

Distortion and Subversion: Punk Rock Music and the Protests for Free Public Transportation in Brazil (1996-2011)

Rodrigo Lopes de Barros

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Victor de Almeida Nobre Pires

Federal University of Alagoas

victor.pires@delmiro.ufal.br

In “A Urgência” (“The Urgency”), the opening track of the now-classic album *Zero e Um* (*Zero and One*) by the Brazilian hardcore band Dead Fish, Rodrigo Lima sings: “hoje é o dia da revolução” (“today is the day of revolution”). For a long time, the song served as the opening for the band's concerts nationwide, not only setting the tone for the performance of one of Brazil's biggest hardcore acts but also serving as a metaphor for the tense contemporary political and social context in Brazil. *Zero e Um* was released in 2004, the same year as a series of mobilisations across the country—marked by the increasing presence and activism of youth — including a significant protest in Florianópolis against bus fare hikes, later known as the *Revolta da Catraca* (“Turnstile Revolt”).

This series of protests is one of the main themes of the book *Distortion and Subversion*. Rodrigo Lopes de Barros provides a rich overview of youth demonstrations and protests against fare increases in cities such as Salvador (Bahia), Florianópolis (Santa Catarina), São Paulo (São Paulo), and Belo Horizonte (Minas Gerais), examining the popular motivations behind the protests and how punk rock and hardcore bands influenced these motivations and engaged in politics. The formation of what became known in the country as the *Movimento Passe Livre* or *MPL* (“Free Fare Movement”) played a significant role in these music scenes, and,

likewise, these scenes were an important trench for the whole movement. If we revisit the song that opens this review, perhaps we can grasp part of the sentiment of the time when Rodrigo Lima sings: “há urgência em estar vivo” (“there is an urgency to be alive”).

It is unfair (and perhaps limiting) to say that *Distortion and Subversion* strictly discusses music scenes, political protests, or urban mobility. Indeed, a strength of Lopes de Barros’s writing is making a compelling case for the broader implications of the study. Largely positioning his investigation within the field of urban studies, he offers a unique perspective on the debate surrounding social and cultural manifestations in the punk/hardcore scene in Brazil and the political mobilisations of young people in four major Brazilian capitals. Notably, addressing conflicts over alternative ways of thinking about urban mobility, Lopes de Barros conveys how the right to the city (and the right to circulate within it) can be understood as a practice of resistance to capitalism and neoliberalism.

From a methodological standpoint, the challenges for data collection during political unrest are numerous and, in the case of the *Revolta de Catraca*, research parameters were largely imposed by the way the protests unfolded. On one hand, a significant portion of the mobilisations occurred online, even though, at this time, the Internet was less developed worldwide (including in Brazil). *Distortion and Subversion* develops a “digital archaeology”, unearthing websites that were no longer available and recovering them through tools and platforms that archive part of the Internet’s memory (such as Wayback Machine, OoCities.org, Google’s cache, and archive.today). Searching inactive discussion lists and old logs of conversations illustrates the difficulty of reconstructing these events while also pointing to trends that would solidify future events and mobilisations, such as the context of the 2010 Arab Spring and the June 2013 protests in Brazil. While this innovative approach to online research informs a large part of Lopes de Barros’s research, he keeps the roots of his study in the city, in the marches, and at the shows, engaging with many individuals involved in these physical social mobilisations and the music scene.

Therefore, the merit of Lopes de Barros’s research is not only his close investigation of music scenes as part of the origins of the protests – rather than as the assumed main origin – but, also, and more importantly, to likewise demonstrate that music does not happen in a “vacuum”. Understanding music scenes instead as integral parts of complex urban networks allows us to visualise the intersections between musical expressions and political practice not only within the usual materials of music studies such as song lyrics, fanzines, and speeches at shows, but also beyond in the streets, marches, and protests that epitomise the “do-it-yourself” ethos. This is apparent in the book’s historical analyses where Lopes de Barros argues, in Chapter 5, that it is important to recognise the impact of these protests on the Brazilian political and social landscape. Considering, for example, the June 2013 protests in Brazil (a series of heterogeneous popular riots that eventually set the stage for the 2016 coup d’état and the subsequent impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff), Lopes de Barros explains that we can perceive how part of the discontent that led thousands of people to the streets was related to a R\$ 0.20 increase in public transportation fares in urban centres like São Paulo. Revisiting this event in light of other protests against the increase in public transportation fares highlights the centrality of the debate on urban mobility in the Brazilian political, economic, and social landscape. Chapter 5 showcases how the June 2013 protests

were appropriated by the conservative right and the subsequent discontent that arose among members of the Free Fare Movement and punk scenes who did not recognise themselves in what the mobilization was becoming. Therefore, the narratives of historical events in the book may interest researchers exploring urban mobility policies, political activism, and contemporary Brazilian history.

Finally, it is also necessary to highlight Lopes de Barros's detailed mapping of music scenes, shows, songs, bands, conferences, training activities, independent media outlets, and cultural spaces that illustrate the discussions throughout the entire text. When discussing the protests that took place in Salvador, São Paulo, Florianópolis, and Belo Horizonte, it is possible to understand the particularities of the cultural manifestations present in each scene and their relationship with the modes of social mobilisation carried out by their members. For example, the analysis of Carnaval Revolução in Chapter 4 outlines an original intersection between punk, football, and "carnivalization" as a protest practice in the construction of the Free Fare Movement.

Distortion and Subversion is a valuable contribution to studies of popular music and politics, and a useful demonstration of the combination of traditional and innovative research methodologies for popular music researchers examining underground scenes, punk rock, hardcore, and "do-it-yourself" politics. Although punk rock and hardcore take on a confrontational stance against the "status quo" in various parts of the world, understanding the political praxis of the scenes in the movements discussed shows that punk needs to be understood much more broadly than just a soundtrack of revolution. Lopes de Barros's examination of punk as a catalysing element of social mediation processes uncovers the many precise cultural and political interactions that combine to create change as well as the complexity of the physical and digital forums they occur in.