Leticia Veloso

Child Street Labor in Brazil: Licit and Illicit Economies in the Eyes of Marginalized Youth

Introduction

When I arrived at a small but busy square in downtown Rio de Janeiro in the heart of the city’s commercial and financial center early one morning in the spring of 2009, I saw a truly varied crowd, including street vendors, street children, and many homeless persons, as well as smart-looking business executives and young people, probably students of the nearby university, carrying brand-name backpacks. Clearly noticeable above the generalized noise was the joyful chatter of Marcelo, a twelve-year-old boy who had just begun his workday. I watched him follow the same routine over several months, as it was the same every weekday. He always brought his merchandise from home in a worn-out backpack, and as soon as he arrived, he would retrieve a small folding table from its hiding place—a hole in the ground—and begin displaying his goods in a precise and tidy manner: object type by object type, brand by brand, model by model. He sold sunglasses and watches; all carried brand names like Gucci, Prada, and even Rolex, and all were clearly counterfeit.
All the while, he talked loudly and happily: “Come on, customers, come buy my products. I’m a working kid, not one of those street vagabonds. I’m a worker just like you. I’m not asking for alms here.”1 When we talked, he told me he had his strategy all worked out:

This is all part of my work. See what I do? First, customers need to know they can trust me, so I make myself known as a working child to them. Second, I need to stand out and show them my merchandise is good, otherwise I disappear among all those other peddlers. Third, when the customer comes to me, I need to make sure I make the sale. So I look them in the eye, make small talk, and convince them to buy something. I tell them which watches are in fashion now, which glasses are [being worn] on soap operas. If they still won’t buy from me, I whine a little bit to show that I’m still only a child. This usually does it.2

This anecdote highlights some of the dilemmas faced by Rio de Janeiro’s working children. Coming from favelas (shantytowns) where formal jobs for their parents are scarce, money is short, and drug trafficking is rampant, they need to earn a living—for their families, or if they have become street children, for themselves. Since Brazil has outlawed child labor, they are faced with few alternatives. Some become street children and must resort to begging (or stealing), while others, like Marcelo, join Rio’s gigantic urban informal economy, selling everything from candy and gum to counterfeit goods brought in from across the globe.

Such labor, however, has been increasingly criminalized under Rio’s recent order shocks, disciplinary measures conducted by the city government under the label Operation Order Shock that are targeting all things “informal”—from street vendors operating without a license to a car parked beyond the lines of a regular parking space. As an unwelcome result, many laboring children end up being forced into the drug economy, where they are considered “ideal” laborers by drug gangs due to their status as juveniles; in Brazil, no one under eighteen can be legally prosecuted or jailed. This, in turn, brings to light certain linkages between productive labor and crime. While obviously not formally counted as “labor,” the drug economy enables youth to earn a living, and it channels aspirations for a better life—which is precisely what children are increasingly excluded from due to the order shocks. Both the informal vending and selling of drugs, while not counted as formal labor, obey certain logics of value production and surplus value extraction that are not entirely different from those described by Karl Marx for other forms of labor.
Based on fieldwork with street children and other working children, this essay locates what I call “child street labor” in relation to other forms of labor, informality, illegality, and crime. My arguments stem from more than six years of fieldwork with impoverished youth and children in Rio de Janeiro, in two of Rio’s favelas, and on the streets of four different neighborhoods, two middle- to upper-class areas, one lower- to middle-class one, and downtown. The research focused on marginalized children, violence, and crime but also, most importantly, on how children try to earn a living on the streets by working, begging, or stealing and on why they label the whole range of such activities as “work.”

I argue that the kinds of labor poor children in Brazil engage in can be seen as a reflection of and a commentary on both the meanings of formal and informal labor in the country and some of the changes currently taking place in the nature of labor worldwide. Further, I argue that the kinds of work street children engage in blur some of the most basic distinctions in sociological and political-economic thought on labor: the distinction between what counts as labor and what doesn’t, between productive and nonproductive labor, between legal and illegal labor, and for that matter, between work and crime.

