BADERNA AND AUTOIMMUNITY ON STREET DEMONSTRATIONS IN BRAZIL:
OVERFLOWING THE RIGHT TO THE CITY, THE RIGHT TO DANCE //

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Abstract: This paper explores the ways in which dissident tactics of struggle and uses of force on public demonstrations have become radical performative practices of democracy, commonwealth, and sovereignty in Brazilian contemporary polis. The emergence of different social movements and disruptive events in the country, mainly since June 2013, have put the streets and the public space [literally] on fire, challenging the limits of the political, its networks and forms of organization. It is interesting to note that these events have been called *badernas* by the conservative segments of Brazilian society. While the term *baderna* can be translated as “street riot”, “mess” and “vandalism,” it also has a singular rhetorical history in Brazil. The term derives from the name of Italian immigrant dancer, Marieta Baderna, whose work developed during Brazilian romantic ballet of mid 19th century. Baderna also was a leading figure in the dancing fever that occupied squares, salons and urban public spaces, events that disturbed the bourgeois patriarchal values of the period. From a

1 This paper was originally presented in the seminar *Dialogues on Dance, Philosophy, and Performance in the Contemporary Neoliberal Moment*, at Coventry University, Coventry – UK, and in the *PSi#23 – Overflow Conference*, at Kampnagel, Hamburg – Germany, in May and June, 2017. It was especially reedited for the *Trans-In-Corporados 2017* publication, in May 2018.

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“proper” name to a performative that interpellates and criminalizes any radical dissident movement that disturbs the sovereign, baderna embodies a blind spot on the political contemporary narrative, one that has not yet been considered. In my analysis, I consider the iterability of baderna as speech act and its historical trace within dance, as well as questions regarding Henri Lefebvre’s “right to the city” and the notion of “autoimmunity,” the real and symbolic suicide of democracy proposed by Jacques Derrida.

**Keywords:** dance, right to the city, democracy and autoimmunity, street demonstrations in Brazil, baderna.

**Resumo:** Este artigo discute como as táticas dissidentes de luta e o uso de força nas manifestações e protestos nas cidades tornaram-se práticas performativas radicais das noções de democracia, *commonwealth* e soberania na polis contemporânea brasileira. O surgimento de diferentes movimentos sociais e eventos disruptivos no país, principalmente a partir de junho de 2013, colocou as ruas e o espaço público [literalmente] em chamas, desafiando os limites do político, suas redes e formas de organização. É interessante notar que esses eventos foram chamados de “baderna” pelos segmentos conservadores da sociedade brasileira. Enquanto o termo baderna pode ser traduzido como “street riot”, “disturbance” e “vandalism”, ele tem uma história retórica singular no Brasil. O termo deriva do nome da dançarina imigrante italiana Marieta Baderna, cujo trabalho se desenvolveu durante o balé romântico brasileiro de meados do século XIX. Baderna também foi uma impulsionadora da febre dançante que ocupou praças, salões e espaços públicos urbanos, evento que perturbou os valores patriarcais burgueses do período. De um “nome próprio” a um performativo que interpela e criminaliza qualquer movimento dissidente radical que perturbe o soberano, atualmente a baderna incorpora um ponto cego na narrativa política contemporânea. Nesta análise, será considerada a iterabilidade de baderna como ato de fala e seu traço histórico dentro da dança, bem como questões sobre o “direito à cidade” de Henri Lefebvre no momento neoliberal contemporâneo, e a noção de “autoimunidade”, o real e simbólico suicídio da democracia pensado por Jacques Derrida.

**Palavras-chave:** dança, direito à cidade, democracia e autoimunidade, manifestações de rua no Brasil, baderna.

* The street demonstrations that have been taking place in Brazil since June 2013 differ in many aspects but share the urgency in debating the right to the city, joining a global wave of dissident urban movements. The prerogative of
the right to the city, as described by Henri Lefebvre in 1968, is that the advance of urbanism has turned into a social practice in global scale, concerning the way of life – forms, functions and structures (affective, economic, political, cultural etc.) – as well as more vital anthropological needs of accumulating, spending or even wasting energies\(^3\). In this sense, in agreement with David Harvey, the notion of the right to the city “is far more than a right of individual or public access to the resources the city embodies”\(^4\); it involves claiming “some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization and presupposes to do so in a radical and fundamental way”\(^5\). In Rebel Cities (2014), Harvey also reminds us that what we have called a city has always arisen “through geographical and social concentration of a surplus product”, defining urbanization as a class phenomenon “since surpluses have been extracted from somewhere and from somebody, while control over the use of the surplus typically lies in the hands of a few”\(^6\).

