



Activism in Brazil: hacker spaces as spaces of resistance and free education

Raquel Renno

Many emerging cultural practices assisted or constituted by digital media were fostered in Brazil by the Cultural Points Project (Pontos de Cultura), initially proposed by the former Brazilian Minister of Culture of President Lula da Silva's, Gilberto Gil. With Dilma Rousseff, Pontos de Cultura was considered of lesser importance, but the same cannot be said of the group of activists that are working across the country disseminating and building knowledge from digital culture. Groups that were organized horizontally and composed in a large sense by youngsters, developed e-waste recovery projects and computer programming (mainly based on free software) in permanent or ephemeral workshops and hackerspaces that were assembled in unique spaces such as offices in malls, classrooms, indigenous villages, Umbanda worship places (Afro-Brazilian worship houses) and houses in slums (favelas). Some initiatives in different cities in Brazil

(Porto Alegre, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Recife) were analysed in the present paper. The selected examples show different ways of sharing knowledge that update the democratization of the education proposal based on a horizontal communication and conjoint experience. In these spaces, the hierarchical spatial structure of the typical classroom was replaced to the shared space of the workshop; the image of the teacher was replaced by the image of the colleague with whom we can learn and teach at the same time; there are no homogeneous age groups, gender or social class; activities are not conducted according to the content or skills instead of that they are based on the projects and objectives defined by the student. At the same time, a space is created in which the traditional and digital culture are not in opposite positions, but instead of that, they complement each other. The use of free software and technological waste recovery questions the relationship between the access to technology and the power consumption, the cycle of obsolescence and the continuous generation of waste from a grassroots perspective. New ways of knowledge are generated from connections between different individuals and backgrounds without forgetting the inherently political nature of the production of knowledge.

1. Cultura Viva Program and Cultural Points (Pontos de Cultura)[1]

The Brazilian Ministry of Culture created the Program "Cultura Viva" in 2005. The program was created with the intent to "strengthen the cultural prominence of the Brazilian society, valuing the cultural initiatives of groups and communities, expanding their access to the elaboration, circulation and enjoyment of cultural aspects and services according to the Pontos de Cultura[2]. According to the Brazilian Ministry of Culture, between 2004 and 2012, 3662 Pontos de Cultura were created in the country. During the last years, the success of the initiative has conveyed

the idea of the Cultural Points to Argentina and Peru, among other countries (around 11 countries stated that they were interested in the proposal).

The innovative aspect of the Pontos de Cultura proposal in the Brazilian context is the understanding rendered to small and fragmented local cultural initiatives from the viewpoint of the generation of knowledge and innovation, overcoming the paternalistic culture comprising economic parameters confounding economic poverty with cultural poverty.

2. The Cultural Points as a generator of a critical appropriation of the media.

Directly or indirectly, the Cultura Viva program has supported groups of free culture activists, involved with free software and hacker ethics to structure themselves in different ways, by using digital technologies as a tool for production and dissemination of knowledge or the subject of experimentation itself. It is not uncommon to find there free radios such as Coco da Umbigada (from an Afro-Brazilian worship house), rádio Kiriri (run by Indigenous people in Bahia) or radio programs called Maluco Beleza prepared by patients of a psychiatric center in the state of São Paulo. These initiatives have enabled the community to generate their own media content, encompassing the oral tradition of these groups and enabling the participation and immediate connection to the public without any filtering system from the traditional mass media.

3. The hackerspaces as spaces for innovative learning

In the middle of this complex and varied context, some of the people directly involved in the activities of the Cultural Points, militants and activists who are users of technology have realized that they would have to propose new methods and training spaces. As stated by Felipe Fonseca (2008:8), about the Metareciclagem: "The idea of accomplishing workshops to bring together people who could be future replicators of knowledge in different locations was an attempt to solve the huge

problem that we had in our hands: how to enable people in hundreds of different places in a combination of complex issues such as multimedia production accomplished with free software reckoning on a limited team and resources?"

