

Networks and territorialities: an ethnographic approach to the so-called crackolândia (crackland) in São Paulo¹

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present a more systematic investigation of what is commonly called crackland (cracolândia), going beyond a series of stigmatized representations of the Luz neighborhood and the center of São Paulo shown especially by the press and television. The use of crack cocaine is currently becoming a theme of increasing concern in Brazil, with repeated news about the “proliferation of cracklands” in various cities, and it must be understood what is at stake in each one of these configurations. Exploring networks of relationships and connections from an ethnographic perspective, we will work with the idea of crackland as a type of itinerant territoriality within a multifaceted context, and marked by multiple situational variations. This ethnographic reconstitution is mainly based on our interactions with “É de Lei”, an NGO that works with harm reduction for users of crack cocaine in the region in question. In this context, the actions of É de Lei take place within a field of mediation also characterized by the actions of agents linked to public authorities, to other NGOs and to churches, as well as policemen, private security guards, shopkeepers, residents and passers-by. One of the challenges consists of understanding and explaining this territoriality in view of the recent political changes which rearrange the context researched, characterized by the presence of “noias” (a word derived from the term paranoia), a relational category which is used in a multiple recurring way referring to crack cocaine users.

Key words: The Luz District, Territoriality, Crack.

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² The present article is based on field research conducted by Heitor Frúgoli Jr. and Enrico Spaggiari (Paula de S. D. Faria took part on one single occasion). It also benefited from the collaboration of participants in the wider research: post-graduate students Guilherme A. Aderaldo, Giancarlo M. C. Machado e Natália H. Fazzioni, graduates Isadora Z. Da Fonseca and Bruno Puccinelli, and undergraduates Wesley E. Rodrigues, Karina Fasson and Julio C. Talhari; Jessica Sklair, Carlos F. de Aquino, Daniel de Lucca R. Costa, Inácio C. D. de Andrade, Fabio C. Julião, Marina A. Capusso, Paula S. D. Faria, Laís Silveira and Bianca B. Chizzolini also took part (all are or were part of the GEAC). For an idea of the first stages of this investigation, see Frúgoli Jr. and Sklair (March 2008 and Dec. 2009). We should also like to express our gratitude to all those we came into contact with and interviewed throughout this research, especially to the members of the “Centro de Convivência É de Lei” (an NGO meaning literally “It’s (from) the Law”, the main interlocutors in this text.

1. Introduction

An explanation of the aims of this paper demands that we very briefly return to the route covered up to here by the present research. Our ethnographic investigations³ have basically sought to reconstitute several networks of relations and connections in between two relatively common representations about Luz: that of the *cultural neighbourhood* (made possible by the creation and strengthening of various cultural institutions by the State, since the middle of the 1980s)⁴ and that of *cracolândia* (*crackland*), a stigma of degradation and crime resulting from the presence of many users of crack cocaine in the streets of the neighbourhood, including homeless men, women and children, sex professionals etc.).⁵

It could also be said that the polarity between *cultural neighbourhood* and *cracolândia* deals with the oppositions between “*requalification*” (*renovation*) and *deterioration* which have been going on since the beginning of the 1990s in relation to the central area of São Paulo, although they could be considered the results of other former oppositions.⁶

Obviously these polarities are not restricted to the rhetorical field, since especially during certain urban interventions – in which several conflicts of a social and cultural nature broke out and intensified – they help to reaffirm and establish a representation of worlds which are totally different and opposing.

In this way, our ethnographic practices have concentrated on parts of the local population of Luz – especially shopkeepers and dwellers –, on people who commonly use the streets and on some urban utilities, as well as on social actors related (often as mediators) more closely to the so-called *cracolândia* – seen as a kind of *itinerant*

³ For a synthetic approach to the importance of ethnographic practice in the study of the city, and to the potential of urban ethnography, see Durham (2004(1986)), Agier (1999), Magnani (2005 (2002)), Cordeiro (2003), Peirano (2005), Frúgoli Jr. (2007), Eckert (2010).

⁴ Initially this can be seen in the project *Luz Cultural* (in the administration of the PMDB, 1983-1986), with a continuation in the following decades by means of the *Monumenta-Luz* and more recently the *Nova Luz* (see Frúgoli Jr., 2000, 72-73 and 103-109; Kara-Jose, 2007). This role has been played by different government spheres, especially state government and more recently municipal administration, with a certain continuity between the administrations, and co-ordination between different government plans defined by policies connected mainly to the PSDB. The sphere of cultural institutions and historical heritage has been emphasized in this route, although it is increasingly related to strong real-estate interests.

⁵ This stigmatization dates back a long time and is also related to previous symbols like that of the “Boca do Lixo” (a kind of “red light district”). Some of those interviewed refer to the use of crack cocaine in the streets of Luz and the vicinity already in the 1990s. According to Uchôa (1996 apud Silva, 2000, 19), the beginning of more intense use of crack cocaine in the streets of Luz was in 1991.