According to that perspective, we can say that when people gather in the streets and squares, move and speak together, claiming participation in a certain public space, these groups are not taking a place that has been previously designated for them in the city as a guarantee of participation in the democratic game. Furthermore, they are claiming the right to rearrange the corpus of participation and the distribution of the social collective. They are reimagining the urban politics according to their deepest desires\(^7\). And, as Judith Butler points out in Bodies Alliance and the Politics of the Street (2011), despite these movements depend on the previous existence of pavement, streets and squares, “the collective actions collect the space itself, gather the pavement, and animate

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\(^3\) LEFEBVRE, 19-?, p. 103.  
\(^4\) HARVEY, 2014, p. 28.  
\(^5\) Idem, p. 30.  
\(^7\) Idem, p. 65.
and organize the architecture”\(^8\). Therefore, these groups remind us that the material elements that shape and mobilize what we call a city and democracy itself are co-implicated and in dispute against each other.

Within the Brazilian context, the recent street demonstrations have set the cities (literally) on fire while the public debate around these events has been massively focused on the discussion about the legitimacy of the movements and their organization tactics. Generally, to the degree these street actions are radically opposed to the interests of the oligarchies and neoliberal sectors that mostly regulate the concentration of the city's surplus, these actions are promptly accused of being acts of delinquency, confusion, incivility, uproar and a big and indistinct *baderna*. The accusation of baderna is a local, heavily vulgar, rhetoric resource from the Brazilian Portuguese without any easy translation to

\(^8\) BUTLER, 2011, p. 1.
other languages; it designates those who are outside the rules of the game and therefore menace the continuity of a common ground that guarantees democratic participation. The baderna spectrum, by its own turn, incorporates a blind spot in contemporary Brazilian politics that reveals a singular trait regarding dance and the city.

It is not that well-known but the term “baderna” in Brazil originates with the Italian ballet dancer Marietta Baderna, who immigrated to Brazil in the middle of the 19th century, at the peak of her artistic career. In the biography Maria Baderna – a bailarina de dois mundos (2001), Silverio Corvisieri has made an important research about the obscure traces of the dancer who had her last name dragged towards two main semantic streams: the first one concerning any kind of public disorder, violent confrontation, riot; and the second one having to do with any sort of group transgression.

I won’t make a historical survey of how the term “baderna”, originally a proper name, transforms through diverse times, roles and uses until reaching its contemporary status as a strategy to criminalize social movements. However, I will point out some elements of this trajectory that will open useful breaches in order to think about the question of the urban disputes in association with what Jacques Derrida has thought of as the democracy to come – “as a meaning-in-waiting, still empty or vacant of the word or concept of democracy”9 – which in its dangerous restraint is autoimmune, that is, structurally suicidal. This is a disturbing thought by Derrida which reminds us of the vulnerability of the legatary of the word “democracy” which demands a vital state of messianism without redemption: “Democracy has always been suicidal and, if there is any future for it, it is in the condition of thinking differently about life and life force”.10

Marietta Baderna fled to Brazil in 1848, following the nationalist defeat and the harshening of the Austrian repression in Italy. Her arrival in Brazil was

9 DERRIDA, 2009c, p. 52.
10 Idem, p. 88.
celebrated enthusiastically by her fans and is recorded in many articles and tabloids of the time that invigorated the Baderna myth as a synonym of “grace and elegance in dance”, “angel and demon”,\textsuperscript{11} in the words of Corvisieri. Between 1850 and 1851, Marietta Baderna would experience the height of the polemics involving her name and her dance in Brazil. In the city of Recife, the dancer was at the center of a heated argument regarding the pillars of the slavery and colonial establishment when she decided to include traditional African-Brazilian dances [such as fados, lunduns and baianos] in her performances at Teatro Santa Isabel.

In Rio de Janeiro, the dancer still attracted a legion of admirers, the so-called badernistas, because of her overwhelming presence at the city’s balls. This period came to be known as dancing fever because of a growing wave of dance events around squares, salons and other public spaces which divided the opinions of liberals and conservatives of that time. The dancing fever coincided with a yellow fever epidemic that took many lives all over the country. Thus, those dance parties were considered a contamination hazard and it wasn’t long until Baderna and badernista became synonyms with immorality or the road to damnation [as we say in good Brazilian Portuguese].

