

# The alchemist: a “peripheral subject” in the social entrepreneurship circuit

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**ABSTRACT**

Based on the dialogue with a social entrepreneur and “peripheral subject” from the south of São Paulo, I address in this article the contradictions of the practice of entrepreneurship in popular experience. Under the impact of the changes felt in the periphery following the transformations in the world of work and the “inclusion through consumption”, João Vicente’s account reveals a renewal of activism in dialogue with forms of social entrepreneurship. Oppressed by the world of work and driven by a utopia of freedom, peripheral young people find themselves caught between the precariousness of their alternatives and the need to generate income. The core of the text follows the trajectory of João Vicente and his itineraries between social classes, peripheral culture, and political engagement. Finally, I conclude that the adoption of entrepreneurship among young people from peripheral territories is the result of new conditions of sociability in urban peripheries between suffering and expectations for the future.

**KEYWORDS**

Social entrepreneurship,  
Urban Periphery,  
Popular culture,  
Ethnography

**O alquimista: um “sujeito periférico” no circuito do empreendedorismo social**

**RESUMO** Com base na interlocução com um empreendedor social e “sujeito periférico” da zona Sul de São Paulo, abordo neste artigo as contradições do empreendedorismo enquanto prática na experiência popular. Sob o impacto das mudanças sentidas na periferia na sequência das transformações no mundo do trabalho e no acesso ao consumo, o relato de João Vicente expõe uma renovação do ativismo em diálogo com formas de empreendedorismo social. Oprimidos pelo mundo do trabalho e movidos por uma utopia de liberdade, jovens periféricos se veem enredados entre a precariedade de suas alternativas e a necessidade de gerar renda. O núcleo do texto acompanha a trajetória de João Vicente e seus itinerários entre classes sociais, cultura periférica e engajamento político. Por fim, concluo que a adesão ao empreendedorismo entre jovens periféricos é resultado das novas condições de sociabilidade nas periferias urbanas entre sofrimentos e expectativas do futuro.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Empreendedorismo social,  
Periferias urbanas, Cultura popular, Etnografia

## INTRODUCTION

This article investigates how sociability and ways of reproducing life on the periphery have been renewed through the contemporary appeal to entrepreneurship. To do so, it highlights the trajectory of a qualified interlocutor - a young adult, social entrepreneur and “peripheral subject”. João Vicente,<sup>1</sup> a resident of the outskirts of São Paulo’s South zone, had his youth marked by the influence of peripheral culture and hip hop, while at the same time, from an early age, he was part of the first social entrepreneurship training initiatives of an important local social organisation (OS). His case also reveals the tension between two other well-known paths in the urban peripheries: the precarious labour market and the world of crime, both of which have an impact on individual and family dynamics filled by the realm of consumption.

Near the coworking idealised by João in the Campo Limpo district, self-employed workers, small business owners, app workers and street vendors interchange in spaces not reached by the progress promised by the Fordist and industrial labour (Telles, 2006). There are thousands of examples, and successful or not, they identify with each other because of the need to *generate income*. Aware of this, João’s bet was on the “economic debate” and the alternative path that he believes exists in this type of entrepreneurship combined with activism. Far from the ideal described in the media or in self-help manuals (Leite; Mello, 2008), in popular contexts, entrepreneurship is a concrete way of escaping the suffering caused by precarious jobs and social immobility (Costa, 2022). However, these models of entrepreneurship share the fundamental characteristic of allowing for present imaginings of future situations.<sup>2</sup>

In this context the peripheral subject moves, who has become, based on Tiaraújo D’Andrea’s dissertation (2013), an ideal type of young person from the Brazilian peripheries who participates in cultural movements, is politically engaged and circulates in the soirees of the South zone, exalting his origin and belonging.<sup>3</sup> They found their means of expression in hip hop, *samba* and marginal literature (D’Andrea, 2013; Nascimento, 2010), but today other forms of interaction share aspects of this peripheral culture, and these political subjects find themselves circulating in the almost inescapable ecosystem of social entrepreneurship and its borderless networks of sociability.

It’s not just the escape from precariousness that drives João, but his utopian energy manifests itself in a contradictory way. Although his activist profile is based on the urban social movements of past (Sader, 1988; Caldeira, 1984), the conditions of engagement are not the same: there is no longer, for example, the physical or virtual confinement to popular territories that during the last decades of the 20th century helped establish local solidarity (Durham, 1988).<sup>4</sup> Circulating between the periphery and the centre, between poor and rich neighbourhoods, João Vicente

<sup>1</sup> | The name of the interlocutor has been changed.

<sup>2</sup> | According to Jens Beckert (2013), the way in which these individuals seek to establish connections between these uncertainties and future states is through “fictionalisation”, which, by taking on a narrative form, enables present-day imaginings of future situations that guide decision-making, despite the inherent uncertainty.

<sup>3</sup> | This ethnography noted, for example, that references to social entrepreneurship had become commonplace in soirees and cultural exhibitions, as well as the presence of peripheral artists at events with a social impact. According to Nascimento (2010: 118), “the formation of a cultural scene in the peripheries is directly linked to the literary and political interventions of writers identified with so-called marginal or peripheral literature”.

