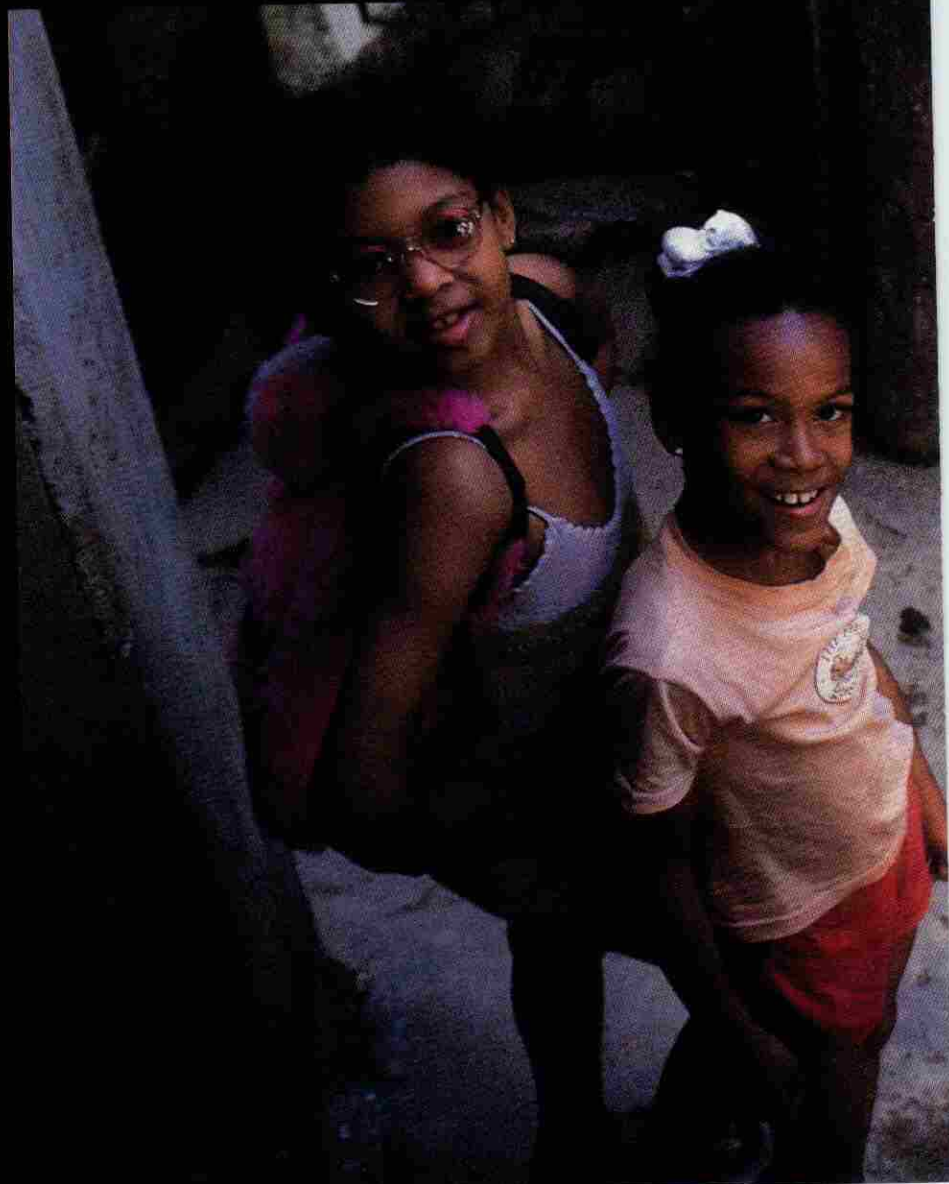# Brazil: Mo

**Despite progressive legislation, children continue to live—and to die—on Brazil's city streets.**

Story by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Daniel Hoffman
Photographs by J. L. Bulcao; Gamma Liaison

