la Gloria – Per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo*. Homo sacer, II,2, Neri Possa Editore, 2007.

²¹ By universal singularity it is alleged the reverse of the set of features normally attributed to modern universality. This latter can be mainly portrayed as innominate equality, differences' abolition, the production of sameness, and humanity as our least possible differentiation, beyond which no other division is conceivable. See, Badiou, *Saint Paul – The Foundation of Universalism*. op.cit.

²² (*Cada detento uma mãe, uma crença./ Cada crime uma sentença./ Cada sentença um motivo, uma história de lágrima./ sangue, vidas e glórias, abandono, miséria, ódio,/ sofrimento, desprezo, desilusão, ação do tempo./ Misture bem essa química./ Pronto: eis um novo detento*).

²³ (*Aí, o rap fez eu ser o que sou/ Ice Blue, Edy Rock e Klj, e toda a família/ E toda geração que faz o rap/ A geração que revolucionou/ A geração que vai revolucionar/ Anos 90, século 21 é desse jeito/ Aí, você saiu do gueto,/ Mas o gueto nunca saiu de você, morou irmão?*)

²⁴ Here it seems to be irrelevant the debate on normative demands of justice (Nancy Fraser) versus subjective suffering for social indeterminacies (Axel Honneth). See particularly: Fraser, Nancy, and Honneth, Axel, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. London: Verso, 2003.

²⁵ See: Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1985 [On the Concept of History/*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band I,2]; Franz Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*. Translated and Edited, with Notes and Commentary, by Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2000; Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*. Part One, Book Two, Reality of the World. Translated by Barbara E. Galli. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005, p.57 [*Stern der Erlösung*].