⁶ For a systematic analysis of requalification and connected lexis, see Frúgoli Jr. (2000; 2006) and Peixoto (2009).

territoriality, as we shall see in the following pages. It is precisely on this latter aspect that the present article will focus.⁷

Still from the analytical point of view, given the social, cultural and urban characteristics of the neighbourhood in question, we seek to work with the hypothesis of the existence of widespread networks of sociability, whose ethnographic starting point is urban areas characterized by a series of precarious urban conditions (Agier, 1999, 110-197). At the same time, we will try to understand the type of public space which results from specific interactions (Joseph, 2005 (1998)) partly potentialized by the fact that this neighbourhood is located in the centre, with many passers-by. It must also be pointed out that within the ethnographic focuses, special attention has been given to the spatial practices of appropriation and production of a neighbourhood (Certeau, 1994 (1980), 199-215).

When we researched this neighbourhood, we inevitably had a more systematic view of what is customarily called *cracolândia*, much more than a series of highly stigmatized representations given by the media, which in a certain way, update the criminalization of poverty – as they extend them throughout the neighbourhood (and vicinity) as a whole, and not as a part of it (as if they could be separated from the hundreds of articles by the press about it).⁸

It is important to point out that when we asked the local population, tradesmen and people who use the streets in the Luz district about what they thought of the neighbourhood, it was common to hear it characterized by the presence of the *noia(s)*,⁹ a recurring native term used to describe the users of crack cocaine, a term mentioned much more frequently than the term “*cracolândia*” (quite common in the press and on

⁷ In other words, this text, dealing mainly with social actors more directly related to so-called *cracolândia*, does not exhaust our ethnographic approaches underway in Luz which, to different extents, are connected to dimensions represented here. Among the other areas – all with emphasis on ethnographic observation and not only interviews – we can point out contacts with people who live there (in different types of buildings and residences), those with commercial establishments (especially those affected by the recent urban interventions), shop assistants, pedestrians, private guards, sex professionals and those who use the streets and services of the neighbourhood. It should be pointed out that we also observed those people who use the three cultural institutions (Pinacoteca, Sala São Paulo and the Museum of the Portuguese Language) as well as those who go to Parque da Luz, and other areas of leisure (samba halls, “*chorinho*” (a type of Brazilian music) and soccer games) organized by musical groups and commercial establishments.

⁸ This is clearly visible in the huge amount of material in the national press that we have collected from 2005 until now.

⁹ The term *noia* may be defined, only in introductory terms and without going into the relational meanings connected to the term “as what addicts to crack call the anguish and the feeling of persecution that accompanies the state of euphoria generated by the drug. Its origins lie in the word *paranoia*” (Monteiro, 3/9/2000, our translation). According to participants of *É de Lei* “to be in the *noia*” may also mean a state in which the user is when he is “desperately” (“*vidrado*”) looking for a rock of crack.

television). A typical response was, in short, the following: “*apart from the noia(s), the district is good*”. It could also be observed that although *Luz* and *Centro* are part of the same area in spatial terms,¹⁰ the term *Luz* is clearly linked to the *noias* – marked by their physical presence in the streets and symbolically associated with a series of stigmas, such as dirt, danger, threats to safety (mainly at night), drugs, trouble, shame etc. (Frúgoli Jr. and Sklair, Mar.2008, 5-6 and Dec.2009, 124-125).¹¹

Our hypothesis is that *cracolândia* is a kind of itinerant territoriality (Perlongher, 1987 and 2005 (1988)), characterized by innumerable conflicts (Arantes, 1996), which means placing it in a certain urban area. However it may move further away, depending on the type of repression or intervention practised, besides the dynamics of its own internal relations. It is in this sense that this study is similar to, but also different from that carried out by Bourgois (2003; 1997(1989)) about agents connected mainly to the sale of crack (*crack dealers*) at certain points of El Barrio (Hispanic Harlem, New York). Although our work also deals with people who are often identified as homeless, our focus is basically on the users of the substance, especially due to the widespread use they make of the streets and other collective equipment of public space, as well as their more visible relations with other social actors in the streets themselves.¹²

Before our first field trips, the specific perimeter of so-called *cracolândia* (defined by the City Hall and widely covered in the press) was precisely the “pentagon” where the municipal project “Nova Luz” (New Luz) was to be installed (São Paulo City Hall, Dec.2005).¹³ Such rigid perimeters revealed strategies of urban intervention whose aim was to create spaces potentially subject to considerable rises in property prices.

¹⁰ In this case, the qualities mentioned slip easily from those in the neighbourhood to those found in the inner city: a train station, buses, the underground, bakeries, supermarkets, medical centres and the Santa Casa hospital. People also mentioned the many work opportunities (even if it is insecure and unstable work) in the central region such as informal trade, the offer of various types of services, collection of recyclable material etc.

¹¹ In many accounts, the people interviewed referred to them as a chronic, long-standing problem, affecting the neighbourhood for many years.

¹² Possibly our approach is closer to the concept of psychotropic territories (Fernandes and Ramos, 2010), but this will be the subject of a future paper.