In the 1960s ubiquitous street urchins in Brazil were referred to with a blend of annoyance and affection as *moleques*, meaning ragamuffins, scamps, or rascals. *Moleques* were streetwise, cute, and cunning, sometimes sexually precocious, and invariably economically enterprising. The *moleque* was an amusing enough popular stereotype that an ice cream bar, chocolate-covered and flaked with "dirty" bits of coconut and almonds, was later named the *pé de moleque*, "ragamuffin's foot." *Moleques* tried to make themselves useful in myriad ways, some bordering on the criminal and deviant. Think of Fagin's boys in Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, especially the Artful Dodger, and you have it. Shoppers would slap their heads in exasperation when a nameless scamp they had hired to carry home a market basket on his head made off with their watch in the quick final transaction. While the victims of a *moleque's* street tactics might alert local police and the boy might be
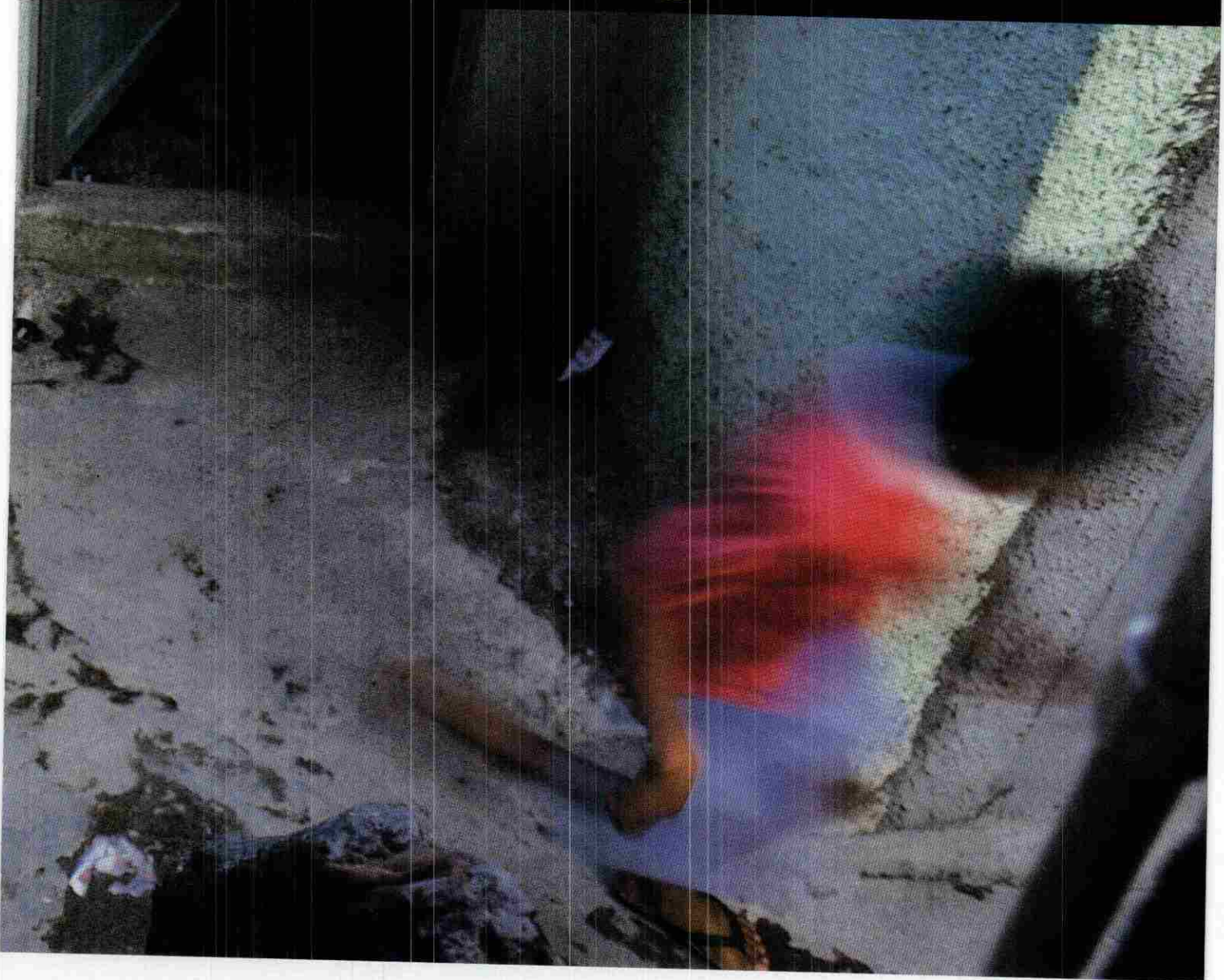
found—perhaps beaten by a police officer or sent to a state-sponsored reform school—there was no sense that street children as a class were a pressing social problem against which certain interest groups (homeowners, shopkeepers, business people) should aggressively organize. Instead, they were seen as a potential source of cheap domestic or agricultural labor.

In the Brazil of the 1990s, however, poor children on the loose are more often viewed as a scandal, a public nuisance, and a danger. This shift is reflected in the stigmatizing terms by which the children are now known. Yesterday's cunning *moleque* is today's *pivete* (young thief), *trombadinha* (pickpocket, purse snatcher) and *maloqueiro* (street child, thief). (Ours is a perspective informed by more than thirty years of intermittent anthropological fieldwork in the interior sugar plantation market town of Bom Jesus da Mata in the state of Pernambuco, and more recently in the cities of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Recife, as well as contact and communications with children's rights activists.)

