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**Between the Decent and the Precarious: A Biopolitical Framework of Women in Journalistic Photographs about the *Bolsa-Família* Program/
*Entre o digno e o precário: enquadramento biopolítico de mulheres em fotografias jornalísticas sobre o Programa Bolsa-Família***

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ABSTRACT

From the perspectives of Foucault, Fassin, Rancière and Butler, this paper outlines the existence of a biopolitical framing in press pictures of impoverished women included in the *Bolsa Família* social project. The present reflection is based on the partial results of a research project developed with the financial support of CNPq in which we analyze a total of 150 pictures related to the *Bolsa Família Program*. They were collected from the newspapers *Folha de S. Paulo*, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, *O Globo*, and the magazines *Veja* and *IstoÉ* from 2003 to 2015. We argue that the biopolitical framing involves the production of narratives that distinguish ways of life that are “dignified” from those that are not. It also highlights situations of vulnerability and governmentality that shape appearances and prepare them to define citizens and exemplary groups, using certain parameters for consideration and appreciation.

KEYWORDS: Photojournalism; Framing; Biopolitics; Women; *Bolsa-Família*

RESUMO

Este texto delinea, a partir de Foucault, Fassin, Rancière e Butler, a existência de um enquadramento biopolítico de cidadãos e mulheres empobrecidas no contexto da implementação de políticas sociais. A reflexão aqui desenvolvida apresenta resultados parciais de projeto de pesquisa desenvolvido com apoio do CNPq, no qual são analisadas 150 imagens relacionadas ao Programa Bolsa Família, reunidas entre os anos de 2003 a 2015, publicadas nos veículos Folha de S. Paulo, Estado de S. Paulo, O Globo, Veja e IstoÉ. O argumento central é que esse enquadramento envolve a produção de narrativas que traçam distinções entre modos de vida considerados “dignos” e outros não, ressaltando situações de vulnerabilidade da vida e da governamentalidade que formata cenas de aparência, preparando-as para definir cidadãos e grupos exemplares a partir de determinados parâmetros de consideração e apreciação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Fotojornalismo; Enquadramento; Biopolítica; Mulheres; *Bolsa-Família*

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Introduction

This article presents reflections from the partial results of the research project *The biopolitical framework of impoverished people: between the government of bodies and the biopotency of lifestyles in the photographic image*, developed by the authors with the financial support of the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico - CNPq [National Council for Scientific and Technological Development].¹ In order to carry out this research, 150 photojournalistic images portraying women benefited by the *Bolsa-Família Program* were selected and analyzed. They were published between 2003 and 2015, in newspapers and magazines that enjoy a wide national circulation and keep digital databases available to the public, such as *Folha de S. Paulo*, *Estado de S. Paulo* and *O Globo*, as well as *Veja* and *IstoÉ* magazines. The general objective of the research is to show how the biopolitical government of collective bodies – in this case, the biopolitical management of poverty – involves the production of narratives, arguments and utterances that begin to distinguish between ways of life considered dignified, and those widely perceived as belittling.

In this article we present an in-depth analysis of six photographic images related to the framing of impoverished women and beneficiaries of the *Bolsa-Família Program*. These images seem emblematic of the frameworks mobilized by the news press to characterize, from a position of appreciation and moral evaluation toward these women, the potential impacts of the Program on their lives.

We argue that an image is political whenever it enables us to see the operations defining it and affecting the interpretation of what is seen. These operations can be expressed through relationships established inside and beyond the aesthetic scope, pre-configuring utterances, setting up and setting apart discursive operations and narratives between the visible and the invisible, the utterable and the suppressible. As Rancière (2007, p.199) states, “the image is not only what is visible. It is a device through which the visible is captured”² and the ways through which it is captured: “the

¹ A version of this article was presented in the Work Group Gender, Democracy and Public Policies of the *XI Meeting of the Brazilian Political Science Association*, which took place in Curitiba-PR, from the 31st July to the 3rd August 2018. The authors thank the contributions received during the event. One of the research studies that bases this text is funded by CNPq, Fapemig and CAPES.