¹³ This area (present in various articles in the *Folha de São Paulo*) increased the region from which the first ethnography emerged about *cracolândia* by some blocks (Mingardi and Goulart, 2001,39). In both materials analysed, all the maps showed the same pentagon as the spatial outline of the area. In various articles in *Folha de São Paulo*, some blocks were different, but in all of them it remained in the shape of a pentagon, basically formed by Avenues Duque de Caxias, Rio Branco, Ipiranga, Cásper Líbero and Rua Mauá.



Map of Luz neighborhood (and surroundings). In white, the perimeter of the New Luz project (the former area of crackland, according to City Hall). In red, the blocks of the first demolitions. In yellow, some landmarks in the area (cultural institutions, train and subway station, park). In blue, a street frequently used by crack users during our fieldwork; in light blue, two squares where they can also be found.

In our initial observations from October 2007, when the first demolitions in this “pentagon” had already taken place, the main concentration of crack users had already transferred to some blocks away, outside these perimeters.

There are also times when the use of other public spaces in the central region by the users of crack cocaine becomes more visible, partly because many of them move to another place, especially when more comprehensive and integrated operations by local government take place in Luz, as we will see further on.

Thus, as we have already said, besides the fact that the interventions result in an increase in certain polarities due to a set of factors, in the case of so-called *cracolândia* we began to work ethnographically on it, bearing in mind the existence of a process of

dispersion and movement to some more restricted strategic points, with the zone where it spreads out to the Luz region as a hypothesis.

Thus, taking seriously the idea of *cracolândia* as a type of itinerant territoriality and a field of relations, we have sought to establish *ethnographic contact* with this multifaceted context, marked by countless situational variations, by means of contact with a series of organisations, NGOs and institutions (of various kinds) which are characterized by different types of relations with certain local social actors. In this way the relation established by each one of these institutions with this context reveals different sides of it, like those that emphasize aid to homeless children in the region, or to prostitutes, in addition to those which establish relationships with various actors, in an attempt at harm reduction, not to mention others that seek to offer a religious message and help to different groups.

Each one of these groups describes or identifies these actors differently, even though there may be some convergence connected to the question of the use of crack. In this article *we will describe our interactions with the organisation “É de Lei” in its relations with the context in question* which take place through actions aimed at harm reduction, preferentially to users of crack cocaine, by means of direct contact with them in the streets in the Luz neighbourhood and at a reception centre. In this way, the emphasis will be on our description of this particular type of action, which is at the same time a *kind of identity construction* of those attended.

Thus by means of regular contact with this organisation we were able to come closer, from the ethnographic point of view, to crack cocaine users in the streets of Luz and neighbouring regions, making it clear that our focus is predominantly on the relations established by this organisation with them. In other words, we are interested in understanding certain types of mediation established with the context of so-called *cracolândia*, through which we intend to arrive at other types of mediating agents involved in this field of relations.

It should also be emphasized that it is an ethnographic approach which does not seek to (and nor could it) substitute the numerous and increasing approaches and interpretations of the theme (especially in the press and on television), but to analyse it from the point of view of our research experience.

2. The “É de Lei” and the practice of harm reduction: access to crack cocaine users

The reception centre É de Lei, an organisation that acts to reduce risks with crack cocaine users, appeared in 1998 and became an NGO in 2001. Initially users of injected drugs were focused on, with “fieldwork”¹⁴ in nightclubs and bars. Little by little, they began their activities with a reception centre for drug users to spend time together.

According to Marina dos Passos Sant’Anna – the president and coordinator of the organisation in 2007¹⁵ –, the focus of attention started to move to attending crack cocaine users starting in 2002, after the presentation of a pilot plan to the Brazilian Ministry of Health, which was then chosen along with four others from different federal units.

According to Ms. Sant’Anna, who joined É de Lei in 2003 – when the work was already being developed in cracolândia – various reasons led to the gradual change of the target public, such as the decrease in the number of drug addicts using injected drugs, the death of users, and their changing to other types of drugs. She also points out a more public nature in the use of this drug: “it was something much more explicit, done in the street itself”. This change also meant the adaptation of É de Lei to new methods of work.

Although the organisation has received few funds from the beginning for the distribution of material and lip balms to the users of crack cocaine, since “for the authorities, there is no profit in harm reduction”, it succeeded in setting up a mobile unit in 2004, to have access to users in the streets in the downtown area. According to Marina, the aim was to “Take the headquarters into the field” and thus convince the users to know and attend the reception centre of É de Lei.¹⁶

For a week (Dez.2007),¹⁷ we were able to observe the activities and services developed by them at their reception centre, a space for interaction for drug users, where the use of drugs is obviously forbidden, and where discussions are held and reflection encouraged about preventive sexual practices and the abusive nature of drugs. However our emphasis was on the action of É de Lei in the streets in the Luz district and region.

¹⁴ What the agents of the organisation themselves call this activity.

¹⁵ The year of our initial observations and interview with her (10/5/2007).

¹⁶ However, access by users to this reception centre is not easy since it appears that many addicts were barred by the private security guards of the commercial gallery where the organisations has two rooms on the last floor.