<sup>4</sup> | At the end of the 1980s, Durham (1988: 174) made a distinction between “the house or flat, isolated and self-sufficient, limit a social space that is not complemented by the neighbourhood. In the periphery, on the other hand, the neighbourhood is a privileged place for the formation of networks of sociability”.

embodies the indisposition of peripheral subjects with the precarious fate that the job market has in store for them and with police violence, but their dissatisfaction does not spill over into a collective struggle, illustrating the recent transformations in peripheral sociability - or, to paraphrase Durham (1988), how society is seen by the periphery.

Since the 1970s, Brazilian academic production on urban peripheries has sought to interpret the ways in which individuals and families from the lower classes engage in the “economic debate”, how they cope with insufficient income and seek better conditions of living. The family’s project of social ascension, once they have a house of their own, is thus directed towards their children, who are expected to dedicate themselves to their studies and “move on to non-manual or highly skilled manual labour, or even more difficult, starting a ‘business’” (Durham, 1988: 187). By the way, in Caldeira (1984), self-employment was viewed positively, even though the “reality” - society’s obstacles - opposed the “model” - no longer working for others. At that time, however, the author observes that the belief in the possibility of working for oneself was reiterated only by those few success stories that permeate the imagination of the lower classes, that “someone who has already climbed the ladder”.

If, on one hand, the scenario of structural inequality remains, the challenges to achieving family progress for João Vicente’s generation are quite different and help intensify the entrepreneurial utopia. As an enthusiast and promoter of social entrepreneurship, João didn’t make much of an effort to get a university degree, even in times of strengthened public policies for young and peripheral people (Costa, 2018); moreover, his lifestyle is already a direct consequence of the urban transformations experienced by the periphery in the 2000s, where new “fortified enclaves” (Caldeira, 2000) emerged and where João now lives with his wife and daughter in Campo Limpo.

Through entrepreneurship, João has achieved a remarkable rise, enough to take him out of the *favela* and into a condominium of the peripheral “new middle class” and its new consumer possibilities (Cardoso; Préteceille, 2017). His life and discourse still revolve around the periphery, however, even though his itinerary often takes him to the city centre or the wealthy West zone. That’s why the antagonism with the *zé povinho*<sup>5</sup> is a new chapter in the oddness of the search for equality among the poor, “jealously sought and patrolled in the fabric of local sociability” (Zaluar, 1985: 124), and which doesn’t come from the fact that João is a variation of the self-employed worker, but from his habits and the people who come to visit his place, such as celebrities, politicians and television channels.

Although they often take a stance against right-wing governments and politicians, it is not the political situation that guides the actions of social entrepreneurs like João Vicente, who are much more concerned with creating survival/emancipation strategies regardless of the ruler on duty and the economic crisis, which makes

5 | “Zé povinho” is a popular expression on the outskirts of town that refers, in a derogatory tone, to simple people who are adept at gossip and envy.

the money circulating in the periphery scarce, but disappears in their committed speeches. On one hand, the social entrepreneur places himself at the forefront of the modernising project of which social impact businesses are a part;<sup>6</sup> on the other hand, he embodies a yearning for the de-commodification of relationships and nonconformity with the abuses and exploitations of the world of work, opening up imagined futures for peripheral subjects decades after their pioneers emerged.

This article is a result of my doctoral ethnography, in which I conducted participant observation in shopping streets, social impact events and religious services in the South zone of São Paulo. In addition to this introduction, the text divides the ethnographic account into three parts. The first introduces our character in his context, describing in detail the path that led him to social entrepreneurship. The second section goes into his “economic debate” and the events that served to structure his reasoning, serving as his justification. In the next section, we follow João Vicente as he balances between the two sides of the bridge, the periphery as a place of cultural and political power and growing internal differences, and the middle class of São Paulo and its social impact networks. Finally, I’ll save some lines for the concluding remarks, locating João’s *ethos* in the tangle of urban transformations, sociability, and contemporary politics.

6 | Although they have slightly different meanings in the specialised debate, for the purposes of this article the terms *social entrepreneurship* and *social impact business* are used synonymously.

## A SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR

It was a rainy afternoon in February 2019 in the Bela Vista neighbourhood, in central São Paulo, when I met João Vicente, a young black man in his 30s and a rising star in peripheral entrepreneurship. At a workshop he was taking part in as a speaker at the Sesc-SP Research and Training Centre,<sup>7</sup> he was observed by a non-specialist audience made up mostly of middle-class ladies interested in healthy eating alternatives. The first speaker, who coordinated an NGO on the west side of the city, seemed quite familiar and moved fluidly, but her successor had to work a little harder to bring the periphery into the centre. Asked by one of the listeners how he defined himself - she was a little surprised that she didn’t know him - João responded with open arms and an unexpected banter: “I’m an alchemist!”

7 | The Social Service of Commerce (Sesc-SP) is an important network of cultural centres spread especially in São Paulo and maintained by the powerful commerce association.