² Text in Portuguese: “a imagem não é simplesmente o visível. É o dispositivo por meio do qual esse visível é capturado.”

image belongs to a device of visibility that regulates the status of the represented bodies and the kind of attention they deserve. The question is to know the kind of attention that this or that device causes and demands” (RANCIÈRE, 2012, p.96).³ As Rancière and Didi-Huberman point out, an image is not political on its own but it has political power from the moment it not only allows the thematization of cultural, historical, social and institutional arrangements that make possible one version of the real, but also enables (often in the reiteration of frames of meaning) the recombination of signs capable of destabilizing the evidences of the dominant discursive registers. Identifying such political potency becomes possible from the moment we question images relying less on a so-called “political message” to be deciphered to favor the devices of visibility that define and impose constraints of the ways in which the possibilities of presentations and the subjects’ appearances are constructed in an image. Political image and its politicization are configured when we thematize the operations and arrangements that delimit the times, spaces and enunciative scenes of the subjects’ appearance and performance (MARQUES, 2014).

Butler (2009)⁴ comments on the frameworks that define the meaning of the images to emphasize that the reproduction of modes of intelligibility and legibility of the human or the inhuman can simultaneously reinforce moral evaluations that legitimize or not ways of life and allow ruptures in these evaluative practices.⁵ Therefore, the political image presents the chance of a performativity that is not limited to producing content or indicating how certain events and situations are to be understood. This performativity, also called image politics, reconfigures the relation between representation (a form of relation to the real in which the distance between referent and spectator is minimal, leaving little room for reflection) and figuration (a relation in which the distance is preserved, which makes it possible for the spectator to reflect on the senses of what is presented in the image). Then, the political image arises from the encounter of the visuality and the spectator, and not as a relation between a

³ Text in Portuguese: “[A imagem] pertence a um dispositivo de visibilidade que regula o estatuto dos corpos representados e o tipo de atenção que merecem. A questão é saber o tipo de atenção que este ou aquele dispositivo provoca e convoca.”

⁴ BUTLER, J. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* New York, NY: Verso Books, 2009.

⁵ The biopolitical framework invests and disinvests the women of their humanity, for the normativity of life is not external to biopolitical strategies, but operates in and through them: the capacity to differ, as Butler (2009) argues, to introduce changes in the process of repeating rules, is also a gesture of inscription of life in the center of the biopolitical paradigm.

“referent” captured by someone and delivered as a product of a look. The spectator is emancipated from a passive position to implicate themselves through contemplation in the gesture of producing an image and its senses (RANCIÈRE, 2009).⁶

In photojournalism, we believe that the politics of images, that is, their political capacity to preserve a reflexive and critical space between the spectator and the sign, is related to the possibility for an image to document and create worlds other than those scripted and produced to be displayed and consumed (WALL, 2017). Contemplation takes into account the dislocations of the gaze in the work of the spectator and gives rise to symptoms, traces and vestiges of a life that cannot be contained neither in a representation nor in a framework.

As Didi-Huberman argues (2012), the survival of life in the image is related to the elaboration of an incorrect, deterritorialized syntax that connects and disconnects at the same time the main storyteller, who operates in full light, showing what can and what cannot be said. Such dislocation restores sonority to the silencing of daily life, thickness to spaces and times flattened by repetition as well as visibility to the naturalized relations of force.

By pointing out the frameworks and the tensions between them, it is possible to highlight some of the dimensions of the meaning dispute on the production of images of impoverished subjects and their process of economic and political impoverishment. As Barthes (1977)⁷ reminds us, in his classical text on photography, the connotative operations of images offer obstacles to its intended transparency of a *message without a code*, as they evince the proposers of the meaning of what is shown. Such process is essential, he says, for photography to effectively show something beyond itself.

For Butler (2009),⁸ frameworks are power relations: they do not decide unilaterally the conditions for the appearance of subjects and happenings, but their objective is to outline the sphere of apparition as such. Frameworks would act, then, to differentiate the lives we can apprehend and value from the ones we cannot. Terms, categories, conventions, and general rules that act on framing devices shape, for

⁶ RANCIÈRE, J. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Transl. Gregory Elliott. New York, NY: Verso Books, 2009.

⁷ BARTHES, R. The Photographic Message. In: *Image Music Text*. Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1977, pp.15-31.

⁸ For reference, see footnote 4.

example, a living being into a recognizable subject through the apprehension, that is, a form of knowledge related to feeling and perceiving, without using concepts.