Meanings of Labor in Brazil

All the children I worked with—whether street children, criminal children, street vendors, or others—shared one crucial feature: they all valued work above anything else, both as a topic of conversation and as a (desired) source of identity. For example, all perceived themselves as “workers,” regardless of whether they sold drugs, begged for a living, or—like Marcelo—worked as street vendors. Work was omnipresent in their conversations and imaginations: all the children I interviewed worried about it constantly and were always seeking ways to perform some kind of remunerative work. They considered the capacity to support themselves as not simply a function of their poverty but as the basis of their very existence and identity. Thus regardless of whether they were legitimated by others as workers—and not every child on the streets is—they saw themselves as “working,” even when they begged or robbed for a living.

Of course, labor has long featured centrally in political-economic accounts; it has been seen, for example, as an instrument of consciousness or a signifier of social value. In both senses, formal labor versus informality has been key. In Brazil, however, this equation is complicated because of
specific cultural undertones and the fact that, historically, a large portion of the laboring masses has remained outside the formal labor market.

Soon after Brazil abolished slavery in 1888, the new free labor market failed to incorporate most former slaves and most of the poor. After industrialization a similar pattern remained: new forms of regulated labor and ensuing welfare benefits were put into place, but they excluded laborers not employed in industry. In fact, industrialization coincided with the emergence of many new forms of informality, ranging from all kinds of autonomous and domestic work to small, informal enterprises run from backyards. All such workers were entirely invisible to any labor legislation, which in turn impeded collective representation. This state of affairs continued even during the height of economic growth; the so-called economic miracle of the 1970s only incorporated around 50 percent of all Brazilian urban workers. Even today, regardless of all recent efforts at formalization and employment programs, the formal employment rate remains at only roughly 40 percent.

Closely linked to this history, in Brazil the ability to secure formal work has been treated as the main marker of citizenship and belonging. When social welfare legislation was implemented in the 1930s, for example, it was designed only for formally employed persons: only workers with a formal, regulated tie to a business or government enterprise, and with the proper papers to prove it, were considered full citizens. In this form of social and political personhood—which Brazilian political scientist Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos calls “regulated citizenship”—only those duly registered as formal laborers, carriers of so-called workers’ IDs, had access to social rights such as health care and welfare benefits, and only they were allowed to vote and otherwise participate in the nation’s political sphere. Formal labor was thus predicated on a positive understanding of registered workers as the only acceptable and socially recognizable kinds of citizens.

The symbolic equation between the worker and the citizen continues today. For example, when police raid favelas in search of criminals, the main marker they use to identify suspects is whether they are carrying a proper workers’ ID. Here, then, the category of worker stands in direct opposition, on the one hand, to a “dominant class” and, on the other, to simplistic concepts of idleness. More important, however, those who are not workers are considered marginals, who lie outside the realm of socially accepted society. In Portuguese, the word marginal connotes both social marginality and potential criminality, and this, in turn, also makes those who engage in formal labor into morally superior beings. This is, I suggest, a fetishization of
formal labor, as if the mere fact of holding a position in the formal labor market suffices to define one as a real citizen, thus obscuring the whole range of (unequal) social relations that place people in different positions in a scale of social worth. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Marcelo reproduces this same fetishization when he chooses to mark his distance from lesser-valued street children who are not “workers” like himself.

The Value of Child Street Labor

One of the most common ways in which this fetishization of labor makes itself felt is through the sheer value the children ascribe to their capacity to be street laborers and their ability to be good at their jobs. There are probably a few thousand children on the streets of Rio de Janeiro selling all sorts of goods, from candy and gum to the elaborate counterfeit merchandise Marcelo had access to. Their ubiquitous presence on the streets is obviously linked to their need to earn a living—either to contribute to their families’ income or to support themselves if they have run away from home. But, as Marcelo so poignantly shows, they take their work seriously and demand that others do so, too. They are not beggars, and their identity and self-respect depend on this.