¹⁷ Afterwards other (sparser) visits were made.

The field work of *É de Lei* has been carried out in the downtown area, more precisely in the area called Luz.¹⁸ The first attempts to do it were difficult, both in relationships with the police and with the users themselves, many of whom distrusted the members of the organisation in the streets in the region. The distribution of materials, for example, passed through various stages. Initially the distribution of wooden pipes was tested, but they were not widely accepted by the users, who preferred to continue to use metal ones, usually made from car antennas. Currently they distribute silicone cigarette holders, lip salves (sticks made from cocoa butter) and condoms, in addition to leaflets with information about the reception centre and ways to prevent various diseases. The relationship with the police also made the first few months of work in the Luz region difficult. According to Marina, the police “usually would arrive at the team, to inspect us”.

For this and other reasons, according to her, it took some time for *É de Lei* to be accepted in the region, although we have observed the friendly and receptive way in which the agents of the organisation are almost always received by the crack cocaine users, which very probably is the result of trust constructed with time. This includes the possibility that from time to time this action may be contested in words by the users themselves. During one of our trips with *É de Lei*,¹⁹ on 16/10/2008, a boy who said he used crack commented (to the agents of *É de Lei* and to us) that the work of harm reduction or prevention would not help “to solve the problem”. A possible solution would be to bring “a damaged human organ in a glass jar with formalin to show us”. “You have to shock us”, he said. On the same day another user (who appeared to be over 40 years of age)²⁰ commented: “It’s Utopia to get this cigarette holder (distributed by the agents), it gives the feeling of “legalizing it”.²¹ We were told that one day a user accepted the silicone cigarette holder, although he said he intended to share it with other

¹⁸ On various occasions the agents of the *É de Lei* used the term “Luz” to refer to the region where they distribute the material. In a certain way there was a reduction of the Luz neighbourhood when they spoke, to the perimeter of *cracolândia*. In its turn “Centro” was a much wider term since, as one of the agents said, “there are regions here in the centre where there are no users, but these are nearer *Consolação* and *República*”.

¹⁹ Whenever we went, we wore T-shirts identical to those worn by the agents (they were red, orange or yellow and the name of the organisation was written on them), and we sought above all to observe their actions, although we sometimes helped in the distribution of material. Our interactions with the users were mainly in triangulation with the agents.

²⁰ We were told very rapidly (since it is very difficult to establish more lasting contact in the streets due to the itinerant character of the field of *É de Lei* and also because of the ways in which the space is used by the users of crack) that he had been arrested for using marijuana.

²¹ “Legalize it” is the title of a reggae song by Peter Tosh about the need to legalize the use of marijuana.

people (in other words, questioning the proposal that they be used individually by the agents to reduce harm).

The team went out to do field work once a week, always in the afternoon between 15h and 18h, with two or three members.²² Leaving the headquarters of the organisation located in a gallery on Av. 24 de Maio, the team went through some streets and avenues in the downtown area to finally reach the area called Luz.

There was visible concern about the health of the users during these trips, and the team also attempted to give what medical help was possible in the circumstances. Once (Dec.2007), in Praça Júlio Prestes (Júlio Prestes Square), one of the agents helped a black boy whose heel was injured, to put disinfectant on the injury. On other occasions we were able to observe initiatives of *É de Lei* to create partnerships with bodies and organisations in the health area that work in the region.

Despite the difficulties, one of the agents pointed out that the constant presence in field work helped to create ties with the users that were a little more significant, and also increase relations with the other actors – shopkeepers, dwellers, prostitutes and transvestites – who act in the so-called *cracolândia*.

3. New arrangements in the uses of the space: “today there is a march of “noias!”.²³

Notified beforehand by the Ministry of Health about “Operação Limpa” (“Operation Clean Up”), which was to take place in March 2005,²⁴ the agents of *É de Lei* did not accept the invitation to take part in it, since they were not in agreement with this proposal to intervene. Bruno Ramos Gomes, also an agent of *E do Lei*,²⁵ pointed out that the years after “Operação Limpa” were difficult, since they came up against resistance from the City Hall to cooperate with their actions in the field because the aim

²² Usually it is necessary to have three people for the field and a member of staff on duty in the reception centre. Due to the reduction in the number of staff and voluntary workers, the weekly field trip was cancelled sometimes. One of the agents confirmed that until 2006, the team had made 3 field trips per week, two of which were for direct intervention with the users and one to accompany users to be attended at public health services.

²³ This was said by a crack user in 8/9/2008.

²⁴ Performed by the local authorities including the police, health inspectors and sectors connected to assistance, health, and public cleaning which resulted in “2,216 people stopped and searched, 426 paper wrappers containing crack cocaine confiscated, 12 people caught dealing or carrying drugs, 3 hotels closed and their entrances sealed with concrete, 3 guns and 50 cell phones confiscated, 369 adults and children taken to shelters for the homeless, 2 wanted men arrested and 5, 200 pirated CDs confiscated” (Folha de São Paulo, 3/10/2005, our translation).