Accustomed to dealing with all kinds of characters who inhabit the realm of entrepreneurship from business centre Avenida Faria Lima to the far reaches of the South zone, João Vicente saw his career take a defining turn when he created his coworking in Campo Limpo, to which he dedicates himself entirely. His entrepreneurial *ethos* benefited from the cultural and economic dynamics, which were given a decisive boost in the context of Lula’s first governments (2003-2010) with two concomitant federal programmes: Pontos de Cultura, an initiative by the Ministry of Culture to establish agreements with local cultural projects through public notices;

and partnerships with the then National Secretariat for Solidarity Economy (Senaes). One of them gave birth to the Banco Comunitário (Community Bank) in Jardim Maria Sampaio *favela*, which, based on the principles defended by the secretariat, aimed to establish exchanges of services through its own social currency. The co-working, transformed into a social entrepreneurship agency, was thus created from this experience, bringing together collectives and professionals from the local production and circulation of culture.

João responds to a basic condition present in the peripheral subject thesis, that “when they no longer feel represented by classic political organisations such as parties, unions and social movements, they start to make social criticisms and organise themselves politically through artistic production collectives”, claiming the legitimacy of representing their reality (D’Andrea, 2013: 136). But he is also part of a context in which performance “is an invention, ideas emerge and are put into practice as new demands arise” (Bergamin, 2015: 150), a hallmark of social entrepreneurship. In fact, with its performance around culture consolidated, the agency also began to dedicate itself to the concept of healthy eating that is widespread in middle-class circles, setting up an organic store for local producers in the property’s garage and later investing in the restaurant that his mother would run with the renovation of the backyard, made possible by crowdfunding.<sup>8</sup>

Charismatic and hurried, João Vicente has already been featured in important magazines, São Paulo’s main newspapers and appeared on powerful Rede Globo TV news programmes. At the time, he had a queue of dozens of entrepreneurs waiting to join his coworking space - strong indications of his relevance on the local scene and justification for João’s prominence in this role. You’re likely to find him wearing a shirt with Afro-inspired prints and trousers or shorts from the Fundão clothing brand, owned by entrepreneurs from the *favela* of the same name. Tall, he approaches to speak to his interlocutor, but he is often interrupted by his mobile phone or by an acquaintance (or admirer), with whom he articulates ideas that have arisen at that moment, and almost always ends the conversation with variations of the phrase “do you have my WhatsApp?”.

He didn’t benefit from any public policy, he started a business degree at a private college, but didn’t finish it when he ran out of money. In a social project, João received formal education and became interested in entrepreneurship. In 2018, he was selected to take part in RenovaBR,<sup>9</sup> whose scholarship helped pay off the debt on the house where his agency now operates, which he was in danger of losing to creditors.

His trademark is the relentless exhortation that economics is at the heart of young people’s behaviour in the periphery. “We come from a very humble background, so from an early age young people from the periphery are... how can I put it, provoked to generate income, you know?” With a fierce disposition and patience,

8 | In fact, the remodelling and metamorphosis of the house’s uses suggest a different *quality* that it is now exhibiting (Cavalcanti, 2009).

9 | A “pro-political renewal” group, also known as a “political startup”, which grants scholarships to those who want to run for the legislature and is supported by donations from businesspeople.

his goal at the Sesc-SP meeting, as well as in practically all the spaces in which he participates in the city centre or in the neighbourhoods of the West zone, was, as he puts it, “pragmatic”: to gain supporters and people willing to bring resources to his side of the bridge by eating local food, honouring artists from the periphery and attending his events. The main one is the Festival that the agency organises every year in Campo Limpo, with dozens of entrepreneurs, from organic food producers to fashion designers, well-known chefs from the city’s fancy restaurants and concerts with newcomers and famous artists from the periphery.

João Vicente’s journey through the city’s social entrepreneurship circuit began at the age of 15, when he went to bohemian neighbourhood Vila Madalena for the first time for an event on social impact businesses. Although his main memory of the occasion was being approached by a security guard on the street, he wasn’t intimidated. João had already been attending the Projeto Rede<sup>10</sup> for five years and had excelled in the entrepreneurship classes; at the same time, he applied for his first environmental education project and raised 20,000 dollars, which turned into a pioneering programme for the correct disposal of rubbish with a focus on a local stream.

10 | The name of the institution has been changed.

In Rede’s example, most of the teenagers looking for the courses on offer want a traditional qualification, because they “arrive lost” and “don’t know their talents”. One of the managers told me that the culture of families on the periphery is not yet “entrepreneurial” and that they encourage their children to get a job as soon as possible - a remnant of the remote family project of social ascension (Zaluar, 1985; Durham, 1988). So, for this interlocutor, it’s not the technique that should be sought, because “the most important thing at this time is to broaden their vision, recover their self-esteem and their ability to dream”. This is where João Vicente’s trajectory fits in, as described by Tommasi:

Working with what you love and what you know how to do seemed, for many of those young people, to be synonymous with working with “art and culture” and being self-employed. Today, with the multiplication of public notices and training courses aimed at promoting “young cultural entrepreneurs”, it seems that the wishes of those young people are coming true. Becoming a “cultural worker” seems to be an “opportunity” that is opening up even for young people from working class backgrounds. An achievable alternative to escape unemployment or employment in subordinate roles. An alternative that is not subject to the need for a university degree in order to get a decent level of pay (Tommasi, 2015: 101).