In an important study of child street labor in Guatemala, Thomas A. Offit argues that such children should not be understood solely through concepts of poverty and exploitation, as most manage to assign a positive value to their labor. For example, they enjoy a range of liberties that many more privileged children do not enjoy; they build strong relationships with other children without adult interference; and even their work is not necessarily gloomy, sad, and exploitative. He says that this is because they manage to develop creative strategies both to increase their profits and make their labor more fun.

Such work is not always a last resource, something a child engages in only while he or she awaits better times. As both Offit’s and my research suggest, many children like Marcelo are able to envision better futures in which this labor is central. Several other children I encountered were just as professional in their work habits and also displayed an amazing desire for social advancement through street labor. Thus, a boy of thirteen named Júlio told me:

I am very lucky to be able to work like this. I love being a salesman. There is all this stuff that people want to buy, so I sell it to them. Everyone wants to
have these things, so there will always be work for me. I make good money. When I am bigger, I want to have a small stall just like those guys over there, the ones selling video games. People will always want those and they will always need to buy a new one; they don’t last since there is always a new model. Real money to be made there.16

Júlio worked like Marcelo, with only a small folding table for his merchandise and no fixed spot for his work. The “guys” he refers to are young men who rent stalls in a large open market in downtown Rio de Janeiro; this is his dream of social mobility. He is also confident about what exactly he wants to do with his life: he enjoys being a “salesman,” but he knows where the “real money” is—not in the counterfeit watches he currently sells, but in the ever-changing world of video games, where people always “need” to buy the newest model.

Neither Marcelo nor Júlio fits easily into the standard image of the impoverished and exploited street child forced to work slavishly, in exchange for a few miserly coins. Both boys explained that “in a good week” they were able to make more money than their parents make in a month. Neither is merely a victim of unfair economic conditions, though they are obviously affected by poverty and their parents’ un- or underemployment. What matters most in both cases is the inventive strategies they are able to resort to, not only to “endure” their labor but actually to enjoy it and place it at the center of their expectations for a better future. After all, Marcelo plays the role of the victim only when he thinks there is something to be gained from it: when people resist buying his merchandise, he whines and behaves like a needy child. But the very fact that he is able to recount this as an intentional strategy is significant, for it attests to his ambiguous subject position.

Begging or Working?

Children like Marcelo and Júlio, however, are but the tip of the iceberg of the hierarchical structure that makes up child street labor in Rio de Janeiro. They sell “quality products that last,” as Marcelo puts it, by which they mean more or less durable goods that people will own and wear for some time. That their merchandise is counterfeit does not bother them in the least. As Júlio said, “Who cares if this is fake? It’s a watch and it has the brand on it. This is what people want.”17

This kind of merchandise stands in stark contrast with the low-end, disposable goods that some children try to sell on streets, like cheap candy
bars, gum, or paper tissue. For those children who wander around the city offering passers-by their low-value products, “work” carries a different meaning: selling candy or chewing gum is, they think, “work,” but they also see it as one strategy among many to make ends meet. When they do have the means to acquire a box or two of candy or gum to sell, they do so; when they do not, they resort to begging or, perhaps, stealing.

One such child was Pedro, whom I met in early 2010. He was a thin black child, small for his age and dressed in rags, and I saw him every Monday as I went to work. He sat near the entrance of a bank branch in downtown Rio, holding a small box of candy that he showed bank customers, desperately trying to persuade them to buy some. On our first encounter, I offered him money and said I did not need the candy, but he was offended. He insisted that I take the candy, saying he was “no beggar and no thief” and would only sell his merchandise.

This was important, he said, because he “looked like a street child,” so people would not want anything to do with him. He deeply resented this association: “A lot of people are mean. They don’t even look at me, or almost run me over. They are scared of me. They think I’ll rob them. But I’m just working.” When I asked him why he did not choose a more favorable spot—say, near a church that people visited, rather than near a bank where everyone was in a hurry—he simply replied, “This is my place of work, this is where I always come to work, and this is where I must sell my candy.”