²⁵ And who currently coordinates the organisation.

of the operation was to “clean up” the area known as *cracolândia*, that is, remove the users of crack from that region by means of a combination of actions – with emphasis on police intervention.

According to Marina, after the Operation Clean-Up in the “pentagon” that we have already mentioned, identified as *cracolândia*, when many hotels were closed, the users of crack cocaine migrated to the region of the former central bus station, opposite Station Júlio Prestes and near Luz Park and Praça Princesa Isabel (Princesa Isabel Square). However, she observed that “the users disappeared with Operation Clean-Up, but many of them are coming back”.

Consequently, the perimeter of the project Nova Luz (the preferred target of Operation Clean Up) continued to be a space where *É de Lei* attended. However, it was extended to the new places where there were concentrations of users as we could see on several occasions.

On most of the field trips, the preferred destination was Rua Helvetia (Helvetia Street), the place where there was the largest numbers of users. This represented a slight change in territorial focus in relation to former routes, when the main place was Princesa Isabel. However, as Bruno said, the large numbers of users in Rua Helvetia in the previous few months meant that they decided to gradually start the work there.

Given the new arrangement of work in Luz, *É de Lei* underwent a period of reorganization in 2007, in an attempt to strengthen its ties with other groups and organisations such as Casa Taiguara (a shelter for children and adolescents from the streets), Forum Centro Vivo (Alive Inner City Forum) and evangelical groups that work in the region, which would prove to be fundamental for the work to continue. The new frame of work in the region also meant that the organisation stopped mediating in contacts between users and the homeless with the network of shelters in the region to obtain vacancies.

Between 2007 and 2008 there was a considerable increase in the number of users, especially in the region of Helvetia, as the members of *É de Lei* themselves had foreseen. In our observations between September and October of 2008, there were occasions when we counted up to as many as 200 users, as we have already said, along this street. At the same time, the numbers in Princesa Isabel decreased, when compared to that of the previous year.²⁶

²⁶ In areas nearer to the pentagon, inside which the demolitions of 2007 took place, there was apparently a reduction in the number of crack users. But this cannot be stated definitely. Only to give an example,

In any event certain changes in the dynamics of the occupation of the space by the users of crack could also be seen, as the type of police control increased significantly, making them move about the streets in the region much more – even though they still maintained certain points of concentration, as observed. Without entering into a discussion of the merits of the results of repressive practices, we frequently had the impression that the police ²⁷ showed up, making the users disperse, but they then returned – slowly or quickly – to the same places.

This arrangement could be understood from the comments of a person who attended the reception centre of É de Lei, and who lives with his parents in a block of flats on Helvetia, almost on the corner of Rua Ana Cintra. As he lives near a place where a significant number of users gather, he always commented something about the use of drugs in the region. Once one of the agents asked if there were many users in the street that morning; he said there were because the number had been gradually rising since the police operations which had begun in these streets in October, had stopped in November 2008 although they always had a police car parked on Rua Helvetia, which according to him “today is the cracolândia of four years ago”.

In addition, although the largest concentration of users is on the corners and pavements of Helvetia, some blocks away from the “pentagon”, we could see that this is not the only area occupied, since we were also able to watch the distribution of materials in the Júlio Prestes and Princesa Isabel squares, as well as in the Rua dos Protestantes e Rua dos Gusmões. ²⁸ This is not to mention a significant number of users at night, in the vicinity of Guaianazes and Gusmões, only after the local shops close their doors, very probably due to a different set of agreements. ²⁹

On the other hand the increase in the area attended cannot be understood only because of the events and interventions observed in the last decade. The fact that E do Lei has carried out field work in areas near the “pentagon” since at least 2003 suggests the presence of users in these areas even before the Operation Clean Up in 2005. Besides, when the itinerary to be followed by the team in the distribution of materials was presented during one of the field routes of the organisation, one of the members of

when we imagined that we had understood this territoriality a little better, we discovered from shopkeepers that at night there was another large gathering of users of crack at the corner of Rua Guaianazes and Rua dos Gusmões, with a strong nocturnal occupation of streets and pavements, only after local establishments closed their doors.

²⁷ Constantly identified by users as “loira” (the blonde).

²⁸ These two streets inserted in the “pentagon” recognized by the local authorities as cracolândia.

²⁹ Which the private security guards of the local establishment are part of, as other ethnographic approaches indicate, which will not be described here.

É de Lei remembered that in previous years, the actions included some slightly more distant areas, including some outside the perimeter of the Luz neighbourhood, like República and Sé Squares, Baixada do Glicério and Pari.

Thus we look at the mapping of a *cracolândia* principally from the perspective of É de Lei. In this ethnography, it emerges with no actually fixed territory, even though this does not mean that it is dislocated. As Marina observed, “*cracolândia*” is located in the area where the users are, or at least most of them: “... *cracolândia* does exist. It’s not only a geographical space. It is the world of crack cocaine. There are 20 people around you, *fissuradas*, strung out on the drug”.