Street urchins have long been a feature of urban life in Brazil, as elsewhere in Latin America, where chil-

dren are simultaneously drawn to, and in flight from, different kinds of labor. But in 1981 Hector Babenco's film *Pixote: a lei do mais fraco (Pixote: The Law of the Weakest)* stunned audiences with its savage images of the lives of marginalized children both on the streets and in detention. Filmed during the final stages of the military dictatorship in Brazil, *Pixote* focused on a child in the generation left behind by the failed "economic miracle" of the 1970s. Rapid industrial expansion made Brazil into the world's eighth strongest economy, but one whose wealth was more unequally distributed than in any other modern, industrialized nation.

The country's much-vaunted move to democratization was especially hard on street children. The authoritarian police state that had ruled Brazil for twenty years had kept the social classes safely apart, with "dangerous" poor children confined to the *favelas* (slums) or in prisonlike reform schools. But with the transition to democracy in 1985, the shantytowns ruptured. Poor black street children descended from hillside slums and seemed to be everywhere, flooding downtown boulevards and *praças* (plazas), flaunting their misery and their needs. Children who in the 1960s might have been viewed with mild annoyance were now feared and
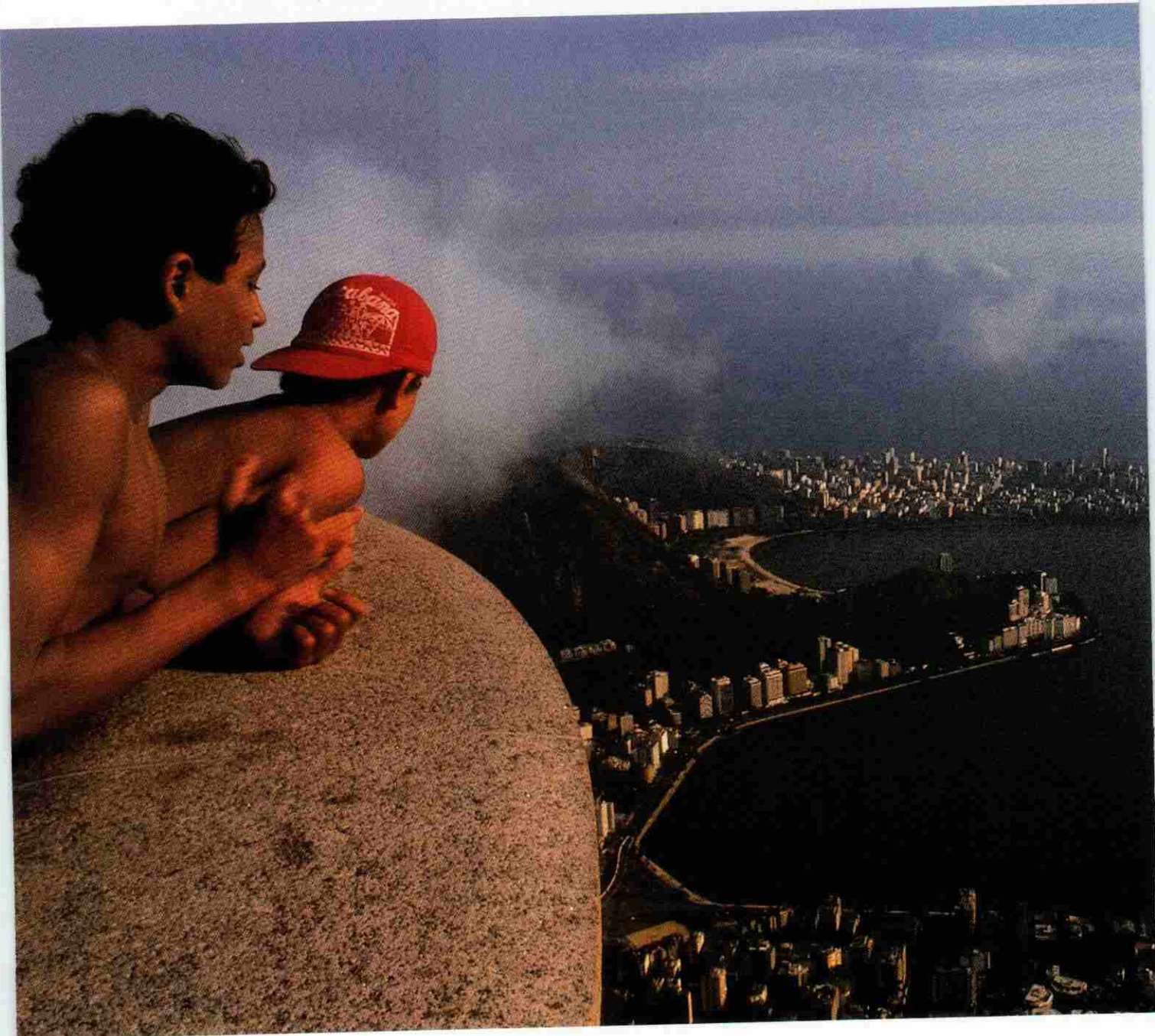
Estimates of Brazil's population of street children vary from tens of thousands to millions.