Still other children do not even have access to such petty merchandise, for even this requires an initial investment (buying the candy in bulk), which will then accrue value as it is sold for a profit. In Rio de Janeiro, a common mode of earning money on the streets is performing acrobatic tricks in front of traffic lights, then walking by the waiting cars to collect money after the performance. In this unusual form of artistic labor, children—sometimes as young as six or seven—work in groups and have fixed spots at intersections that they consider their place of work. They perform tricks such as juggling tennis balls, often while standing on top of each other’s shoulders. The commodity they thus produce seems to accrue at least some value in the eyes of bored drivers, for some of those do take an interest in the children’s antics and reward them for their work by slipping a few coins through the car window—something they would rarely do if the children were “only” begging.

For the most part, these acrobat children live at home with their families and engage in this kind of labor only because the income they are able to secure is necessary for their families’ survival; in some cases, they are their family’s main providers, and their “income” can be higher than the
minimum wage their parents earn. Interestingly, although in general these children’s situations are even more precarious than those of children like Pedro—whose family at least has the means to provide him with goods to sell—their “labor” is taken more seriously and is more highly valued by other city residents. Exactly like Pedro, though, all these children are serious about their work and actively and conscientiously try to embody a worker’s identity—albeit one engaged in playful labor.

In fact, the two types of labor may not be that different. In the late nineteenth century, French sociologist Gabriel Tarde argued that intellectual, artistic, and even playful labor should not be severed from theories of economic labor, for any value production also involves both the production of products and that of knowledge, aesthetics, and even joy and playfulness. He thus suggested that to truly understand labor one must take into account not only its more obviously “productive” forms but also forms mistakenly presumed to be “unproductive,” such as artistic labor—and, I would add, also the athletic labor these children perform. With this early insight, Tarde contributed greatly to advancing our understanding of the broad spectrum of human activity that can and should be counted as value-producing labor. This is precisely what these acrobat children are doing: blurring boundaries and expanding notions of work.

Their work is serious and strenuous, and it requires certain skills and resources that not everyone has access to. First, they must learn to perform such tricks, a difficult endeavor in itself. Then they must access a very specific resource: a network of other children with whom to collaborate, for they can perform only in groups. They must thus develop trust relationships with other group members, not only because they are standing on each other’s shoulders and accidents happen all too easily, but also because they share both their “raw materials” (tennis balls, face paint, sometimes other objects) and the money they make. For practical reasons, often two or three children will perform the tricks while the light is red, while another child walks past the cars asking for money. Perhaps more important than determining whether this is actually “labor” is realizing that the children describe it thus, and when I spoke with them, they were always eager to discuss the skills they had to master in order to perform this work satisfactorily.

But what happens to those laboring children who cannot even gather the social resources necessary for performing this athletic labor? Many children actually live on the streets, by themselves or in small groups, and may be so desperate that they lack even the means to buy juggling balls or the emotional strength to join forces and perform such tricks. Such children
frequently resort to begging as their only alternative, but they do so while being aware of its associated stigma.

Even so, they do their best to attach some dignity to their begging, and some children even label it “work.” For the most part, what they do is alternatively engage in various activities—all of which they label as “work”—so that begging is simply another activity that earns them a living. As one eleven-year-old boy explained: “People think we are only street kids, but we are just trying to work and make money like everybody else. Most of the time we beg, but we also guard cars and we do tricks in traffic lights. This is work, right?”

Or, in the words of this thirteen-year-old girl in Copacabana: “Everyone needs to earn money to get their food, right? Other people have good jobs, they do their work and get paid for it. I don’t. I’m poor, alone, and hungry. So, I beg to live. This is my work.”

**Between Informality and “Crime”**

In recent years, a new situation has affected Rio’s poor working children, for the informal street economy, long part of Rio’s urban fabric, has been increasingly criminalized. As the city gets ready to host three major events—the 2012 Rio+20 environmental summit, the 2014 World Cup, and the 2016 Olympic Games—massive effort is being put into reordering a public space that has been politically predefined as chaotic. Chief among such actions are the so-called order shocks, ordered by city government to end informal commerce on Rio’s streets.

