Book Review

Moritz Ege (2013)
Ein Proll mit Klasse: Mode, Popkultur und soziale Ungleichheiten unter jungen Männern in Berlin.
Frankfurt/New York: Campus. ISBN 978-3593399478
532 pp. softcover 29.90€

Roberto Camargos (2015)
Rap e Política: Percepções da vida social brasileira.
São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial. ISBN 978-8575594261
191 pp. softcover 34.00 BRL

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Cultural Expressions of the Male Underclass

This review covers two books on a similar subject, but in different socio-economic contexts. Both deal with the subculture of rap and hip hop, albeit from different theoretical and methodological backgrounds. Moritz Ege's work *Ein Proll mit Klasse: Mode, Popkultur und soziale Ungleichheiten unter jungen Männern in Berlin* (*A Prole with Class: Fashion, Pop Culture and Social Inequalities among Young Men in Berlin*) is an ethnographic cultural analysis of Berlin's male sub-proletariat of the early 2000s. It is thereby situated in one of the centres of the Global North, where deindustrialisation and the precarisation of the workforce led to a dramatic increase of social exclusion (Bude and Willisch, 2008; Castel and Dörre, 2009). Roberto Camargos' *Rap e Política: Percepções da vida social brasileira* (*Rap and Politics: Perceptions of Brazilian Social Life*) is methodologically based on conceptions of "history from below" (Camargos, p. 28) and deals with the emergence and development of politically engaged rap from the Brazilian peripheries from the 1980s to the mid-2000s. Thus Camargos writes about cultural politics (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar, 1998) of the marginalised in one of the most unequal countries in the Global South. Differing from Germany, Brazilian exclusion has its roots in slavery and has affected a majority of the population throughout history.

While Camargo focuses on the active performers of rap and hip hop, Ege emphasises the milieu of the younger generation of hip hop fans. Employing Elias' (2004) concept of "figuration",

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Ege describes the figure of the "prole" – a term mostly used pejoratively as an abbreviation of "proletarian". He unfolds this analysis by exploring both bourgeois and (sub-)proletarian discourse on the term. While bourgeois conceptions of "prole" attribute a lack of education and aggressive gang behaviour to the figure, Ege unravels different figurations within the group being denounced as proles. Based on critical realist methodology (Bhaskar, 2008), he first develops the figure of the prole by its history of figuration in Europe. Sub-proletarian cultures such as hooliganism are traced back to their origins at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, and current youth subcultures are presented – for example, the figures of the "chav" and "white trash" as British and US equivalents to the German prole. The main part of Ege's work (pp. 131–492) focuses on the German capital city of Berlin and its prole subcultures.

After a short description of Berlin as a post-proletarian city, Ege introduces his ethnographic analysis. His entry point into the figuration of prole is the local trademark "Picaldi" and the derived "Picaldy style" which is commonly used to describe the way the youngsters look. Interviewing managers and shop assistants, Ege unravels the special kind of masculinity in the looks of drainpipe jeans and bomber jackets. Combined with special territorial bonds to their "hood", a "masculine" look – emphasising slim hips and broad shoulders and legs – the underclass youngsters fashion an aggressive appearance and behaviour. As already described by Scharenberg (2001), the cultivation of a special kind of "street knowledge" is combined with a re-definition of values. Fashioning an anti-bourgeois subculture, there are strong tendencies towards territorial domination, combined with an often sexist macho culture. Dignity is thereby restored as "dicknity".

Ege's main work then focuses on in-depth interviews with young people, unravelling their peculiar sense of identity. He contrasts these stories of figuration by the concerned persons with figurations of public discourse, in newspapers and on television. He discovers that rap and hip hop are strongly associated with proles – a figure which is seldom employed by the youngsters themselves. Instead they differentiate between "Gangsta-style", "Kanaken-style" (*Kanake* is a German swear word for migrants, mainly of Turkish origin, being used by the group), "Player" (a playboy figure), or "Atzen-style" (a specific German figure of a self-confident and self-declared prole).

Ege manages very well to show the ambivalence of the prole-figure, representing territorially based strength and masculinity for practitioners ("bosses of the neighbourhood"), but also a negative image as macho, aggressive, delinquent and anti-social. He presents the people as fashioning a counter-culture to bourgeois political correctness, with rather strong tendencies to reproduce hegemonic inequality practices – especially concerning race, ethnicity and gender. While the subculture opens different ways of self-respect for the excluded youngsters, Ege also warns of the danger of perpetuating self-exclusion and structural marginalisation.

While Ege's work is very compelling, considering the ambivalences of appropriating hip hop culture by excluded young people in Berlin, some issues might have been raised more explicitly. Ege discusses the ambivalences between proletariat and sub-proletariat only marginally, and tends to equates the figure of prole with the working class. Given this focus, a short discussion of the difference between the cultural politics described by E.P. Thompson (1963) for the working class, as developing a positive self-image and its transformation since World War 2 might have benefitted Ege's book. In general, the political dimension is rather marginally touched. Despite one of the interviewed youngsters being portrayed as far-right-wing, the issue was not further discussed. To what extent are the (sub-)proletarian youngsters capable of being active proponents of a

"progressive" political project?