4. Impacts and broadening of the ethnographic context: new questions to study in depth

The picture shown up to here, however, would undergo some changes after the inauguration of the “*Ação Integrada Centro Legal*” (“Integrated Action for a Legal Centre”), which took place in the middle of the following year (2009) in the Luz district,³⁰ an intervention which in a certain way readopted some general principles of Operation Clean Up (2005), whose ostensive police patrols in the area continued, though to a lesser degree and more variably, in the following years, with a series of repressive interventions undertaken during the Kassab administration.³¹ From then on there was a certain continuity in the action, combining police action with that of other sectors and public bodies. Nevertheless, the fact that people related to the use of crack cocaine and to other illegal activities remained in the region (although continually moving around the downtown area) – even after many demolitions which followed Operation Clean Up, and especially after the project Nova Luz (2007) was decreed – demanded the creation and application of other forms of intervention in the neighbourhood.

In a conversation in October 2008, we saw that the agents of É de Lei had been noticing a gradual change in the way in which the public administration was facing the question of *cracolândia*. What had before been treated as a social problem, began to be

³⁰ Authorized by the Public Ministry, and including joint action by the Military and Civil Police, inspection authorities and health inspection (Folha Online, 22/7/2009).

³¹ G. Kassab was vice mayor in the J. Serra administration (PSDB-PFL, 2005-2006) and took over the City Hall from 2006 on (he joined the DEM (former PFL) after March 2007); he was re-elected for the period 2009-2012.

recognized as a “health issue”, although Marina pointed out that this was still far from being ideal, since the policy being used was strictly restricted to the hospitalization of users and the police’s action continued to be repressive.

This new way of facing the “problem” of *cracolândia* would appear more strongly in 2009, when local government began a new process already mentioned of intervention in the Luz neighbourhood and surroundings by means of the so-called “Integrated Action for a Legal Centre” (Corsaletto, 23/7/2009). But it must be understood that this was connected as before to considerable interests in the urban sphere. In the middle of the first semester of 2009, a controversial plan of “urban concession” was passed by the City Chamber of São Paulo and sanctioned by the Mayor in 7/5/2009. It includes the expropriation of 18 blocks in the central region (about 600 properties) through the participation of private initiative. At the same time, *cracolândia* began to be regarded, in the words of the mayor, as a “health problem”. For the mayor “all this revitalisation will only be possible when we succeed in minimizing this problem” (Portal Terra, 23/4/2009, our translation). Within this framework of various interests at stake, the mayor formed teams of health workers to “help the chemical addicts of Nova Luz” by means of ongoing work along with other spheres (Globo.com, 24/4/2009, our translation).

These developments raised new questions for the understanding of what we had been attempting to analyse until then about *cracolândia* as an itinerant territoriality, characterized by a certain mobility, and which was related to social actors within the dynamics of work, trade, housing and leisure in “degraded” areas. Thus, if previous observations already allowed us to relativise certain territorial determinations about a perimeter which was the main target of repression and investment by the authorities during the last decade, also suffering a partial process of demolition from 2007, the challenge of understanding the new political and daily dynamics having an impact on the context researched from 2009 on remained.

Although it has not been possible to make an ethnographic study of the region in question at the time of Operation Clean Up (May 2005), it seems to us that aspects of that situation, especially regarding the dispersion of the users of crack to other downtown areas reappeared (in new arrangements) after the actions connected to Integrated Action for a Good Centre (from July 2009 onwards).³² This became clear

³² Our investigations show scores of articles about this during July 2009.

especially when the national press began to criticize the efficiency of the movement's intention to eradicate the use of crack in the streets in the Luz neighbourhood, as well to show the presence of groups of users in other areas of the centre, such as Barra Funda, Vale do Anhangabaú and the Praça da República. According to one of the articles, the region of *cracolândia* included Bom Retiro, Luz, Santa Cecília, República and Arouche (O Globo, 23/7/2009), and the users had become the “exiles from *cracolândia*” (Sampaio, 9/8/2009, our translation).³³

It is worth mentioning some aspects taken from our contacts, of a more specific nature, in the Projeto Quixote (the Quixote Project)³⁴ – that deals with children and young people in situations of risk in various areas in the central region, including the so-called *cracolândia* –, in an attempt to increase the understanding of the themes dealt with here.

In 2008³⁵ Fernanda Quirino Ramos, an assistant therapist and one of the coordinators of the organisation told us that, taking various places in the central region into account, a certain contrast between the dynamics observed in the Vale do Anhangabaú – in general terms a more open public area, where it is easier to interact with children and young people, where educational activities are more viable and where the use of drugs is much rarer – with the neighbourhood of Luz – whose streets do not offer much space for interaction, resources for making contacts or exchanges are clearly more difficult, and the use of crack is much more intense. Various children and young people circulate in both territories and if in the Vale do Anhangabaú (or in other areas of downtown, like República) they may open up to interaction with the educators, in *cracolândia* they frequently say: “here, no!” or “mister, pretend you don’t see me!”