Rio’s mayor Eduardo Paes and his newly appointed secretary of urban order began this operation in 2009; its purpose was to “give back to citizens the public spaces illegally occupied by beggars and street children.” In his speech inaugurating the operation, the mayor declared that his goal was to “return legality to the city. People must learn that they cannot do what they want in public space.” He further stated that the city’s mission was to “make people abide by the rules of conviviality in the city.”

In practice, these order shocks consist of rounding up street children and homeless persons and placing them in shelters, and prohibiting any form of informal street commerce.

As a result, informal child laborers such as Marcelo, Júlio, and so many others have been forcefully removed from their work areas and either returned to their families or placed in shelters; in the process their merchandise is confiscated and their storage areas closed. While these order shocks are very difficult to resist due to the officials’ often-truculent ways
and because much of the repression indeed targets actions punishable by law, such as selling counterfeit merchandise, government officials cannot act in all areas of the entire megalopolis at once. This is what Marcelo and others count on: they know that the possibility of being caught in the order shock operations is very real, but they also understand that agents cannot be everywhere at the same time. They therefore plan strategies that allow them a quick escape should the agents pay a visit to their area.

Marcelo, for example, used his small folding table in a most creative way: it was actually a rectangular suitcase that he placed on a folding metal support. One day he showed me how quickly he was able to fold up the suitcase and run. Children like Pedro, who have no real merchandise to protect but who are more easily identified as street children and are targeted for removal by order shock agents, have also found their own coping mechanisms. Pedro learned about Brazil’s Statute of the Child and the Adolescent, and he used it to his own advantage. I once watched him argue with a security guard, saying that no one could force him to leave because “this spot is public, and I have the right to be here. I have the right to be in public spaces.” He later told me that this kind of altercation happened frequently, but that he “knew his rights: . . . I can stay here as much as I want, it’s a public place.”

Not everyone is as resourceful as Marcelo and Pedro, though, and at the very least the order shocks appear to be contributing to a highly unexpected outcome. Because they have been criminalized as illegal merchants or forcefully expelled from their begging spots, many child street laborers are finding it more difficult to make a living. Some have thus had to move from mere informality to actual crime, by joining one of Rio’s infamous drug-trafficking gangs. This is a logic rife with contradiction. The order shocks treat children as unwanted laborers because of their informality and at the same time alienates them from their only means of (relatively) legal income. As a result, many have been effectively pushed into drug gangs where their labor power is intensely prized. In Brazil, children and adolescents have a most precious commodity to sell, their age. As minors, they cannot be prosecuted and imprisoned.

In this highly competitive market, therefore, children’s labor has become an especially lucrative mode of accruing value. They are, in fact, the ideal laborers in the illegal drug economy, mostly because, unlike adult traffickers, their labor supply is always available: should a police raid take down one gang, the children will be spared and will be ready to be absorbed by other cells. They are thus an ever-present source of surplus value production. Drug lords tend to regard their operations as a business and use a
vocabulary seemingly arising straight out of a nineteenth-century political economy manual; they speak of salaries, products, the workday, discounts, and sales, and, of course, of value. They are well aware of children as a business asset and use them to their advantage.29 In the process, children are no doubt earning a living as laborers but of a very special kind: they become, inextricably, “criminals” laboring in this economy of crime.

Marcelo and Júlio were both still working as vendors when I last saw them in 2010. But I have lost touch with them since, and it is impossible to say whether they are still resisting the order shocks and how long it may be before they give up and seek work with their local drug gangs. This was surely not what Operation Order Shock intended. At the same time, however, these contradictory outcomes also help illuminate just how intricate the topic of labor has become in the current moment, when labor and non-labor, production and nonproduction, material and nonmaterial labor, and even legal (or licit) and illegal (or illicit) labor come together in unexpected, contradictory, but always significant ways.

What Is “Real” Labor in Child Street Labor?