Becoming visible in a communicative scene involves not only the choice of framing, meanings and shared values – through which individuals are identified, recognized, and named – but also the establishment of a conflictive relationship in the search for legitimacy and autonomy (BIROLI, 2018). Visibility, in this sense, articulates the existence of a public image with an intersubjective and mutual process of enunciation, of speaking and listening, of reception strangeness.

Premises, judgements, disagreements, values, affective predispositions, etc. allow social actors to recognize and understand facts and perceptions. They also reveal how the framing is set as an organizing central idea in processes of discourse construction and unveiling of a political problem and its subjects. Fassin (2010) points out that discussions on the degradation of the understanding of the self are fomented by a series of norms and meanings ruling bodies and lives in contemporary times. Hence, expressions such as raising empathy, correcting, healing are recurrent in actions of public and governmental policies directed towards the impoverished population.

In this article, we argue for the existence of a particular modality that rules over collective bodies: the biopolitical framework of subjects and impoverished groups in the context of implementing social policies. We present the theoretical-methodological trajectory that guided the choice and analysis of the photojournalistic images that integrate this text in the next sections. The analysis of images in the article is focused on the ways impoverished women are presented as examples in the press in order to understand the aesthetic-political implications that constitute the “presence” of these subjects in the images. We suggest that, despite the constant use of a lexicon that is usually intended to grant them visibility, those images contribute to advance their invisibility. They do so because they are based on a rationale of recording that resorts to deep-rooted discourses of poverty, welfarism, dependence, vulnerability, and gender stigmas as well as on the association of the images to what is known as “feminization of poverty,”⁹ that is, the reaffirmation of the equivocate “placement of women” under

⁹ Women are the beneficiaries of the *Bolsa Família* Program (the card for receiving the benefit is emitted in their names), just as they are institutional agents of social assistance who work locally for registering and following the beneficiaries. The relationship networks uniting these social actresses are motivated by rationales moving within moral economies, biopolitical rationality, and specific resistances. One must also mention the central role of the notions of social vulnerability, care, responsibility, and family, all *Bakhtiniana*, São Paulo, 15 (1): 35-62, Jan./March 2020. 39

the domination of the patriarchy, that deepens asymmetries and affects impoverished women differently in their singular experiences (SANTOS, 2014).

The government identifies women as the “managers” responsible for ensuring the success of the Program through their commitment to the fulfillment of conditions related to the health and schooling of children and adolescents. One of the paradoxes of the Program lies precisely in the promotion of women’s autonomy at the same time it reduces them to be fully dedicated to the duties related to care and reproduction. According to Georges and Santos (2016), the focus on the family’s arrangement (note the presence of the traditional idea of conjugal family rather than single-parenting) reorganizes the framework of moral values that resorts to the support of neoliberal ideologies to reaffirm the subaltern place of women. These women, while responding to the conditions imposed by the income-transfer programs (for instance, ensuring the health and education of children, ensuring the balance of the home, ensuring the care of children, adolescents and the elderly, managing the income and seeking professional training and autonomy), face the ever more distant possibility of featuring in the labor market and realizing themselves as desiring subjects.

Thus, a series of interrelated dimensions – patriarchy unequal division of domestic work, focus on the nuclear family, race, class and gender bias, as well as the non-thematization of these issues at the moment of the elaboration of public policies – further deepen the paradoxes in the operationalization of the Program and its biopolitical gears.

Biopolitics and Governmentality of Impoverished Bodies

According to Fassin (2009) and Lazzarato (2006, 2014), biopolitics is connected to concrete experiences in which individuals are treated fairly or unfairly according to principles and in the name of a moral code frequently leading to inequality and lack of recognition. Hardt and Negri (2000) highlight that life and living beings are the nodal points of new political struggles. Therefore, beyond the institutional frameworks, the narratives and communication exchanges that enable them should become objects of

being pierced by an ideological process of moralization that comprises blaming, meritocracy, and citizenship as gifts.

investigation focused on unveiling the power flow that, under the excuse of “empowering,” “emancipating,” and guaranteeing “sovereignty” to marginalized subjects, actually expose and increase violence, moral suffering, and identity damages. Taylor (2000) suggests, on this particular matter, a series of issues, advancements and setbacks in photojournalism in the construction of narratives that are able to convey diverse meanings in themselves.