The axis of a global phenomenon of “ethical capitalism”, social entrepreneurship is part of initiatives aimed at promoting “small worlds of development”, supported by micro-credit policies and stimulating micro-entrepreneurship (Roy, 2010;



Sposito, Corrochano, 2005). In favour of its spread, the global movement of information and people, both through the electronic media and mass migration, has acted to spread narratives of workers who, based on them, have shared imaginaries of social ascension. As Appadurai (1996: 9) observes, “globalisation has shrunk the distance between elites, shifted key relations between producers and consumers, broken many links between labour and family life, obscured the lines between temporary locales and imaginary national attachments”.<sup>11</sup> Globalisation provides aspirations for people living in realities of poverty, making success seem attainable, implementing modern practices and deepening ruptures and transitions with the space of popular experience (Koselleck, 2006; Beck, 2011).

But João didn’t live on mirages alone, and it’s possible that without such perseverance his career would have been far from the magazine covers and closer to two other well-known destinations for him: precarious work and the world of crime, which ultimately marked his life and that of his entire family. He had his first job at the age of 11, working in an amusement park where his older sister also worked. “Manual labour, a very deplorable situation,” he says of assembling and dismantling the toys. The 10 reais he earned each day he worked, João left with his mother, and at one point they managed to *bater a laje* (self-build the roof) of her house - she still lived in the neighbouring municipality of Embu das Artes at the time. In fact, for João this was his first contact with the need to generate income, “from a very early age”, as he puts it. Both for him and for the rest of the family, who took different paths.

<sup>11</sup> | Appadurai (1996) refers to what he calls “communities of sentiment” and which he reinterprets from Benedict Anderson’s well-known thesis: just as newspapers and magazines at the end of the 19th century helped to form a collective (and national) imaginary between people who had never met, other contemporary forms of electronic communication need not be limited to the borders of the nation-state.

## ECONOMIC OUTCOME

For the younger brother, it was the desire for consumption that shone through, for whom precarious work gave no hope. In 2011, the boy was killed by the police after a bank robbery; he had already been involved in robberies for some years. “And, *mano* (bro), the bullet passed close by, took my brother and passed me, you know? I was there at the Community Bank. Bank robbery and I was at the community bank! Did you get the picture?”<sup>12</sup> João’s metaphor about the bullet that “passed close by” points to the experiences that he and his brother, only a year younger, had in common, but what saved him was a certain restraint in contrast to the younger brother’s fascination with the realm of consumption.

At that point, João was already involved in the Community Bank and reaping his first successes as a social entrepreneur, but he was far from the life of luxury that he never had. The brutality of the police, who shot his brother eleven times, was followed by the cruelty of his former robbery colleagues, who took the boy’s belongings from his family home as “reparations” for their unsuccessful work. João then moved with his mum for a while to the coast. “Afraid of reprisals?” I asked him, and

<sup>12</sup> | *Saidinha de banco* (bank robbery) is a slang term for robbing customers, usually after they have withdrawn their money from the bank.

although he didn’t answer in the negative, he claimed that he didn’t want to share in the *economic outcome*. “That’s why we have an economic debate when we talk about the extermination of young people. He wanted to buy a motorbike, you know? He wanted to buy a lot of things and he wanted to take this quicker path”.

In fact, especially from the 1990s onwards, the world of crime began to compete with work for the aspirations of poor young people. In Gabriel Feltran (2011), the attraction of rapid social ascension through crime is seen as a form of distinction from the generation of working parents.<sup>13</sup> Vera Telles and Daniel Hirata (2010: 46) analysed the “overlapping circuits of new, old or redefined illegalisms, between survival expedients, irregular work, small local enterprises and criminal businesses”, which include illicit drug sales points, car dismantling, etc. Behind this is a new disposition towards the realm of consumption among these young people who are strictly excluded from it (Pereira, 2014; Pinheiro-Machado, Scalco, 2018).

Both the experience and the courses at the Projeto Rede and the episode involving his brother would have “turned a switch” in João Vicente’s head, who today is proud of having been the “first young entrepreneur at Rede” and of the activity he continues. But if the quicker path taken by the “bandit” brother allowed him to “live like a king” (Hirata, 2011) for a very brief period that would be abruptly interrupted, does the entrepreneurial brother’s trajectory promise something at least close to that? A former resident of Jardim Maria Sampaio, João moved to a condominium in Campo Limpo with his wife, one-year-old daughter and dog Martin, a choice befitting a new middle class on the periphery. He shares a moderate lifestyle, which encompasses his religiosity (non-practising Catholic) and his *habitus*, which in no way resembles that of a king (Bourdieu, 2009). Work and leisure are intertwined, and he can be seen in the peripheral soirees articulating partnerships while sharing a *cachaça* with lemon and exchanging messages on his mobile phone. He has a genuine ambition to become a reference in social entrepreneurship, but that doesn’t turn into material ostentation: everything he earns ends up invested in the agency, the restaurant and the bills to be paid.