Several things are going on in the above examples. First, the children’s stories demonstrate that, like all forms of labor, children’s street labor is stratified and children are valued differently depending on the kinds of work they perform. Lowest in this moral economy is begging, which is generally looked down upon and seen as labor only by a few. Slightly higher up are ambiguous activities such as those performed by acrobat children, which blur the boundaries between work and begging since no clearly identifiable value is being produced. I include the sale of petty merchandise, such as candy and cheap gum, in this category. Highest in this hierarchy is selling actual, near-durable goods, such as watches and sunglasses, even if in practice this means the exchange of counterfeit merchandise in an illicit market. Curiously, although they are selling illicit goods, this form of child street labor is the only one truly valued by others as real work and the only one that allows a child to be symbolically raised above his or her peers just because he or she is a worker.

By contrast, all street children tend to receive contemptuous looks from passers-by, who do not see their actions as work even when the children may label them thus. When I interviewed passers-by about their views of children like Marcelo and street children in general, the difference between him and other children was very clear in people’s minds. Everyone agreed that only Marcelo counted as a real worker, in spite of the fact that he was
working illegally and selling illegal goods. One elderly man expressed in a particularly vivid manner the commonly held view: “That boy is a worker and deserves our respect. Those others are just idle and useless.”10 This is the case, of course, precisely because children like Pedro are seen as beggars, that is, “nonworkers,” for the petty goods they try to sell are not customarily counted as “real merchandise” in Rio’s urban semiformal economy. In fact, even Marcelo reproduced this dichotomy. I often saw him joke around with other street children before he set up his goods, but as soon as he had done so, he would chase them away.

What children like Marcelo and Júlio do is clearly defined as work, and they are praised for it. These views promote the fetishization of work as the crucial basis of one’s social being in Brazilian society. This is why the working children try to distance themselves so clearly from nonworking children. It is also why others interact with these working children as they would with any other respectable worker, by making small talk, taking them seriously, and buying their goods. Marcelo and others like him are treated as real workers; their work is thought to produce social value, and the commodities thus exchanged are treated as part of a legitimate chain linking labor and value.

Intriguingly, there is an irony here that seems to turn Brazil’s moral hierarchy of formal versus informal labor on its head. Marcelo and others like him are immersed not only in informality but actually in illegality. The goods they sell are counterfeit and are linked to nebulous international distribution chains that include pirated goods and illicit drugs. Marcelo, Júlio, and others like them, therefore, are crucial pieces in a complex commercial chain in which illegal goods are bought and sold. This chain, as Carolyn Nordstrom has shown, is hard to pin down precisely because of the vast numbers of people and products involved.31 His work is thus not that distant from the children who actually join the drug trade.

At the same time, Marcelo’s work is outside both the realm of formality and also of legality, because children under fourteen are not allowed to work under the Brazilian Constitution and the 1990 Statute of the Child and the Adolescent, except in the case of apprentices.32 Actually, it is the begging street children who are perfectly legal in their actions (unless, of course, they decide to mug someone), as no laws exist against begging or vagrancy. The Statute of the Child and the Adolescent clearly says, in an obvious nod to street children, that all children have “the right to come, go, and be in public spaces.”33
What seems clear, then, is that even though distinctions between working and begging, or between formal and informal labor, still prevail—finding their most poignant expression in the order shocks—in everyday experience and perceptions such meanings are far from straightforward. For example, children will often express an interest in obtaining a workers’ ID one day, as a token of their insertion in the labor market. But in reality the boundaries between formal and informal are not clear; rather, they are fluid and complicated, as notions and perceptions of labor are organized around an uneasy continuum between the formal and the informal, the licit and the illicit.

The importance of labor in people’s self-perception seems clear enough, since many poor and marginalized persons, including children, actively pursue work as an end in itself. The children I discuss here wish to be identified as workers because it makes them feel like valuable members of society and also to avoid being classified as marginals, vagabonds, or criminals. Further, they idealize whatever precarious labor they manage to find and treat it as a means toward social recognition and a new sense of self; they even fetishize it as a means of obtaining a better life.