In the following year, weeks after the beginning of “Operation Legal Centre”, the same coordinator pointed out³⁶ the consequences at that moment of the significant increase in police repression (which in a certain way had already been increasing before): children and young people were forced to walk around a great deal, there was

³³ See the publications: Capriglione, 26/06/2009; Spinelli; Credendio, 02/07/2009; Estadão, 22/07/2009; Magalhães, 22/07/2009; O Globo, 23/07/2009; Manso; Zanchetta, 12/07/2009b. For more details, see the excellent piece on publications in the national press present in a text produced by Karina Fasson and Bruno Puccinelli, members of GEAC (Fasson; Puccinelli, 2010).

³⁴ The Quixote Project, created in 1996, is an Organization of Civil Society and Public Interest – OSCIP–, non-profit and connected to the Federal University of São Paulo – UNIFESP. We stayed in contact with one of the coordinators but unfortunately it has not been possible to accompany the relations of the educators with their target public ethnographically.

³⁵ The interview was held on 20/10/2008.

³⁶ In an interview held on 23/7/2009.

greater difficulty in establishing interaction with them, and even access to crack was apparently being easier than before in various places.³⁷

According to Fernanda, it is also common for these children and young people to tell the educators that they use crack but that they are not noias (as we saw in some ethnographic situations with É de Lei). Sometimes one may call another noia as a kind of moral insult, as the person accused is losing a certain “discernment” according to the coordinator. In this way, if someone states that “at one time I was noia”, he may be speaking not only of a period in which he used crack, but in which, in Fernanda’s words, he lacked “dignity”. There is a possibility here of thinking of the term noia in the relations among these users of crack (or “craqueiros” (“crackheads”)).

On the day of the visit to one of the branches of the Quixote Project (located in Republic Square) in July 2009, we witnessed in the surroundings a scene we had already observed before: a group of approximately 20 users (adults) were gathered together in Rua Joaquim Gustavo (most of them sitting on the ground and some of them with pipes in their hands), when the police came slowly in their direction; immediately all of them dispersed and most of them went towards Avenida São Joao. About 15 minutes later, however, various had already returned to the same place.

Another very important contact, though on only one occasion, was that which was established with Osvaldo Ataíde Norberto, who was then an educator in the streets and a member of the Fundação Projeto Travessia³⁸ whose target public is practically identical to the previous one: children and adolescents living in the streets. The first aspect that attracted our attention was his use of a series of anthropological concepts that guided the work (or derived from it) that he carried out from 2004 onwards in the region of cracolândia: to think of the children and adolescents of that context as “natives” (seeking to avoid pre-conceived ideas about them), to become close to them and interact, based on the idea of “participative observation”, to understand certain ready discourse (“made for the ‘coloniser’”), to pay attention to their “ritual practices”, and to seek the “reading they have of us” (as opposed to what we have of them) etc.

It is important to point out that for him, the children and adolescents did not talk about the Luz region (some asked ‘what’s that?’, when asked by him), but of cracolândia, and independent of the use of crack, many do not see themselves as noias

³⁷ Within the principle that, with the repression, the dynamic of cracolândia would begin to spread to other downtown areas.

³⁸ Travessia Project Foundation. Interview held on 15/10/2008 and unfortunately not followed up, despite countless attempts to meet Osvaldo again. After, he left the institution.

(this would be a category more “from outside”).³⁹ It must also be emphasized that the so-called *cracolândia* is not limited to something physical – since they “take it wherever they go”, nor is it contained in the use of crack (“just a figure in a situation”). These children and adolescents establish closer relationships with homeless people, shopkeepers, prostitutes, those collecting trash for recycling, street vendors etc.⁴⁰

Other investigations have allowed us to widen our observations (as well as the challenges) on topics regarding concrete points about territoriality, fields of relationships and identity constructions in this context. To move forward a little further, contributions of the ethnographic study by Selma L. da Silva (2000) may be mentioned, about women and the use of crack in the Luz neighbourhood⁴¹ which synthetically call attention to the multifaceted context found in the district and in the region. She interacted with women who practised prostitution and with others who were in the street, connected to other activities (sometimes theft or drug dealing) which in itself defined certain distinctions among them. She perceived that there were prostitutes that smoked crack and others who did not, and between them there was conflict resulting from the fact that the users of crack tended to charge less for the program or agree to do it without the use of condoms, causing problems to the others who then called them “noias” or “noinhas” (“little noias”) as well as “crackeiras” (“crackheads”) or “fedidas” (“stinking”) (Silva, 2000, 54-63).

Besides this, there was also the idea among those who smoked crack that it is possible to take some precautions (such as alternating consumption with water, milk or soft drinks, or food, taking a bath or resting, leaving a longer time between the days when it was used, or not staying in the streets with the others). This for example is expressed in the following words: “the rock doesn’t control me, it’s me who controls the rock” (Silva, 2000, 75, our translation). In this context, the term *noia* may also be used among women who use crack to those who cannot deal with the more harmful effects of the drug and who practise high-risk behaviour.⁴²

³⁹ According to Osvaldo, they think; “I’m not a *noia*, I just can’t manage to stay in my house” (Coletivo Política do Impossível, 2008, 90, our translation).