The frisson around the dancer’s name and the aggressive public campaign against what the press called “immorality” of the dance and its “libidinous excesses,” “excessive applause,” “excessive cheering” have dragged Marieta Baderna to public repulsion and ostracism. That, as Corvisieri writes, led the badernistas to enact thunderous protests against the outrage their beloved was being subjected to, resulting in “preludes of physical confrontation that provoked police intervention and the indignation of the advocates of public order”.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} CORVISIERI, 2001, p. 91.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, p. 162.
Records of performances by Marieta Baderna in Brazil are found until the end of the 1850’s. However, tabloids from later decades have increasingly popularized the reference to episodes of public disorder as being led by those “from Baderna” or “those usual badernistas”. The repetition of this expression endured for many decades and was in fact widely employed by military dictatorship generals, especially after 1968, which led to the consolidation of a Brazilian political scene always haunted by the Baderna spectrum.

Baderna, since its existence as a proper name, is a quote, an iterable speech act, a “compulsive repetition” I would say in another reference to Jacques Derrida. As such, it means, translates or betrays an event we say we have been shaken by but cannot quite identify, determine, recognize or analyze beyond the very word as a quote: we can call something or someone baderna or baderneiro in reference to the disturbance we define as such by decree. Thinking about that compulsive repetition in the lines of Derrida, we notice that this speech act is put in action: 1 – to neutralize a trauma by distancing from it, like a purge that says “go away, you baderneiro!” and then, as if by magic, to exorcize “the thing itself, the fear or terror it inspires”; and 2 – “to deny as closely as possible from this act of language and utterance”13 our inability to name, think, describe the thing (the disturbance) beyond a referential circularity.

Following the same line, we can think about how the baderna issue reenacts a rhetoric/warlike resource in contemporary politics that determines – through accusatory speech acts – who the outlaws are. Within this repeatable and accusatory structure of speech acts, Derrida was also concerned about the notion of rogue states as employed by the American foreign policy to accuse states that do not acknowledge sovereign states and menace democracy, especially the democratic model of North-America and its allies.

In that long accusatory chain, rogue states are:

[...] delinquent states, criminal states, states that behave like brigands, like highway robbers or like vulgar rascally whom just do as they feel, do not respect international right, stay in the margins of international civility, violate property, frontiers, rules and good international manners, including the laws of war (terrorism being one of the classic forms of this delinquency, according to the rhetoric of heads of sovereign states who for their part claim to respect international right). Now État voyou is a translation of the English rogue, rogue state (in German, Schurke which can also mean “rascal,” bounder, cheat, crook, rabble, blackguard, criminal, is the word also used to translate rogue). “Rogue State” in English seems to be the first name (voyou and Schurke are merely translations, I think), for the accusation was first formulated in English, by the United States.14

Fernanda Bernado, in Portugal, has translated the term into “estados vadios” (idle states). In my PhD dissertation15, I’ve made a lengthy discussion about the problems with that Portuguese translation that does not seem to work well in the Brazilian case, for instance. As a deviant translation, I’ve formulated an association between baderna and voyous in order to emphasize the ethical violence of these interpellations – something I won’t have time to get into now. Presently, I would like to identify this repeatable and accusatory strategy that, in many languages, by neutralization and denegation of what/who comes to disturb the order, designates the dissident forces that cannot take part in the commonwealth [the democratic rule of law]. The ones who are out of the game are thus determined, those non-tameable under the rule of law (kurodō), which governs democracy.

As we know, sovereign is the one who founds the law and therefore determines who is an outlaw. According to Derrida, the sovereign is structurally placed as an outlaw for he is the only one who can, by right, suspend the law in the name of his own decree’s indemnity, that is, his force of law. The sovereign can behave as an outlaw within the circularity of law. As it was sentenced by Carl

14 DERRIDA, 2009b, p. 18-19.
15 Cf. ANDRADE, 2016.
Schmitt: “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception”. And that is precisely where the problem resides: who can decide to reference something as baderna or baderneiros? Furthermore: what effects such a decision produces in political action? The work of Derrida, explicitly inspired by Austin, reminds us how that structure of conflicting decrees “do things” and is decisive in the shaping of strategies and calculations of the reason of the strongest, the sovereign reason. To determine who is the outlaw through the performative is crucial to that shaping.