often became targets of violence and even murder.

Perhaps the very process of democratization (accompanied by economic austerities imposed by the World Bank's model of development through "structural adjustment"), occurring in the absence of economic and social justice, provoked a crisis for street children. Not only had they become part of a more visible, desperately poor population, but new democratic laws and liberal institutions now promised them civil rights protections that used to be the province of the affluent and the educated. Many middle-class Brazilians felt insecure, unprotected, and threatened by these newly empowered children. Paradoxically, vigilante and police-linked violence increased during and following the transition from military to democratic politics, with children included as targets.

The crisis has been complicated by a lack of precision regarding the numbers of street children, the nature of their existence (alternating between home and street), and the number of crimes committed by and/or against them. Estimates of their population vary from tens of thousands to millions. In São Paulo alone, survey estimates vary from as low as 5,000 to as high as 500,000, depending in part on whether they include those children who have homes but spend most of the day and occasional nights on the streets.
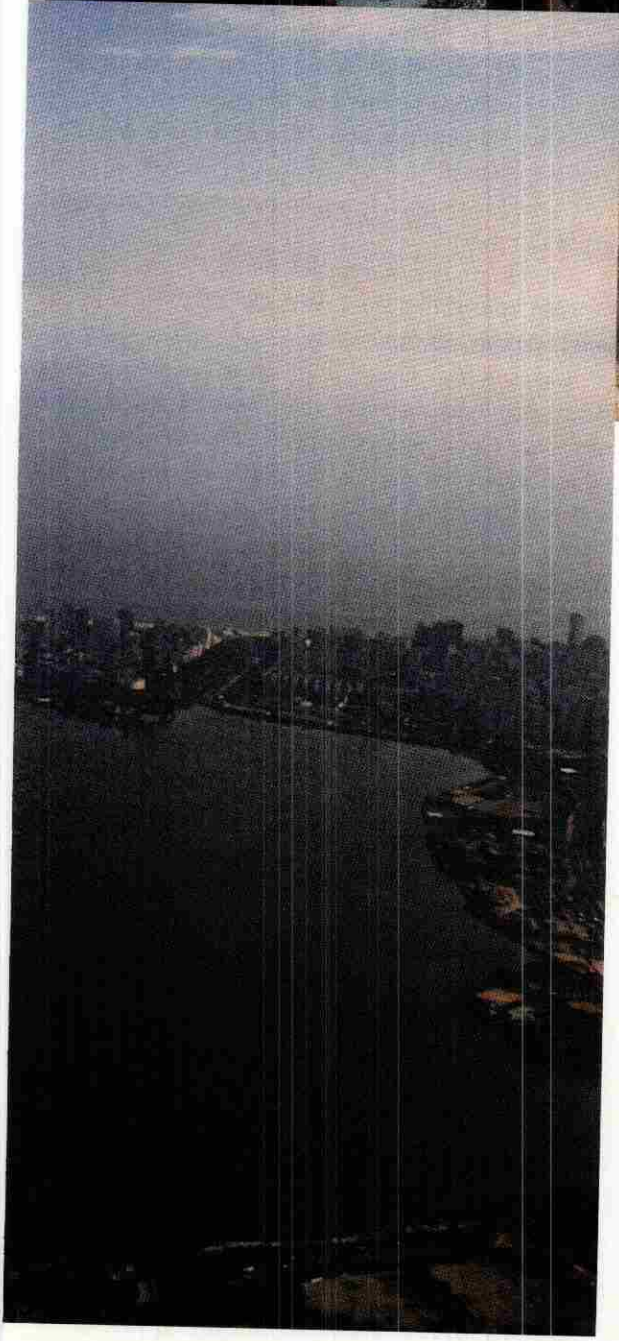
In a 1989 interview, a group of boys who survived by begging on the streets of Bom Jesus da Mata discussed public perceptions of them. "They say we will turn into thieves," said nine-year-old Josenildo. Marcelo, two years older, broke in with, "Thanks be to God that up until now I have never stolen anything, and I never want to either!" The quietest and most reflective of the group, ten-year-old Adevaldo (nicknamed Deo), said, "We do become thieves. But I myself am going to be different. I am going to return to school until I am graduated and then I will find a good
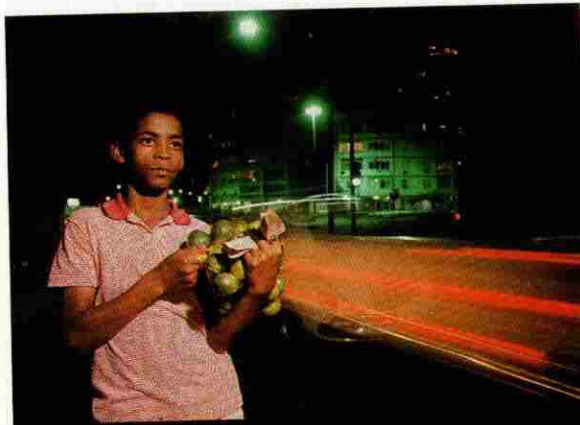
To survive, children sell candy, guard and wash cars, carry groceries, and shine shoes.

