

Street Kids in the Latino American Metropolis.¹

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Pavement Captains, street kids are the most fragile figures within urban reality; conditions of extreme poverty have marked them from birth. Street kids are the emigrants from the *barrios*, who, converted from a very early age into urban nomads, live alone or in gangs. The sign of greatest urgency characterizes their everyday. They are between five and fifteen years of age: the ones younger than 5 are a burden for the rest of the gang, and the ones who are 15 years and over become too old to wander the streets without exposing themselves dangerously. For this reason they look to join a gang or very rarely look for a job.

The street kids haven't had the possibility of going to school, for one reason or another. Either they never assisted or there simply wasn't a school in their *barrio*. The child, profane pilgrim of the metropolis, will therefore be socialized by his own means without any essential schooling or even without the family, which as we have seen has not been protective. The socialization will be a result of direct learning from life in the streets, the only way possible in the absence of the home. The steps of this learning are known to us: violence, hunger, diseases, small robberies on the sidewalks, the selling of oneself to some passing pervert, stealing wallets or picking pockets, clever ways of cheating, the reinvention of the real world and its terrible hierarchies into an imaginary world with child-like dimensions, and sometimes dealing drugs if the older generation trusts them.

Without any identification papers, and with their dirty metropolitan gypsy face, without any memory of their roots and no intention of remembering, changing facts by any means so as not to regret anything, exposed to the elements and society, mistreated and without an established identity, they live the worst as a routine, and when the worst get worse, they die skinny and malnourished, misunderstood, toothless.

In Venezuela, the alternatives that urban society offers streets kids and abandoned infants are generally the same old mechanisms that were applied when the abandoned or unprotected minors were only a few: either orphans or children rescued from their abusive parents. At that time, it was thought that the problem would be solved with the coming of "modernity" and with the nationalization of the oil industry. But nowadays, however, we feel the magnitude of the drama.. We know that for many the street is a place to stay permanently, a place to work, a place to sleep in. The old mechanisms of reform do not work any

¹ Presented at the Special Session 34 Children without shelter: homelessness in the city. ASA Congress 2001 : Cities of the Futur

more, since we are dealing with entire societies of wandering children that must be saved from “deviation” !. This is an old and forgotten story ...

The only record that the street kids know is that of informality, the law of the street. For the majority of them this begins from the moment they are born: not wanted, not loved, rejected, excluded. They thus form nomadic groups, with changeable but not interchangeable, elements and fluctuating identities. And even after so much suffering and rejection, they are still questioned because of their informality of their identity.

As proof that they are alone in the urban world (with the exception of some brigades that falls upon them), they have developed an oral system of communication that is fast and informal. They know the streets and their rules of steel, that of shoes without laces, the rule of sniffing glue, of sexual abuse, the law of the strongest in which the strongest is he who has been mostly abused. They know about the violence in all relationships, even the most fraternal ones, between gang members. They know about the violence of friendships and of total trust. They know about the struggle with transient beings and the night, situations where one is afraid and the one tries to avoid. And they also know that the police are *sapos* (toads) paid by corrupt politicians

For all these reasons street kids are most fragile, the most submerged in the urgency of life. Nevertheless, noting the present situation of the homeless in New York City, the “*sans abri et sans domicile fixe*” in Paris, the colonies of street people in Calcutta or Bombay, couldn't we say that these children of the pavement are the prototype of our next metropolitan civilization?

The child that is found from very early age on the street, starts by becoming familiar with (and perhaps even controlling?) small territories where he can feel relatively secure, even being alone. From the time that he joins a gang, the size of his territory expands (or actually deepens) due to the fact that he is dealing with avenues and streets, which he will walk non-stop with his new friends, his gangs. Generally the first territories of the streets are bus stops, subway stations, as well as areas around bars and around popular, inexpensive restaurants that are frequented by night-birds without money and are found in the vicinity terminals. They are always central locations, where the constant flow of people and cars moving slowly in traffic, give a higher yield for begging. And when the police arrive they can always hide in the crowd. Little by little the child turns into the nomad of center city, discovering the best corners and hiding places to sleep without being assaulted or awakened by some storeowner wanting to open his store. Normally, the child who lives in the street does not return to the *barrio* where he was born and from which he has run away from. If he lives the *barrio*, it is a permanent decision and normally ends up in a juvenile center. The street kid is illegitimate whatever he goes. No place is home, and for this reason his stopping place is everywhere, both in the day and night time. In the civilization if the sedentary he is always in movement. It is for this reason that he is persecuted and sometimes even executed. Street children are less violent than the violence from which they arise. The simple fact of their existing and surviving in the street is a violent act. They shouldn't be there, they should be at home, which means anything but the street. They live in the violence of the metropolis.

Withdrawing from this violence of the street can only come about through violence itself. There is no way out. **There are already 100 million children that live partially or totally in the streets of Latin America.**²

For them being born has meant entering into violence, seeing it move around the house, in the *barrio*, take their brothers, kill their neighbors... Hunger is also violence, the family is also violence, to work in the side walks of the center city selling japonais toys or Colombians blue jeans, that is violence. The police, far from protecting them from this every day violence, adds more to there anguish, taking the money that the street children have been able to make by invoking any pretext, or—abnormally happens—without offering any pretext at all.

This is the context of the Latin American metropolis at the end of the XX century. and of course event worst in the beginning of this XXI century

- From a consideration of the problem to the ways of intervention

The problem of the streets kids in Latin America is widely related with the poverty in which the majority of the urban population lives, as well as the social inequalities growing every day. Nevertheless, the official posture is set on finding a solution through reform-minded interventions – interventions that maybe has some sense at a time when the problem involved only a few children- or in the ideal of thinking that the child that is in the street will return to his original family. In the same ideology, the child's family is considered responsible, without any real understanding that the family in poor *barrios* is not necessarily the typical nuclear kind, or that those that exist are actually constantly transforming themselves, adapting to worsening miserable conditions.

To keep on intervening with the illusion of a return “home” that is in fact impossible is, and will continue to be a means without results. Holding the poor family responsible for the presence of street kids in Latin America is part of the ideology of blaming poverty itself.

The policies of intervention that seek to “reform” by “reforming” the child who is in the streets as if his existence represented mistaken or errant behavior, as if street kids were “born delinquents”, using methods of “assistance”, is a nice way of seeing reality, has not solved the problem and, far from doing so, it was made it worse by multiplying it.

We propose and believed that a change in the visualization of the problems is both urgent and necessary, as is accepting that the growing conditions of poverty will lead to a progressive growth of the kids in the street, as well as that of the adult homeless population. In this sense new ways of integration into society are believed to be urgent, ways that would allow the young population in the street to obtain their

² Mario Cuevas, Mexican sociologist gives this date in an Essay about La Infancia abandonada en America Latina, presented in may 1991. El Nacional. Caracas 13-mayo-1991.

right to a formal identity and citizenship, which are the minimum requirements for existence. They must be visualized as human beings, and as the future of society.

One of the biggest problems in the Latin-American metropolis has been the purposeful killing of street kids, many times the result of the expansion of the ideology of “urban cleaning”, of eliminating the filth, even if they are human beings, little men. The kids living in the streets generally were never registered as citizens, they have no given names (only those that they have found and have self-identified themselves) and their non-existence makes them susceptible to any abuse.

A political intervention that gives formal and legal identity to all the children in the streets of Latin-American metropolis will be extremely important.