Although he doesn’t forget to mention the issues of “structural racism” and the “extermination of youth”, his pragmatism drives him to, as he puts it, “make the economic debate”, in other words, to understand the condition of the youth he is part of by squeezing out income-generating alternatives that will ultimately get them out of the police’s sights. A reform of the institutions would obviously be welcome, but unexpected, so João chose to act where the results can be concretely realised.

These alternatives are, as is common in social entrepreneurship discourse, ambiguous. His dream of getting young people from the *quebrada* - “broken” is the affectionate way in which young people from the periphery refer to their neighbourhoods, while still acknowledging their precarious reality - out of the world of crime and drug addiction comes up against what João calls a lack of “scale”. His coworking

<sup>13</sup> | Notable testimonies to this effect can be found in the documentary *Notícias de uma guerra particular*, by Kátia Lund and João Moreira Salles, and in the lyrics of the Racionais MC’s, summarised in the verse “Tempo para pensar, quer parar / Que cê quer? / Viver pouco como um rei ou muito, como um Zé?”, from *Vida Loka* part 2.



space has room for a few dozen candidates, not enough in his opinion, who makes a curious association for what he wants, a kind of fast-food for young entrepreneurs. He is absolutely aware of his limitations, just as he understands the contemporary world of work to be crossed by the world of crime, intertwined with it in the very subjectivity of these young people he witnesses toiling away in the *biqueira* in pursuit of the consumer society, the “by-product of capitalism” running at full speed.<sup>14</sup>

14 | The expression indicates the act of working at a drug point (*biqueira*).

Look, bro, I'm going to tell you that I think it's even increasing the deaths of young people. I don't think our work has that much... we don't have that much scale. My dream is to have scale, to get here and only have young people working, like McDonald's. That's my dream, that's when I'll see that I'm really getting young people out of crime. But bro, we're a needle, we don't do anything, you know? Crime has a “thing” that seduces young people in such a way that they enter... Today we go to a *biqueira*, the young man dies, tomorrow there's another one working. You know, bro... like us, to do a course, you don't fill up the course. And I'll tell you, mate, it's a lot of young people! We see young people's funerals every day. Not every day, every weekend, because it happens at the weekend. Too much, bro. The police really kill. And I have friendships that aren't just [coworking], they're people from the *quebrada*. So their Facebook is all like that, it's not *intellectual Facebook*, you know? (João Vicente, 2019)

It's a sceptical view, after all. João has seen violence knock on his door, enter his home and drive him away from his mother, to whom he is unconditionally attached. At the same time, he had a revelation with the incipient entrepreneurship that presented itself to him through a social project on the outskirts of town. But personal experience is combined with careful observation of his neighbourhood and others, which he accesses through his contacts throughout the country and on social media. On Facebook, he distinguishes between “intellectuals” and friends from the *favelas*, who are saturated with violent sociability (Machado da Silva; Menezes, 2019), suggesting that he does this so as not to lose touch with the social ground.

João realises the need to show his interlocutors at least an appetiser of this “by-product of capitalism”. Invited by him, I took part in a coworking *vivência* (experience) in February 2019. Twelve people, all of whom lived in the city centre or the West zone, took part in the activity, which began with breakfast at the agency itself.<sup>15</sup> João Vicente served us coffee, juices, sourdough breads and organic fruit, emphasising their peripheral origin and their availability in the health food store he has created in his garage. Then, wearing a large black T-shirt emblazoned with the actor Al Pacino in his “Scarface” version, his partner at the agency gave us a presentation about the Festival and we set off for a walk through Jardim Maria Sampaio, close to the town of Taboão da Serra.

At the gates of the *favela*, João proposes an awareness activity that everyone

15 | Another interlocutor in the research, whose cultural production company in Jardim Ângela also promotes these *vivências*, described the audience for which the activity is aimed as follows. “White people, upper middle class, who work in companies that give them a lot of money and who have never experienced the *quebrada*, they've never had that opportunity, they only know about it from newspapers, magazines, radio, all that stuff”.

follows naturally: we hold hands and close our eyes to “connect” to the proposed objective, and then a PCC *disciplina* let us in.<sup>16</sup> The rain that had fallen a few hours earlier emphasised the precariousness of the place, where a multitude of wet, squalid cats circulated among the shacks and the tangle of cables and wires.

The aestheticisation of precariousness is accompanied by a discourse of overcoming: next to the hostile local *piscinão* (water retention reservoir) a few years earlier there had been a severe flood, which had knocked down the retaining walls of the stream that runs through the area. Once rebuilt, the walls were decorated with graffiti, colouring the banks of the Pirajussara stream. Back at the agency, we went through a *descarrego* session - an exorcism ritual common in Pentecostal cults and which still causes astonishment among higher social strata - before eating the vegan *feijoada* prepared by his mother. The alchemy of symbolic elements characteristic of peripheral culture, but with a brief interruption that reveals the popular origin, is explained by the multiple references that make up the social entrepreneur, but also by the public’s interest in the exotic.

The reference to Pentecostalism, however, is justified by its harmony with “the values dear to the professional ethics postulated by the free and post-social market that took hold in the country in the 1990s” (Lima, 2008: 23), although not explicitly stated by João. Not by chance, the emblematic Universal Church of the Kingdom of God found its moment of vertiginous growth “in the period in which the display of the glory of the ‘winners’ came to occupy so much space, and so insistently, in the secular media” (Lima, 2008: 24), breaking with the Christian tradition of teaching the poor about suffering and attributing waged employment to a source of humiliation.