The latter issue has been tackled by Camargos' *Rap e Política*. Through interviews with rappers, and engagement with their albums and demo tapes, Camargos seeks to write a piece of "history from below" on the cultural politics fashioned in Brazil since the 1980s. As stated in the foreword by Adalberto Paranhos (p. 14), the book is written about "engaged rappers" – in his point of view, the vast majority of Brazilian rappers. Camargos engages with the messages of Brazilian rap and hip hop, mainly during the 1990s, but also in its early days in the 1980s and the more recent times in the 2000s. Thereby, he covers a time period with remarkable political and economic shifts: This period saw the liberation from military dictatorship and democratisation during the 1980s (Sader, 1988), the neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s (Fiori, 2001), and the centre-left government and its social reforms since 2003 (Leubolt, 2015). These shifts are hardly ever mentioned by Camargos, who describes socio-economic change as neo-liberal throughout the timeframe.

Camargos focuses mainly on the role of Brazilian rappers as engaged political subjects who voice an alternative discourse about their country: "The image of Brazil being formed in the arts of many rappers is not superb, of a 'good and beautiful country', but of a country sinking into a social catastrophe" (p. 27). By voicing respective criticism, the concerned rappers show engagement with their peers, who also live in *favelas* (slums) in the urban peripheries. In this way they politicise everyday life and give a voice to otherwise excluded people and their realities. As prominently discussed by Spivak (1988), an important aspect of marginalisation concerns the possibilities of the marginalised to take part in public discourse and have political representation. In this sense, the "counter history" present in the music of Brazilian rappers can be seen as an important contribution to cultural politics.

Backed by many direct citations from interviews, CDs, LPs, and demo tapes throughout the whole book, Camargos unfolds a short history of Brazilian hip hop. Being imported from the US during the mid-1980s, it arrived closely connected with funk (a variant of the so-called "Miami bass"). "Black parties" (Port.: *bailes black*) began to evolve in the Brazilian *favelas*. By the 1990s, two different subcultures began to emerge: *baile funk* fashioning a less politicised and more sexualised youth culture, and rap and hip hop, fashioning a more rebellious and aggressive youth culture. Camargos describes the latter as focusing on urban problems – violence, drug consumption, the social dynamics of drug trafficking, the bad living conditions in peripheral areas in contrast to the privileged districts, and the precarious access to public services for the people living in the deprived neighbourhoods.

After the introduction, Camargo writes a chapter on "dialogue with the critics" (pp. 53–75). Taking a polemical newspaper article against rap and hip hop from 2007 as central reference (Gancia, 2007), Camargo deals with bourgeois critique and its repercussion by the rappers. The latter denounce the elitism and discrimination against the poor in Brazil, as the criticism denies hip hop to be a cultural movement and argues heavily against government spending on cultural activities related to rap and hip hop. The main points of critique concern the offensive language employed by the rappers, the glorification of gangster lifestyle and the sexism present in some of the lyrics. Despite a footnote with references to a documentary and master theses on feminist Brazilian hip hop (p. 59), Camargo does not further engage with this criticism, but rather constructs his arguments about rap being a counter-culture to Brazilian elitist conceptions of culture. Given that the above-mentioned argument about "dicknity" also concerns many songs of artists frequently cited by Camargo, he might have considered a more thorough engagement with critique.

Camargo goes into the efforts of Brazilian rappers to voice radical protest against the "elites" and politicians and the politicising lyrics. Issues such as the injustices of the Brazilian labour market, access to education, the decadence of the rich and the bad treatment of prisoners are raised, as well as stories about problems related to drug trafficking and crime. Furthermore, some rappers also tried to intervene directly in politics. A prominent example is given by a story about a rapper who received an award in a regional parliament and used the occasion to perform his most critical song against corruption in politics. Mano Brown – perhaps the most well-known Brazilian rapper from the band Racionais MCs – is cited as using hip hop as his weapon to fight against the injustices of the Brazilian system (p. 80). Social transformation is presented as a necessity by the engaged rappers, who thereby contribute to progressive cultural politics.

Camargo's book deals with the subject Ege neglected in his analysis – the political dimension of rap and hip hop. He convincingly portrays Brazilian rappers as engaged cultural agents for social transformation. Nevertheless, he does so at the expense of not exploring the involved contradictions, which feature much more prominently in Ege's analysis.

Comparing the content of the books, the differences between German and Brazilian hip hop cultures become apparent. While the majority of Brazilian rappers are politically oriented towards the left, the same cannot be stated about the German equivalent. As Ege explained in a public discussion during a conference, the left is rather represented by persons with power over the youngsters – such as social workers. Thus it is viewed as part of the establishment and not compatible with the anti-bourgeois stance of the movement. In Brazil, despite anti-political sentiments in reaction to corruption scandals and the continuous social crises in the *favelas*, the most important rappers are advocating for social transformation in favour of the poor. Their criticism "from below" can therefore be described as progressive cultural politics.

Both works deal with a section of society frequently neglected – not only by conservative sections of society, but also by large parts of the organised working class. Given the ongoing movement of precarisation affecting workers globally, it might be a good idea to listen to the voices of such people. The two books reviewed here are certainly interesting to read for admirers of hip hop and rap, but might also be of interest for people who want to know more about subaltern culture.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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