Based on these local contents far from the metropolis, with limited money, space or even electricity, innovative training proposals were generated which shall be explained as follows.

3.1 Bailux, technologies in a social context

Aldeia Velha is an Indigenous reservation inhabited by the Pataxó tribe in southern Bahia (Brazil) in the neighbourhood of a town called Arraial d'Ajuda. The Pataxó are the remaining population of a variety of tribes that included the Monoxó, Kutatoi, Maxakali, Maconi, Kopoxó and Panhame. Actually, the Pataxó tribe is a conjunction of two dozen tribes which were divided, persecuted and exterminated in Brazil in recent centuries (to be clear, the extermination of indigenous peoples did not stop since, lately it was intensified even more as a result of the lobby increase of the agribusiness companies and projects as Belo Monte hydroelectric power plant.)[3]

Regis Bailux (this nickname was originated by the combination of Bahia-Linux) has been living in Arraial D'Ajuda for more than 20 years ago and recently, he started to develop a close work with public school teachers at the reserve. In recent years, there were some projects related to the teaching of the use of free software and the preservation of local culture for future generations.

In collaboration with the teachers Angelo Pataxó and Arnã Pataxó (the tribe members often used the name of the ethnic group as surname), Bailux developed projects involving technological appropriation and preservation of local culture.

3.1.1 Affective Technologies



Pic.1. Regis Bailux (left) with kids from Pataxó tribe in Aldeia Velha, Bahia

As in other hackerspaces, Bailux created a physical structure of networked computers that were connected to the web with the use of free software. Old electronic equipment are reused for the critical use of technology, always keeping in mind that "technology should be adapted to people and not the other way around" as Bailux says[4].

Bailux connects technology to people through personal relationships and mutual support. According to him, it is important to take the time to meet the children and youngsters of the village and to get acquainted with their needs. He called this process affective technology. Garcés (92:2013) spoke of the importance of the relationship between activism and affection: "It is important to understand that this thought is not the promotion of a contemplative attitude and neither will it seek shelter in a new intellectualism. On the contrary, this is regarded as a real concern, to break the relation of indifference that denotes us as consumers - mere

viewers of reality. Critical thinking starts when 'what we know' (or do not know) affects our relation with things, with the world and with others. This does take courage and this sentiment is cultivated in the affective relation with others. This is the fundamental experience that can change our relationship with the world and its forms of domination, which are more intimate and subjective. From that point, education is once more a challenge to existing structures and field experimentation."

The conservative conception of culture leads to the criticism of the use of technologies by Indigenous tribes since according to it, this may damage or lead them to forget their traditional culture. However, most of the people of Aldeia Velha is in constant contact with non-Indigenous population and the presence of technology in their lives is already a reality that makes the critical approach even more important.

3.2 Coco de Umbigada: technologies in the Afro-Brazilian culture

The Coco de Umbigada do Guadalupe is a cultural center associated to Ilê Axé Oxum Karê (Afro-Brazilian worship center) in the Guadalupe neighborhood in the city of Olinda in Pernambuco. It is under the supervision of yalorixá Beth de Oxum and they have been practicing their activities for the past 15 years. It is structured around "brincadeiras de coco" (local music rhythms) and promote local festivals called sambadas every Saturday. Among the activities carried out there, we can mention the percussion workshops, technological appropriation from the recycling of computers, development of network communication tools, applications and gadgets for multimedia production. Ancient and contemporary knowledge blend into the space consisting of the exchange generated by visitors. The Yalorixás have access to social network through mobile devices, recycled technology and workshops to learn how to develop free radios such as the Brincadeira of Terreiros project promoted in collaboration with the SEPPIR (Promotion of Racial Equality Secretariat by the Presidency of the Republic). One of the members of Coco de Umbigada, Ricardo Ruiz, also took part in the Lab3Ecologías project with Ricardo Brasileiro. 3Ecologías is not a Ponto de Cultura, instead of that, it

gathers lab proposals for the training and production of technology, education, culture and art. At 3Ecologías they develop methodologies for teaching creative computing and engineering applied to media art projects. The focus is at the projects, whose objectives are established by the students themselves, surpassing the idea of mere "content learning".