The purpose of this type of activity, which is also promoted by other cultural collectives on the periphery, is to “build bridges”. They are inspired by the Interdisciplinary Internships promoted by the Landless Rural Workers’ Movement (MST) since 2003, usually in model settlements and with university students as the target audience - by the way, an MST flag decorated the agency’s backyard on my first visits. In this case, they are shorter, part-time activities on Saturdays, which do little to compromise the visitors’ schedules. As we’ll see below, these exchanges promoted by João also have significance for his individual behaviour in and out of the periphery.

## BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

As I’ve realised over the years of research, it’s mainly at weekends that bridges are built, starting with the Festival. João organises partnerships full-time, but the results can be seen when other people’s time allows. I’ve been to the Festival for two consecutive years, but it didn’t happen again with the Covid-19 pandemic. The Cam-

<sup>16</sup> | In the hierarchy of the First Capital Command (PCC), the *disciplina* is responsible for ensuring compliance with the rules drawn up by the faction. According to Biondi (2014), discipline is synonymous with ethics for the “thieves” and has to do with “right” which, in turn, is never defined in advance.

po Limpo square, very close to the bus station, is quite large and pleasant, and the exhibitors' stands are spread out in a well-coordinated manner, divided into food, fashion and craft aisles, photographic exhibitions, as well as children's tents, *samba* and rap circles and the main stage, where a big show is held in the evening. Also visible that afternoon was the presence of chef Bel Coelho, well known on the Vila Madalena gastronomic circuit, and Greenpeace and its volunteers.

It was interesting to note that in the 2018 edition, which took place in November, a mostly white, middle-class audience enjoyed the sunny Sunday, giving the gathering a carefree, festive atmosphere. The following year, however, funding problems pushed the Festival into December, and the reduced audience was noticeable, both visually and in the assessment of many entrepreneurs. As night fell, the presence of local residents became more noticeable than the previous year. I was watching the movement when a group of boys crossed my field of vision dressed as the Joker, the villain of the Batman comics. Meanwhile, on stage, local graffiti artist Gamão entertained the audience waiting for rapper Rael's concert with phrases encouraging entrepreneurship, justified as an alternative to the world of crime.

The difficulty exposed in this case is that the absence of the West zone audience creates a vacuum in the Festival's sustainability. In fact, I heard from a qualified interlocutor that João needed to make his business sustainable every day of the week and not depend so much on events. Incidentally, it's when faced with the abyss of debt that he and his colleagues take their chances. It's not the amount of debt that worries them most, but as Viviane Fernandes (2019) observes, debts are social stigmas, and integrity of character is an esteem that is sought in the eyes of others, especially the dozens of entrepreneurs associated with them who also need these events for their own maintenance.

But this is a clear symptom of the agency's strategic activity, which is to sell the periphery to the city's capitalised circuits that see it as a business or social marketing opportunity. Still in 2019, I witnessed him and his partner commenting on the difficulty of organising the next edition of the Festival, as they still hadn't managed to close the bills for the previous ones and negotiate with the city hall about providing stages, chemical toilets, etc. “2017 was so bad, we still owe a lot. God willing, this month we're going to pay the five *contos* (thousand) we still owe from 2017”, said João.

Despite his conviction about his vocation for entrepreneurship, these choices weren't easy for João, and they're still not entirely comforting. Until he was 18, he says, he still didn't know what he wanted to be professionally. His wife has a salaried job, which guarantees the upkeep of the house, but his very modern profile as a worker/entrepreneur confuses more than clarifies. “People think you're not working, that *vivência* is *cachacinha*. It is too! But the art of my stuff is there, you know?”.

Now, with his daughter still in the early years of childhood, issues that aren't

as funny as the ones he shares in his meetings are starting to weigh on his shoulders, creating dissonance in his narrative. At the time, a debate about a new pension reform was intensifying in public opinion, which seemed to bring to light, for João, the unpredictable side of his choices, in this case the fact that a pension will not come smoothly for him. He says that he would only go to a labour contract “if it was for a lot of money, talk of 10,000, 20,000 a month”, but he feels the pressure to have a higher education degree that he left by the wayside and which, with his responsibility as a father, now seems to be lacking for when he needs an occupation that pays at least enough.

João obviously denounces the racism he has experienced on the entrepreneurial circuit, but he also responds in a restrained and, once again, pragmatic way. He lets out a nervous laugh when he tells of the times he was mistaken for a delivery man when he arrived for a meeting with entrepreneurs, and then another ambiguity appears: it’s not those at the top that he points his complaints at, but the petty powers of those who control the entrances and exits, in other words, workers who often live in the same neighbourhood as him. Sometimes João feels a sense of revolt, of putting a stop to situations that are truly humiliating for him. But, in general, his response is to maintain his “professionalism” and “do his best”, and his restraint has earned him the possibility of many other invitations, the result of the “calculation” he makes between his radical denunciation of racism and his uncertainty about the consequences for these relationships.