job. I am going to have a wife and children and I will never put any of them out in the streets to beg."

"And where do you hope to find a job, Deo?"

"I want to work in the Bank of Brazil," he replied proudly, to laughter all around.

"Do you think they will trust you in a bank, Deo? Won't they say, 'Oh, I remember him; wasn't he the one who used to beg outside the Santa Terezinha bakery?' "

"But I am going to quit soon, and no one will remember me. I am already looking for a job, but the woman who said she would hire me has changed her mind. And now I only beg because I am hungry."

"When you go home, isn't there food for you?"

"My mother only cooks for my father, not for me."

"Doesn't your mother care for you?"

[After a slight hesitation] "She likes a part of me."

"Which part?"

"That I sometimes bring home things for her that I get in the street."

"You mean that you steal?"

"Yes, sometimes. But I don't like doing these things and I want to 'reform.' "

Casa and *rua,* "house" and "street," are keywords in Brazil that refer to more than physical spaces. The terms are moral entities, spheres of social action, and ethical provinces. *Casa* is the realm of relational ties and privilege that confers social personhood, human rights, and full citizenship. *Rua,* in contrast, is an unbounded, impersonal, and dangerous realm, the space of the masses (*o povo*). Shantytown homes are overcrowded and families often unstable. Consequently "home," especially for boys, is not so much a place to eat and sleep as an emotional space, the place where one comes from and where one returns, at least periodically. As denizens of the street, poor and semiautonomous children are separated from all that can confer relationship and propriety, without which rights and citizenship are impossible. Yet, while street children may be almost autonomous, they often remain emotionally dependent on home and deeply attached to the idea of family. When we asked nine-year-old Chico, a street boy of Bom Jesus da Mata, if his mother still loved him, he replied without hesitation, "She's my mother, she has to love me!" But Chico knew as well as we did that his mother had tried several times to give him away to distant relatives when he was a baby and had later forced him out of the house.

From the point of view of shantytown dwellers, nothing is extraordinary or problematic about its children flowing onto the streets, for the streets, especially in the city center, are primary sites of employment and

economic survival for both poor children and adults. The term "street child" is not even used in the shantytowns; parents sometimes do speak critically of local boys and young men, *malandros*, who "spend their lives doing bad things on the street." Perhaps the closest that people in the shantytowns come to thinking of a street child is the oft-expressed fear of "losing" a child to the streets, to the uncontrolled realm beyond the home.

Like Chico, most street children work. They sell candy or Popsicles, guard and wash cars, carry groceries, and shine shoes. The outward signs that a child is working—the shoeshine box, the tray of candy, the pail of roasted nuts—signify that the child is "good" and should not be perceived as a threat. The empty-handed street child, traveling in a group and obviously not working, is far more likely to suffer discrimination. Most children return home at night to sleep, while a minority alternate sleeping outdoors with sleeping at home. An even smaller group lives full-time in the streets. This smallest group, truly homeless and very visible, fuels the negative stereotypes of dangerous and uncontrollable street children. Commonly associated with theft, gang life, and drugs, they are the most likely to be targets of exploitation and of violence that includes police brutality.