3.3 Art and Technology: Emerging Spaces

The members of the Lab3Ecologias are also involved in the Teia/Nós Digitais, active cultural point since 2006 in São Carlos in the state of São Paulo which have generated a network of initiatives of Pontos de Cultura for the development of free software and other experiments in the field. Specifically Lab Macambira is quite successful in the combination of political activism and software programming and besides that, the development of workshops and training in the use of free radios and music production. Traditional cultural spaces have also adopted the concept of the Pontos de Cultura such as the Circo Voador in Rio de Janeiro. Coacting circus practices, space for concerts and dance shows, they also offer training activities at the Escola Livre de Artes (ELA) and a center for audiovisual education.

3.4 Quilombo do Sopapo

The project Quilombo do Sopapo located in Porto Alegre, capital of Rio Grande do Sul, began in 2008 and aims towards the promotion of alternative cultural and audiovisual production and training in information technology for youngsters. The project reckons on a Community Council Supervisor and seeks to encourage actions involving art, civic culture and solidarity economy, the assertion of rights and building a culture of nonviolence. The project name is related with the afro-gaúcho drum, created in the nineteenth century, made with Arbore shell and horsehide. The Quilombo is also responsible for the project Imagens Faladas, consisting of photographic walks around the neighborhood where the project is located or some research to recover

the history of the african culture in the southern Brazilian region as well as the organization of a community library. It is important to note that the quilombos are places and groups founded by slaves who had fled during the period of African slavery who are still fighting for legal and political recognition in Brazil.

4. Towards a hacker learning

The previously mentioned projects present a common proposal that at first sight seems simple, almost customary. The teacher as the "know all" or the "great inspirational artist" is not there anymore. The work is performed with everyday objects, innovative practices are used for the proposition of a open method, allowing improvisation and new ideas, therefore a fruitful path for media art development.

As explained by Michael Bauwens (2012: s/n), the working principle of the hacker surpasses the idea of someone who works for another person (often something that the hacker is not fond of) in exchange for a salary. The work counts as knowledge process and takes place during the working period, not only before (as in schools that renders a preparation for a job), in other words, is not submitted to the traditional capitalist job system. Knowledge is generated as something continuous and is valued according to its relevance to the community.

This type of work is personal and can only make sense in relation to the contexts and values of a community and aims to improve these contexts. In this sense, the concept of knowledge and how it is acquired is instable, since it changes according to the questions and desires presented by the participants. As stated by Bauwens (2012:s/n), "knowledge should always happen collectively."

Nelson Preto (2010:s/n) encourages the "hacker attitude" to teachers. According to him, a hacker teacher is not merely a reproducer or distributor of third party content, he works in liaison with his students to generate content; such content should always be free and open, on-line for other groups to take hold of and recreate. It is Preto's idea that a

permanent production system should be created, in which knowledge and culture are public properties, aloof of the boring "teaching materials" and closer to the peer to peer provision and the remix culture[5].

The above examples raise a claim to cultural and epistemological diversity beyond dichotomies such as north-south, or center-periphery. Its not only about "education for all", instead of that, it is related to the demand for spaces – not only physical, but subjective and epistemological – of knowledge inside and outside of the traditional system. With the social demonstrations in Brazil that since 2013 questions the "up to bottom" political and economical decisions from the government, this is also the moment to question the local education system and its role in the process of culture and arts development and their correlation with technology.

Remarks

[1] This article was originally published in Spanish at Edumed Congress papers (II Congreso Internacional de Educación Mediática y Competencia Digital) at UOC, Barcelona, November 2013.

[2] <http://www2.cultura.gov.br/culturaviva/cultura-viva/> (last access: 03 May 2014).