Man, everyone [at a certain event] stopped to talk to me, I didn't have a minute's rest. My mouth hurt, my jaw, from talking so much. “It's just that I'm at a point in my life, with my daughter, that I can't go on playing the *vida loka*. Do you think I don't want to play Mano Brown?”<sup>17</sup> But you can't, look at the *bang* we're involved in, bro. The *bang* we're involved in is very big. There's a calculation”. (João Vicente, 2019)

**17** | The expression indicates a confrontational attitude, inspired by rapper Mano Brown, leader of the emblematic group Racionais MC's.

There are times when João seems gloomy. His efforts to sell the periphery to the centre have their moments of frustration, especially when an event he has organised doesn't get the support from the other side of the bridge that he had expected for.<sup>18</sup> João hopes to meet the expectations of those looking for the “authentic” peripheral subject, a victim of state violence, politicised in the fights for recognition, but far removed from the “old politics”. And, of course, the entrepreneurial and optimistic profile that, together with others like him, will promote the pacification of the *quebrada*. In fact, the way he refers to his peripheral neighbours and the university students who visit the periphery is curious. When asked about the social impact he brings to the community, he uses the latter as an example, who cross the bridge to learn about his social technology - a sign that his enterprise has reach - while the

**18** | One of these situations happened in February 2019 during “pre-carnival”. While in the Pinheiros neighbourhood the streets were filled with revellers and *marchinhas*, in Campo Limpo the atmosphere was the same. At the agency, DJs took turns and the sound ranged from rap to reggae, with some American soul and funk. The crowd was small, ranging from 20 to 30 people, all from the region. João Vicente had publicised the event on social media, but the expected audience from the West zone didn't turn up.

former are often labelled *zé povinho*, in the manner of the Racionais MC's. “So, when *zé povinho* see us on [Rede Globo], they don't call us vagabonds anymore, you know? They used to say it was bum stuff, that it was pothead stuff, that it was bandit stuff... you went there, you saw it!”

His disdain for the *zé povinho*, as opposed to his tolerance for the actors in the social impact ecosystem, shows that his principle of justification (Boltanski; Thevénot, 2006) is based on a particular universe that may target the periphery, but whose determinations come from elsewhere. This principle predicts that, within the system, opinions and attitudes are adjusted, maintaining the “natural” situation of that context in which only those who share the same nature are included and those who resist fitting in are threatened with exclusion (Boltanski; Thevénot, 2006). Studying one of these systems, called “philanthrocapitalism” in their ethnography conducted in Brazil and the UK, Sklair and Glucksberg (2020: 10) observe an overlap between wealth management and philanthropic counselling.<sup>19</sup> Thus, in spaces like this - including social impact businesses - the demand for professionalisation is not restricted to managers and advisors, but affects social entrepreneurs from the peripheries with their jargon and, above all, their attitudes and lifestyles.

The impact that seems to be worthwhile for João is what is perceived on the other side of the bridge, but he himself recognises that this middle class that visits him in Campo Limpo is “a bit *blasé*”, that they aren't very impressed by important actions in the periphery, such as painting the wall of a school. He therefore suggests that in order to get them there, he needs to organise events that are interesting for them, and not necessarily for the *quebrada*. The return for the periphery, he hopes, will come at another time and in the form of money and projects, or “counterpart”, as he prefers to say. João thus lives between two worlds, and his agency is located right in the middle: when he talks about the future of his enterprise, he expounds a utopian vision of a “Woodstock” of the periphery, which is how everyone who was part of it will remember it.

Throughout the time I've followed João Vicente's work, I've witnessed his talent for forging partnerships and, with his unusual charisma, bringing well-known names in the entertainment world, such as journalists, actors, musicians etc., to the periphery. In December 2021 it was chef Alex Atala's turn to make an appearance. On the first weekend of the month, he and João's mother would prepare a menu of fish and vegan *moquecas* to raise funds for projects to fight hunger. The invitation stated that bookings were required and would be accepted until 5pm. Compared to my first visits, the professionalism of the staff was striking. I arrived around two hours early, and on my table was a handwritten note that read “Henrique Sociólogo” in blue pen, but the event wasn't full, despite the presence of the chef himself, who was smilingly walking around the place taking selfies. As the afternoon progressed and a *roda de samba* (samba circle) was organised, the event became emptier, with

19 | The objective in this case ranges from tax reduction to “succession planning” strategies - philanthropy as a gateway to “inclusive values”, persuading disintegrated family members to unite around a project - as well as contributing to their good public reputation (Sklair; Glucksberg, 2020).



João’s *manos*, entrepreneurs from the *quebrada*, remaining.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this article, I have tried to analyse the profile of social entrepreneur and “peripheral subject” João Vicente through his life experiences. These two identities, which intersect in his trajectory, represent a convergence in which he appears as an ideal type, bringing together in a single character the result of the cultural effervescence of the São Paulo’s South zone, cradle of soirees, marginal literature and where the hip hop movement yielded its main representatives, the Racionais MC’s; on the other hand, global actions of social transformation through private initiative began to circulate through social organisations (OSs), public and private foundations and through the very culture shared intensely by new technologies, associated, supposedly, with entrepreneurship.