The most notorious assault on Brazilian street children, one that renewed international concern for their plight, was the Candelária massacre of July 23, 1993. On that night a group of off-duty policemen opened fire on more than fifty children who were sleeping in the elegant square in front of Rio de Janeiro's Candelária Cathedral. Eight died, six on the spot, and two at a nearby beach, where they were taken and killed execution-style. Many others were wounded. Opinion polls showed considerable public support for the police action. Many "ordinary" citizens reported being "fed up" with the criminal and disorderly behavior of street children. Rascally *moleques* truly had been transformed into dangerous *meninos de rua* (street children).

In the past decade a new fear has been added, that of untimely death at the hands of paid death squads. Beginning in the 1980s—well into Brazil's democratic transition—reports surfaced of a deadly campaign against street children involving kidnapping, torture, and assassination by paid vigilantes and off-duty police recruited in projects of "urban hygiene." They seemed to operate with relative impunity, especially in large cities. But even in small interior towns such as Bom Jesus da Mata, street children live in daily fear of police, state institutions, kidnappers, and, more fantastically, people who are rumored to steal human organs. Between 1988 and 1990, close to 5,000 street children


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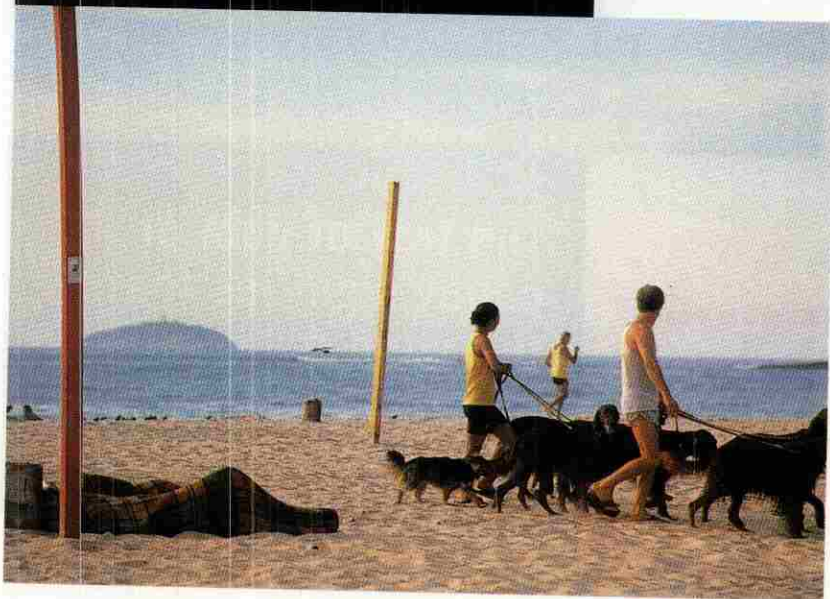
and adolescents were murdered in Brazil, but few of these homicides were deemed worthy of official investigation. This lack of bureaucratic attention is not surprising when police officers are among the suspected perpetrators. Most of the victims were males fifteen to nineteen years old, although younger children were also victims.

In his 1991 denunciation of violence, *Brazil: War on Children*, journalist Gilberto Dimenstein identified the role of off-duty policemen and hired killers—working in concert with small businessmen and shopowners—in sustaining the death squads. Street children were said to be bad for business and for tourism, threats to public health and safety. A report by the São Paulo chapter of the Brazilian Bar Association implicated military police in death squads funded by shopkeepers that killed most of nearly 1,000 street children who were slain in that city in 1990.

The vast majority of full-time street children do not so much run away or "choose" the streets as they are thrown out of, or driven from, homes where exposure to chronic hunger, neglect, and physical or sexual abuse makes life under bridges, in bus stations, and in
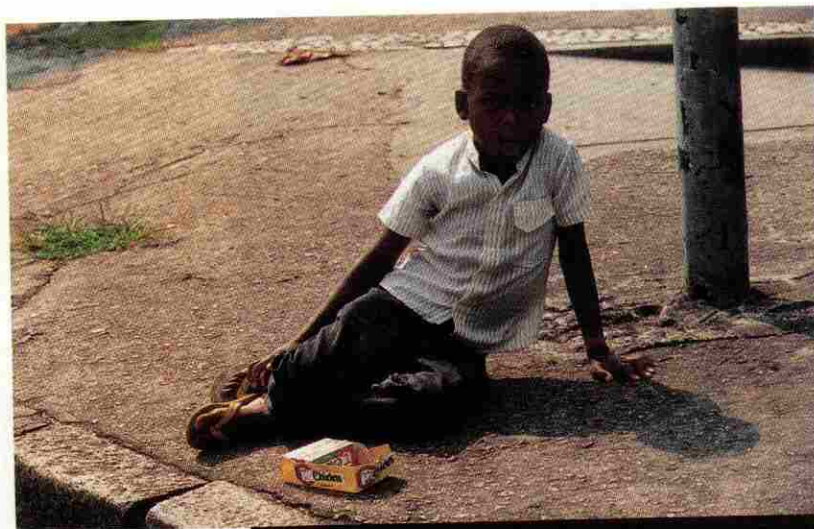
The tray of gum or candy signifies that the child is "good" and is not a threat.