However, in Voyous (2003) Derrida will point out the authoritarian contradiction of that shaping, reminding us that Robert Litwak, in 2001, soon after the events that came to be known as 9/11, justified United States’s national security plan and its vigorous offensive against the rogue states by declaring: “A rogue State is whoever the United States says it is”. The American war against terror, in order to publicly justify itself, makes use of a sovereign speech act and, thus, decides to invest 60 billion dollars in missile and anti-missile systems to be used against the rogue states. An auto-determination that acknowledges the other by means of expulsing it in order to justify itself as the strongest one.

Meanwhile, in 2016 Brazil, an anti-terrorism law was approved in a haste when the intense street demonstrations had been challenging for more than three years the capitalist city model and, as such, were designated as crimes against the public order and accused of excesses, that is, accused of baderna. Public pressure from social movements has made president Dilma change the initial text but very little was in fact altered in what concerns the global anti-terror claim. This same claim, now counting on a legal base, was responsible for arming and training the police to act violently against the street demonstrations. Especially in Rio de Janeiro, the demonstrations were prompted because of the popular uproar against the priorities of the Olympic City that, on the verge of

bankruptcy, offered tax exemption to public transportation companies at the same time that elevated bus fares. The same Olympic City that forcibly removed hundreds of people from their homes, including indigenous and black communities downtown, all in the name of “innovation” or yet in the name of the so-called “creative destruction” – a neoliberal conceptual jargon that disposes the urban masses of every possible right to the city.\textsuperscript{18} “To focus on baderna“ is a strategy indivisible from the choreopolitics\textsuperscript{19} put together to keep up with the prerrogative of the “innovative city” – the city that cannot stop producing and consuming its surpluses.

(...) Baderna, baderneiros, badernistas, the usual ones “from baderna”.

If, on the one hand, this compulsive repetition through the force of the media and the police, can neutralize and deny the popular insurgences, on the other hand it is also an autoimmune breach that can structurally shuffle the democratic game. I say autoimmune breach as a “means” and “secret” of a radical democracy to come that, it seems to me, demands a double counter-task concerning the issue of baderna.

The first one has to do with \textit{badernocracia} – here suggesting a deviant translation of Derrida's notion of voyoucratie in the sense of a “counter-power and counter-citizenship supplementary to the power and citizenship”.\textsuperscript{20} I quote from the author:

> Urban, and therefore political, origin. The \textit{voyou} milieu is in the first place the municipality, the \textit{polis}, the city or even the capital. And when we talk about the \textit{voyous}, the police is never very far [...]. Generally it is presupposed that there are \textit{voyous} in the suburbs. The question of a democratic politics of the city must always depart from the grave question: 'what does it mean suburbs?', that is, 'what is a \textit{voyou}?', 'in which conditions it is possible to have a voyoucratie [\textit{badernocracia}, I would say]'?.

\textsuperscript{18} HARVEY, 2014, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{19} LEPECKI, 2011.
\textsuperscript{20} DERRIDA, 2009c, pp. 137.
\textsuperscript{21} Idem, p 139 [comments are mine].
To think about badernocracia also involves wondering about the performative orchestrations that emphasize the circularity of the urban space beyond the decrees that feedback and justify themselves through the states of fear and terror, beyond state terrorism.

The second one, it seems to me supplementary, gets back to what I've previously called the right to the city and, following and overflowing the traces of the baderna spectrum, I now call a right to dance: a joyful disturbance that “changes place and, above all, changes the places”, the revolution of the out of joint time of dance, that Derrida once referred to as l’atopie ou la folie de la danse. I’m talking about the enthusiasm, the faith without any guarantees and the waiting for the unpredictable frenzy of the incalculable choreographies in the public space, the topological and untimely turbulences that bring about the opportunity of a radical return of the democracy to come. A postponed democracy that does not reserve any reason in itself and always touches an exposed vulnerability, an autoimmunity. Finally, regarding that topic, I finish with Derrida’s words:

[...] the autoimmunity is not an absolute evil. It allows being exposed to the other, to what is to come and to whom is to come – and therefore it must remain incalculable. Without autoimmunity, with absolute immunity, nothing else would happen. We wouldn’t wait anymore, we wouldn’t wait for each other anymore, not for each other or for any event.

References


23 DERRIDA, 1992, p. 100.
24 I’m making reference to the incalculable choreographies thought by Derrida from the women’s movement and the question of the feminine in his essay Choreographies. Cf. Derrida, 1992.
25 DERRIDA, 2009c, p. 267.


LEFEBVRE, Henri. O direito à cidade. São Paulo: Centauro, 19-?.