⁴⁰ Not to mention those that are implicit when they speak, such as NGOs, the police, employees of the local authorities or evangelicals, although all of them may be thought of more, in this case, as agents who have access to *cracolândia*.

⁴¹ The researcher gave details of this research at a seminar held by GEAC on 6/3/2009. Her investigation was developed with the practices of the facilitating agents connected to the Casa de Convivência da Pastoral da Mulher Marginalizada (a religious organization to help vulnerable women), connected to the Diocese of São Paulo.

⁴² See more details in Silva (2000, 72-82). In the space of this article it will unfortunately not be possible to show the results of another investigation underway in Luz, related to the field of prostitution.

However *from cracolândia to the noias* (passing by the *crack users*), the question remains of how to describe this itinerant territoriality. In this way, an ethnographic observation of the uses and disputes that permeate the Luz neighbourhood demands an analysis of the plurality of the actors involved with cracolândia as well as with the connections among them, whether conflicting or not, which paint a complex and heterogeneous picture of relations. These aspects and relations are barely touched upon in the journalistic approaches and media work on the theme.

Based above all on the ethnographic analysis of the work of one of the various organisations that works to attend crack users in the Luz neighbourhood, the present article allows an observation of some of the relations or intermediations established by the authorities with these agents. The work of É de Lei is an example of a possible mediation between the users and the authorities or “society”, whose aim is to create a non conflicting relation, characterized by discourse on harm reduction in the use of drugs. It is one way to mediate among so many others which we were able to observe from the beginning of the research: the actions of the police; the participation of the shopkeepers of the Luz neighbourhood and nearby in the daily life of the district; the work of the private guards and security officers,⁴³ hired by shops and car parks to keep users away, also making them move continuously around various streets in the region; the involvement of the those who live in the residential buildings in the region.

The end of this paper is actually a beginning of a series of challenges coming from those first ethnographic moves closer to the subject, with a view to understanding the so-called cracolândia as a modality of itinerant territoriality and a field of relationships, in a multifaceted context marked by diverse situational variations. Throughout this text, we have observed various connections between the terms cracolândia, users of crack and noias, which must undergo a certain separation for analytical purposes, even though they dialogue among themselves.

The term *cracolândia* emphasizes a certain territorial dimension, with a tendency to be fixed spatially from the point of view of how it is represented, as in fact occurred in the Luz neighbourhood, which practically became a synonym for cracolândia in various newspapers of the national press (although these means of communication also recognize that after large-scale operations of repression, this context “migrates” or

⁴³ There are also reports of the presence of people linked to the PCC (Primeiro Comando da Capital (First Capital Command), a criminal organisation) who act in the region, also organising where the noias can stay so as not to upset the local establishments.

“reappears” in other places in the city). It is clear that the authorities have used this type of description even to describe an urban perimeter to be “remodelled”. In any case, it cannot be said that the term is only used by the authorities or by the media since it also appears sometimes when the users of crack speak.

One of the types of ethnographic approach is faced, as we have seen, by the problem of the supposedly fixed nature of this territoriality, when we observe the users of crack deal with police action in their daily lives, or when we see that they gradually create (as well as dissolve) new concentrations in other places in the city. But it is important to point out that this observation was only possible especially when we direct our attention to the way in which the so-called *cracolândia* is incorporated into the *users* or *consumers of crack*. If they are not the only actors in this space, they undoubtedly constitute the main targets of a series of practices of intervention, mediation or control. However we know that this category, although decisive, may often be relative, provisional or insufficient (like all identity construction), as we frequently came into contact with people who are part of this area of relationships but who do not use crack or other drugs.

Finally, special attention must be paid to the way in which various meanings are attached to the term *noia*, which is perhaps revealed in this context to be the main *relational category*. It is connected, but not identical, to the user of crack as we have seen – used in a significant series of situations, whether by dwellers, shopkeepers or people who use Luz to those who use crack, or among those who actually do use crack, which reveals stigmatizations among these users – with moral dimensions capable in some way of controlling the effects of the drug. This is not to mention references which may occur, as we have seen in other ongoing ethnographic situations in the Luz neighbourhood, jokingly among non users.⁴⁴

These observations deriving from our observations in the field, pose a series of new challenges for our current research (ongoing) at a moment in which the use of crack is becoming a theme of increasing concern in Brazil. In this sense it is worth paying attention, among other things, to news which refers to the “spread of *cracolândias*” throughout Brazilian cities.⁴⁵ What is at stake in each one of these

⁴⁴ When we accompanied the relations between members of a local amateur team (Nova Portuguesa da Luz) at a snack bar in the neighbourhood, a boy asked why he had not been chosen to play that day, and the person in charge answered, “because you are a *noia!*”, which was followed by a great deal of laughter.

⁴⁵ See details in the articles: Folha Online, 17/5/2010; 19/5/2010; 20/5/2010; 21/5/2010; Folha de São Paulo, 23/5/2010; Diário do Nordeste, 31/5/2010.

arrangements must be understood at multiple levels, with emphasis as we have sought to contribute to here, on ethnography.

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