Books to Read

Brazil: War on Children, by Gilberto Dimenstein (distributed by Monthly Review Press, 1992)

Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil, by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (University of California Press, 1993)

Children and Urban Poverty in Brazil: Street and Working Children and Their Families, Innocenti Occasional Papers, The Urban Child Series (UNICEF, 1992)

Final Justice: Police and Death Squad Homicides of Adolescents in Brazil, by Ben Penglase (Human Rights Watch/Americas, 1994)

class people, fearful of new "invasions" of the desperately poor into their social spaces.

It's true that some street children, especially older ones, survive, at least in part, through petty crime. However, Padre Bruno Secchi, a Salesian missionary who has been working with the poor and street children for thirty years in the Amazonian city of Belém, contends that what is striking is not how many poor children are criminals but, considering the misery of their lives, how few resort to crime. Many survive by begging, but as soon as they show signs of physical maturity, they cease to evoke compassion. Seventeen-year-old Marcos Julio spent nine years living on the streets of Bom Jesus da Mata. He said that as long as he was "little and cute" he could make his way by begging, but after he turned about fourteen, people suddenly became afraid of him and chased him away.

Exchanging sex for food and affection is also a survival strategy, especially for boys who were initiated into sex at an early age. And for young girls escaping from the "slavery" of domestic service, prostitution can seem like liberation. "The first time I sold my body was the first time I felt like it really belonged to me," a teen-age girl confided at a meeting for young sex workers in São Paulo, organized by an AIDS awareness group. The girl, who had run away from Pernambuco, had a family history that included incest.

Glue sniffing is another badge of street identity, along with sniffing perfume, gasoline, or shoe polish. In Bom Jesus da Mata, children as young as eight years old explained that glue was pleasant (*bom*) and smelled nice (*cherioso*). Some said that it helped them to sleep, especially when hungry. Pedro, age twelve, described himself as nervous and emotional. He said glue sniffing made him more calm. For some small children, it was used interchangeably with thumb sucking or pacifier sucking, practices that street children (as well as other children in the shantytowns) sometimes engage in as late as adolescence.

During the military years (1964–85) the primary mechanism to control loose and wayward children was FEBEM, the State Federation for the Well-being of Minors, a network of reform schools that were often jail-like and inspired fear in shantytown children. ("You won't ever turn me in to FEBEM, will you?" street children often nervously asked Nancy during the military regime years.) But even after the passage of new laws designed to reform these institutions, real change has been slow, and in many small municipalities like Bom Jesus da Mata, local jails have replaced the reform schools as "holding tanks" for dangerous and endangered youth. During fieldwork in 1992, we met

public rest rooms seem preferable, or even—as one child living in an abandoned building in Bom Jesus da Mata put it—more "peaceful" and "happy" than life at home. Those who live on the streets full-time are mostly boys, although girls are also forced there, often following escape from exploitative work as domestic servants or as child prostitutes in cabarets. For some girls, however, the reverse is true: they may seek out prostitution, believing it provides a "safe house" away from the anarchy of the streets.

Rumor plays a significant part in justifying discrimination against these children. In the May 29, 1991, issue of *Veja*, a weekly magazine, it was reported that the street children who congregate in the Praça de Sé, the central plaza of São Paulo, commit more than 32,000 thefts and robberies a year, that is, about three thefts a day by each child. The sources of these statistics were vague. In 1992 newspapers and radio carried reports about roving gangs of shantytown children, some of whom were said to stream across the southern beaches of Rio de Janeiro, robbing anyone within reach. These reports were based on a single incident later attributed to youths from a particular slum, none of whom were homeless. Nonetheless, the stories caused considerable panic in middle- and working-

several underage youths locked up alongside adult offenders in Bom Jesus da Mata's small, dingy municipal jail. Some of them had been there for periods ranging from several weeks to six months with no clear indication of just when they might be tried or released. A local judge explained that these boys were at risk of retaliatory attacks by other children and by paid vigilantes. Without relatives to claim or protect them, with the FEBEM mandate curtailed under new laws, and in the absence of a formal network of foster homes, jail seemed the only reasonable option.