It is important to remember that we are facing a mediatic narrative, conformed to institutional standards and expectations that were built according to expected reading protocols, as indicated by Bissell (2000) and Buitoni (2010). Adam et al. (1980) had already suggested how different frameworks of men and women constitute different perceptions on gender. Besides, it would not be entirely misplaced to recollect the classical work of Goffman (1976) on publicity images to note the same expected protocol in photography in a close albeit different record from journalism. As Marin (1998) recalls, there are places of power built into the realm of the image. There are, thus, strands of power crossing through images and intertwining themselves in discursive-image configurations of powers – in this case, the expression of biopolitics.

The concept of biopolitics first appeared in 1976, in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* by Michel Foucault. Initially, Foucault (1978)¹⁰ explains the transition from sovereign power (the one that makes something die and lets it live) to biopower (the one that makes something live and lets it die): those are two regimes, two notions of death, life, and body. In societies organized by the sovereign power, “a right to seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself: it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it” (FOUCAULT, 1980, p.128).¹¹

In the passage from sovereign power to biopower, the power ceases to be predominantly based on control and appropriation to work through incitation, reinforcement and vigilance in order to obtain the optimization of the forces that submit to it. In this new regime, power is destined to produce forces that must stimulate life, creativity and productivity, which do not remain free from rigid control and constraints. Considering biopower from this perspective, the political power takes on the task of administrating life and investing in it (administration of bodies and manipulative management of life). Thus, biopower is concerned with ruling over bodies through a

¹⁰ FOUCAULT, M. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. v.1.

¹¹ For reference, see footnote 10.

rationalization of the governing art, which affects ways of life, since it aims to standardize people through political technology (FASSIN, 2009).

Starting with the 17th century, Foucault divides the organization of power over life into two poles: disciplining bodies (training, skills expansion, and docilization), and regulations from the population (biopolitics). Biopolitics was created amid the 18th century and it is centered on the biological regulation over collective bodies: the control of proliferation, births, mortality, levels of health, duration of life, longevity. The combination of disciplinary practices with biopolitics aims at the controlled insertion of subjects into the production machine, increasing the changes of adaptation to market needs as well as of framing body and subjectivity (LAZZARATO, 2002). Foucault approaches life from the perspective of behavior, biopower in terms of disciplines exerted on individuals, and biopolitics in terms of the technologies that standardize populations.

Theoretical-Methodological Considerations

When we approach the issue of politics in photojournalistic images that represent impoverished women in contexts of great precariousness, we highlight the gap that can be perceived between two distinct perspectives: the first aims to identify the images as documents that attest to the truth of the real. Photojournalism, then, would act to attest to, document and record unquestionable poverty. On the other hand, images are interjected in a second movement that both searches for fractures, tilts and deviations as well as explores and uncovers conformity in a dialectical exercise of figuration.

Between these two perspectives, it is difficult to identify photojournalistic images as exemplars of a homogeneous group of female beneficiaries, taken as a unit, an identity or a totality. This is so because we cannot speak of an image or a representation in the singular, but of images, whose multiplicity resists any synthesis. However, female beneficiaries are constantly portrayed and represented in order to reproduce some generality. They appear in an isolated environment, in the ostracism of the home, disregarding everyday alliances and sociability. They are supposedly not part of a population, a public space of negotiations and disagreements; they do not experience politics or create means for collective agency, but are immobilized, silenced

and unable to detach themselves from the deterministic relationship with objects (they are themselves reduced to objects that integrate the home setting), from the beings who live at home and from the tasks attributed to the woman-mother-wife.

In the photographs observed in this article, we will see that portraying the domestic ambience serves as a means for impoverished women to become socially intelligible and visually recognizable. Domesticity, thus, functions as an operative element of visibility and an expressive element of a materiality that condenses these women's personal and collective experiences.