João Vicente is an emblematic character and was chosen to illustrate this article because, in a certain sense, he was successful in pointing out an additional path for peripheral individuals like him based on entrepreneurial principles. This does not imply that João or other social entrepreneurs from the periphery are unanimous, and that identity conformations associated with other variables, such as generation, are not equally important (Fontes, 2022). For example, their animosities towards the *zé povinho* may distort these combinations.

However, he is by no means an isolated case. As well as travelling with ease to social entrepreneurship events in the capital and elsewhere, sponsored by large companies and multinational foundations, João is also a reference point for his neighbourhood. The Festival he organises every year brings together dozens of other entrepreneurs; he is also a regular figure at traditional meetings of peripheral culture - for example, the Binho and Cooperifa soirees, where he was even honoured in mid-2019. Above all, as a connoisseur, leader and exceptional organiser, embodying the real and symbolic bridge between the periphery of São Paulo’s South zone and the upper-middle class of the central regions, João has constructed himself as a self-made man and privileged bearer of an “imagined future”, very different from the previous peripheral generation described by D’Andrea (2013) and Nascimento (2010), re-signifying it in a certain direction and wrapping it in a typically contemporary structure of feelings.<sup>20</sup>

So did the state and its institutions, reshaping their public policies and professional qualification programmes (Guimarães, 2004; Rodrigues, 2009), following a global trend of boosting entrepreneurship. Also in 2001, São Paulo City Hall, under the Worker’s Party (PT) administration, developed two categories of innovative social programmes: the “Redistributive” - minimum income programmes conditional

<sup>20</sup> | For Williams (2011), structures of feeling are the practical consciousness of a moment, which are constituted in a generational practice. They differ from social experience, which is characterised especially by dominant and residual social forms.

on school attendance and allocation to the labour market for vulnerable groups, especially the unemployed; and the “Emancipatory”, which had as one of its objectives “the formation of collective and self-managed enterprises”. In 2004, the Ministry of Labour launched the Young Entrepreneur programme, developed with Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service (Sebrae) and aimed at encouraging young people to enter the labour market. Incidentally, this was at a time when young people from the periphery were beginning to question their place in the world in the face of inclusion through consumption during the Lula’s years, which saw low unemployment but low pay - 94.8 per cent of the jobs created in the 2000s paid up to 1.5 minimum wages (Pochmann, 2012).

I understand that one of the reasons why these modernising discourses are gaining traction is that young wageless people interviewed for this research, like João Vicente, have a very negative view of the labour market, but not of work itself. It is common in social impact businesses for their agents to carry out these activities full time, intertwining work with leisure time. The difference is that they see it *as entrepreneurship*, and therefore justifiable: for these young people it means breaking with a set of rules that include fixed working hours and subordination to a boss, but also with a sense of transforming realities that disappeared with previous sociability.<sup>21</sup>

João’s case illustrates other contradictions beyond himself. For example, I met him on the 2nd Periphery Impact Business Forum (NIP), held at the parish of Santos Mártires, a well-known progressive Catholic centre in Jardim Ângela, also on the outskirts of the South zone. The meeting included panel discussions, performances by artists, a sustainable lunch and coffee break, engaging speeches combined with corporate-style dynamics. Organised by a local cultural producer and a social impact business “accelerator”, the event was supported by the Centre for Entrepreneurship and New Business of the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV), the British Council, the Fundação Lemann, among others. The walls featured pictures of Pope Francis, Marielle Franco and Che Guevara. The mix of symbols was extravagant to the nostalgic gaze of the old popular struggles; inside that space the discussions didn’t go past those icons but tried to reconcile engagement and entrepreneurship.

These are clear signs of social worlds turned upside down, in which experiences of work (precarious, self-employed or entrepreneurial) and the city are intertwined, as Vera Telles (2006: 176) suggests, and which answer the question of “how social practices are redefined and the mediations that shape a social experience under another diagram of relationships and another set of references”. João is a peripheral individual who, as well as being an entrepreneur, moves around different *pedaços* (parts) of the city (Magnani, 2003), and his oscillations adapt perfectly to this new world.

In the absence or rejection of family references and role models, young people

21 | Mano Brown saw in his generation what he called “an NGO idea”, in which *work* and *organisation* were necessary in the concrete search for freedom, equality and against exploitation and oppression. According to Felipe Campos, the economic conditions and access to public policies that were the hallmark of the PT administrations under Lula and Dilma would change the perception of the role of rap for the later generation (Campos, 2019).

like him take refuge in therapeutic narratives that interpret their suffering (Illouz, 2007). These are interwoven into their short trajectories, filling the space emptied of work experiences, as their professional lives are pushed forward, promoting aspirations of self-realisation. To paraphrase Fredric Jameson (1985), none of this has anything to do with entrepreneurship per se, which is rather a distorted reflection of individual dreams and feelings about non-alienated labour. Entrepreneurship embodies a utopia of a life without submissive work, in dialogue with both the *malandro* (scoundrel) of popular culture and the managers of the corporate world, characters who don't sell their work, but their lifestyles. He draws the substrate for his utopia from the “guiltless world”, an expression coined by Antonio Candido (1970).

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