Of course, deep down these children cannot help but be aware of the limitations of the kind of work that is open to them. Though they may not be able to formulate it yet, they do know that they are virtually excluded from the kinds of secure, identity-building working-class jobs their parents, grandparents, or older neighbors may have held, as, for example, construction or factory workers. They live in a world very different from Paul Willis’s working-class youth, whose sole aspiration was to become proletarians like their fathers. The kinds of work these children may be able to find once they turn eighteen will likely be lower-level occupations in the precarious service economy—which, with all the recent talk about flexibilization and the fluidity of current labor contracts, may not be as distant from informality as one might expect.

On one important level, the desire for formal, documented work seems almost anachronistic, given that in the current neoliberal moment there may no longer be any job security to speak of; the children’s idealization of the workers’ ID contrasts markedly with people’s actual possibilities for insertion in the labor market. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri state: “What is called the flexibility of the labor market means that no job is secure. There is no longer a clear division but rather a large gray area in which all workers hover precariously between employment and unemployment.”
Furthermore, I argue that labor’s current flexibility should be read in more ways than one. Among poor children in Brazil it involves fluctuating work contracts and ill-defined working hours, as well as the ongoing blurring of boundaries between legality and illegality. The resourcefulness and resilience of street children, for example, are an expression of this blurred logic of work under a capitalism that is not only flexible but also, as Nordstrom puts it, “il/legal.” This is where labor, I suggest, can be described as in/formal, neither wholly formal nor truly informal.

Child street labor is therefore not simply a question of young people having to make do with the forms of (informal, often illegal) labor they can access in order to make a living. This view posits street children merely as victims, who do not necessarily understand their own predicament. I argue instead that we can see their labor and their strategies as commentaries on the futility of trying to pin down what is and what is not real labor in the current moment. Their desire to be taken as real workers and their willingness to expand the very concept of real work are comments on a post-Fordist, postindustrial era in which formal working-class jobs are vanishing and informal, flexible work is becoming ever more plentiful and varied.

In this world of blurred boundaries, this is a valid perspective: the children are on the streets to make a living, and they do so through whatever means they may find, including mugging people or selling drugs. The children described here are thus reinstating a much broader process. Even though the fetishization around workers’ IDs and formal labor may exist, the children know that most of them may never find such work, and even if they do, it will be unstable. In this light, it is understandable why some of the children consider as work whatever practices they feel will produce value, including drug trafficking.

The children also develop their own moral hierarchies of labor, defining some forms of this in/formal and il/legal labor as more valuable than others and constructing their own definitions of real work. When Marcelo, for example, determines that he is really working while the street children are not, he comes remarkably close to the well-known distinction between the proletariat and the lumpenproletariat.

The lumpenproletariat was initially discussed by Marx and Friedrich Engels in The German Ideology and was later elaborated in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon. Though not easily or clearly defined, this term has been used by scholars to (loosely) describe those people in every capitalist society who, either because they were denied formal, legitimate proletarian work or because they purposively placed themselves outside of such
work, earn their living through illegitimate, barely legal, or downright illegal means. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire* Marx goes so far as to assert that one key trait of the lumpenproletariat is its tendency to live off others’ labor—in other words, its parasitic nature. Further, the lumpenproletariat refers to the lowest stratum of the working class that Marx placed outside the realm of socially useful production and was therefore impeded from achieving true class consciousness.

It is true that the children I describe here are anything but “proletarians” in Marx’s sense: they lack both a sense of class consciousness and any awareness of a presumed revolutionary potential, and they are certainly not selling their labor power in a formal capitalist market. In fact, all these children fit into the category of the lumpenproletariat, which Marx called the “refuse of all classes” and which included all kinds of beggars, pickpockets, petty criminals, and so on. Still, those children such as Marcelo and Júlio who perform the higher-valued kinds of work are very keen on defining themselves as “real” laborers. They do so precisely in opposition to those whom they consider parasitic, near-criminal, and just plain lower level, such as the street children. In this manner, they can be seen to reassert unknowingly the difference between a real proletariat and a lumpenproletariat.