[3] More information on the subject can be read at:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/may/29/brazil-indigenous-people-violates-rights> and <http://servindi.org/actualidad/88635>
at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/mundo/noticias/2013/06/130605_brasil_luchar_derechos_web_indigenas_lav.shtml (last access: 03 May 2014).

[4] Source: personal communication.

[5] The peer-to-peer organization is a fully distributed and horizontal, in opposition to the traditional centralized network and the decentralized networks. Regarding the peer to peer (p2p) knowledge production, please read the book <http://lasindias.org/el-modo-de-produccion-p2p> (last access: 03 May 2014). The remix already began in the music and directly

challenges the notion of authorship and control of information. To learn more about the concept of remix out of use in music production, consult <http://remixtheory.net/> and <http://ripremix.com> (last access: 03 May 2014).

References

Almeida, J. L. Vieira (2009): "Interdisciplinaridade: uma Abordagem Histórica com Ênfase no Ensino", Anales del congreso CEMOrOC-Feusp/IJI, Porto: Universidade do Porto, pág. 87–94.

Bauwens, M. (2012): "Working for the commons" (en línea), Bruselas: P2P Foundation, Fecha de consulta: 27/5/2013.

Clarke, S. (1991): Crise do fordismo ou crise da social-democracia, in: Lua Nova, revista de Cultura e Política, n.24, São Paulo: CEDEC/Marco Zero, pág. 117–150.

Arcés, M. (2013): Un mundo común, Edicions Bellaterra: Barcelona.

Fonseca, F. (org.) (2010): Redelabs, São Paulo: Redelabs.

Fonseca, F. (2008). "Em busca do Brasil profundo", in: Cadernos Submidiáticos, São Paulo: Descentro.org, pág. 1–17.

Freire, P. (1967): Pedagogia do Oprimido, Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.

Laplantine, F./Nouss, A. (2002): A mestiçagem, Lisboa: Flammarion.

Lotman, Iuri M. (2000): La semiosfera III – Semiótica de las artes y de la cultura, Madrid: Cátedra Universitat de Valencia.

Lotman, Iuri M. (1999): Cultura y explosion, Barcelona: Gedisa.

Negri, T./Deleuze, G. (2010) "Control and Becoming" (en línea), Londres: Negri in English, Fecha de consulta: 29 de mayo de 2013.

Parra, H./Ortellado, P./Rhatto, S. (2013): Movimentos em marcha: ativismo, cultura e tecnologia, São Paulo: UNIFESP.

Pinheiro, Amálio (2007): "Por entre mídias e artes, a cultura". Húmus 2, Rumos do Itaú Cultural, Caxias do Sul: Itaú Cultural.

Pretto, Nelson (2010): "Professores hackers e ativistas da rede". Revista A Rede, ano 7 número 60, Fortaleza: Prodema.

Romero, S./Neuman, W. (21 de junho de 2013): "Sweeping Protests in Brazil Pull In an Array of Grievances", The New York Times, Fecha de consulta 23/7/2013.

Santos, A. P./Ribeiro, S. L. S. (2011): "Cultura digital, cotidiano e transformações do saber histórico e da cultura escolar." Anales del IX Encontro Nacional dos Pesquisadores do Ensino e da História, Florianópolis: ENPEH, pág. 1-12

Sousa Santos, Boaventura de (2006): A gramática do tempo, Sao Paulo: Cortez.

Sousa Santos, Boaventura de (2000): A crítica da razão indolente. Contra o desperdício da estética, Sao Paulo: Cortez.

Tomas, David (2004): Beyond the Image Machine: A History of Visual Technologies, London/New York: Continuum.

Viveiros De Castro, Eduardo (1996): "Os pronomes cosmológicos e o perspectivismo ameríndio", Mana, núm. 2, vol. 2, Rio de Janeiro: Museu Nacional/UFRJ, pág.115-144.