Decisions about the fate of individual street children are made in the context of a deep national preoccupation with the country's future. So many factors feed public fears—chaotic urbanization, the AIDS epidemic, and the political liberalization that provided new legal protections for the poor, homosexuals, and the sick or disabled—that it is increasingly difficult to remove or incarcerate "unwanted" populations legally. At the same time, Colombian cartels and the Italian Mafia, trafficking in cocaine, brought upscale firearms into the shantytowns and distributed them to youths and even to street children, whom they also recruited as messengers. The expansion and reorganization of crime in the shantytowns interrupted and confounded the growth of participatory democracy that so many grass-roots organizations—residents associations, trade unions, and local church communities—had long struggled to introduce.

A classified document produced at Brazil's Superior War College in 1989 played on people's fears:

Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that there are some 200,000 unattached minors (which is a conservative estimate). By the beginning of the next century we will have a contingent of criminals, malefactors, and murderers the size of our current army. . . . At that time, if police lack the means to confront such a situation, the constituted executive, legislative, and judicial powers could request the co-operation of the armed forces to take on the difficult task of neutralizing them [that is, "destroying them"] in order to maintain law and order.

Something like this is already happening. In November 1994, soldiers, backed by tanks and helicopters, were used in a crackdown on crime in Rio de Janeiro shantytowns. According to Human Rights Watch, the first victims included young people caught in the crossfire. Paradoxically, shantytown dwellers strongly support various police actions against their own populations, according to opinion polls. What makes people there assume that violent attacks on them and their children are an acceptable form of social control, the legitimate "business" of the police? For one thing, the very ubiquity of violence against the poor makes them view their own violent deaths as predictable, natural. There are also racial undertones to the "normalization" of police and vigilante attacks on people in the shantytowns. The crimes of the poor, the petty thievery of older street children, are viewed as "race" crimes and as "naturally" produced. Poor, young, unemployed blacks are said to steal because it is "in their blood" to do so. They are described in crudely racist terms as *bichos da Africa,* "animals from Africa." Increasingly today, race hatred and unconscious racism have emerged as explanations for popular support of violent and illegal police actions in shantytowns and on the street. Indeed, the subtext of the discourse on street children is color-coded in "race-blind" Brazil, where most street children are black. Of the more than 5,000 children and youths murdered between 1988 and 1990, most of the victims were black males between the ages of fifteen and nineteen years.

Fundamentally, Brazil's street children are poor children in the wrong place; as long as they remain in the shantytowns, they are not viewed as an urgent problem about which something must be done. But by

Perhaps the process of democratization itself provoked the crisis for street children.

In "race-blind" Brazil, black street children are described in crudely racist terms.

"invading" the city centers, frequenting upper-class beaches, and engaging in petty crimes against the middle class, they defy the segregated order. The wealthy retreat into private enclaves with private schools, private security, and private transportation, and the public sphere is abandoned to its own turmoil: lack of security, paucity of resources, and vigilante justice. The risks and hazards for street children are great: illiteracy, toxicity from inhalant drugs, chronic hunger and undernutrition, sexual exploitation, and AIDS.

Although the overall picture is not encouraging, there are hopeful signs. In the past decade, a large social movement on behalf of children's rights has arisen, involving thousands of individuals and many small grassroots groups. They have organized street youth in the cities, exposed routine violence and assassinations, advanced constitutional reforms and legislation, and defended the right of children to be *in* the street, while recognizing that a life *of* the streets can only be self-destructive in the long term. Despite the backlash against its liberal reforms, the new Brazilian constitution (1988), and particularly the *Estatuto da Criança e de Adolescente* (the Child and Adolescent Statute), which became law in 1990, are remarkable documents. The child statute—the result of intensive lobbying by a broad coalition of nongovernmental organizations and

activists—radically transformed the legal status of children and redefined the responsibilities of the state and civil society. But as enviable as the new laws are, they have not yet been claimed by the majority, nor have they become internalized popular standards and everyday practice in Brazil. They remain elusive ideals that are daily subverted by those who regard the lives of poor children as undesirable and expendable.

Brazil's street children have challenged and redefined the boundaries between public and private, adult and child, normal and deviant behavior. Because they violate conventional ideas about childhood innocence, vulnerability, and dependency, they are seen not as children at all but as dangerous young people in revolt. The choices offered such children at present are extremely limited: to return home to their "proper" childhoods—which is not an option for most—or to accept the risks of a semiautonomous life on the streets. The true test of Brazil's democracy will be the nation's ability to think of childhood and citizenship in radically new ways. Will it be possible for street children—who cannot depend on nuclear families for support—to find protection, rather than bullets, on the elegant streets of modern Brazil? □