Through their actions, though, they do not merely reproduce this distinction; rather, they appropriate it in creative ways, sometimes reproducing, sometimes challenging it—such as when Pedro, whom everyone considers a street child, demands to be treated as a real worker. These children illuminate just how complex such distinctions are. Through their actions and perceptions, they blur the conceptual boundary between a real proletariat and a lumpenproletariat (or, in this case, between real workers and those lesser beings lying outside the realm of proper work), but they do so even while they retain the hierarchy on which the boundary is based. After all, the children are well aware that any child can be counted as both a real worker and a nonworker, or even a “parasite,” depending solely on what actions he or she is performing on any given day.

**Notes**

I am grateful to the following institutions: Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior, Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico, and Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro.

1 Interview with author, downtown Rio de Janeiro, April 2009.

4 This fieldwork was first conducted in late 1999, then it continued from 2001 to 2003, 2006 to 2007, and 2009 to early 2011. It consisted of interviews and observations with dozens of children, about half of whom were street children; others lived at home but went sporadically to the streets to earn a living. Data collection included formal, structured interviews with children, families, and other residents of Rio who interact with street children, as well as ethnographic observation of children’s interactions among themselves and with passers-by.

5 This data can be found in Márcio Pochmann, *O trabalho sob fogo cruzado* (Labor under Crossfire) (Porto Alegre, Brazil: Editora Contexto, 2006); and Márcia da Silva Costa, “Trabalho informal: Um problema estrutural básico no entendimento das desigualdades na sociedade Brasileira” (“Informal Labor: A Basic Structural Problem in Understanding Inequalities in Brazilian Society”), *Caderno CRH* 23, no. 58 (2010): 171–90.


8 Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos, *Cidadania e justiça* (Citizenship and Justice) (Rio de Janeiro: Campus, 1979), 74.

9 See Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship*; and Santos, *Cidadania e justiça*.


12 Ibid.


14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.


18 Interview with author, downtown Rio de Janeiro, March 2010.

19 Interview with author, downtown Rio de Janeiro, April 2010.

20 Of eighteen “acrobat children” whom I interviewed, nine considered themselves to be their family’s main breadwinner.

21 See Eduardo Vianna Vargas, *Antes tarde do que nunca: Gabriel Tarde e a emergência das ciências sociais* (Better Late than Never: Gabriel Tarde and the Emergence of the Social Sciences) (São Paulo: Contracapa, 2001), 57.

22 Ibid.

23 Interview with author, downtown Rio de Janeiro, June 2009.

24 Interview with author, Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro, June 2009.


26 Ibid.
March 2010, downtown Rio de Janeiro. Operation Order Shock has determined that all street children be removed from public spaces, but this goes against Article 16 of the Statute of the Child and the Adolescent (Brazil, Lei 8.069, Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente [Law 8.069, Statute of the Child and the Adolescent], 1990). Hence, Pedro is more knowledgeable about the law than agents themselves.

28 Brazil, Lei 8.069, Article 104.

29 Though I have so far conducted only a few interviews with youth who are (or were) employed by the drug trade, these preliminary findings corroborate other works on the drug-trafficking gangs. See Michel Misse, *Crime e violência no Brasil contemporâneo* (Crime and Violence in Contemporary Brazil) (Rio de Janeiro: Lumen Juris, 2006); and Alba Zaluar, *A máquina e a revolta* (The Machine and Anger) (Rio de Janeiro: Brasiliense, 1985).

30 Interview with author, downtown Rio de Janeiro, May 2009. I managed to interview thirty passers-by in the downtown area during 2009 and 2010; all but one expressed a similar view.


32 Constituição da República Federativa do Brasil [Constitution of the Federal Republic of Brazil], 1988; and Brazil, Lei 8.069.

33 Brazil, Lei 8.069, Article 16.


37 Ibid., xviii.


39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.