However, there are images that dialectize the visible, that is, that summon another look, a look that associates patterns and movements, placing in contact and friction “the representation with the affection, the ideal with the repressed, the sublimated with the symptomatic” (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2016, p.405).¹² The figuration of the female beneficiary in the image is possible when looking at vulnerabilities not as fixed and immutable, rather as processes that change from the moment we explore and reveal the conformities that recurrently reproduce devices of power and maintenance of asymmetries. Therefore, the domestic environment can be seen then as more than a simple background or physical and social component of subjects and family groups, but as an organizing element of experiences and interpersonal relations, as an agent of different forms of (co)habitation, of small daily negotiations and arrangements of interpersonal lives. In this sense, feminine domesticity and its figuration can be considered integral parts of cultural practices, as well as part of subjectivities and forms of sociabilities created by the impoverished woman as their main agent. Thus, “the domestic space figures as a performative context” (CARVALHO, 2008, p.38),¹³ and therefore should not be treated as a mere backstage scene element in the image.

The boundaries between representation and figuration become clearer when we realize that making impoverished women representable and intelligible through this discursive device does not imply a total erasure of the possibility of allowing one to show in figuration what is repressed in their traditional or conformist representations. According to Didi-Huberman, what is repressed in the representations of a people and marginalized subjects “refers not only to their status of social invisibility, but also to the

¹² In the original: “rotter la représentation avec l’affect, l’idéal avec le refoulé, le sublimé avec le symptomal.”

¹³ In the original: “o espaço doméstico figura como um contexto performático.”

inorganic way in which a people makes known what they wish and think in expressing affections by bodily gestures and interposed motions of the soul” (2016, p.408).¹⁴ Notice, then, that the way of figuring domesticity can be inscribed as a gesture of deprogramming the visibilities that are instituted and that have become generally consensual in a tradition of visual culture that seeks to establish a specific enunciation or representation for the relation between woman and poverty.

In other words, while representations affirm something “Said” (*Dit*) about the relations between women and poverty, the figurations produce a “Saying” (*Dire*) capable of giving rise, in the representation of impoverished women, to the symptoms, affections, heterogeneities and singularities that build their multiple experiences. Figuration is often not in the gesture, nor in the body of the portrayed woman, but in the very scenery (usually domestic) and in the “figurative actors” or in the objects that erupt and populate their everyday environments.

Inspired by Lévinas’s philosophy and Derrida’s criticisms of it, Butler (2004; 2009)¹⁵ states that the force of the “said,” the homogenizing code and the norm of recognition, exerts enormous violence on the subject, disfiguring them. In the “said” there is the articulation of a given world, but in the “saying” there is the trace of otherness. Thus, the more the image offers us a constructed “said” on otherness, the less it gives us time to contemplate and to refuse the understanding of the other over a concept. The “said” names and orders the world while the “saying” is an expression: it does not speak about something or someone; it is not information about something or someone, but it invites someone to talk to someone else. The “saying” refuses knowledge by representation, questions the subject and its defining power; instead, it accepts the encounter, the closeness and the openness to the other.

In this perspective, the theoretical and methodological attitude that guides us aims to perceive in the image the transits between a “said” of representation and a “saying” of figuration, in order to capture gestures, gazes, shadows, expressions and movements that prevent the dissolution of the body in the precarious landscape of poverty (whether that of the domestic space or the aridity of the inhabited places) and

¹⁴ In the original: “concerne non seulement leur statut d’invisibilité sociale, mais encore à la façon inorganique dont un peuple fait savoir ce qu’il veut et ce qu’il pense en exprimant des affects par gestes du corps et par motions de l’âme interposées.”

¹⁵ For reference, see footnote 4.

evince the capacity of the impoverished body to create and improvise with its experience and regardless of it. There is a register of the self and of specific forms of life in the images that, through a cautious and reflective description, we can highlight and problematize. It is not therefore a question of pursuing the efficacy of images in making the details of poverty and female impoverishment accessible and intelligible, but of perceiving “what appears as a failure, a clue or a symptom, making us sensitive to peoples’ life” (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2016, p.422).¹⁶

We start from the assumption that reading these indexes favors a more complex perception of forms of life and their ordinary textures. The play between the “Said” and the “Saying” in the image offers us several aesthetic and political dimensions for analysis. As we mentioned earlier, an image is not political *per se*, but becomes political when we can see the devices and arrangements that make it possible. In the six images analyzed in this article, we favored an observation that did not take the background of the life context as causal (determinant of poverty) or fixed, but as a living element, in a moving relation with the enunciations under construction. This is because we believe that a way of life is not definitive or stable but is elaborated by experiences that are not reduced to a set of meanings or social rules (LAUGIER, 2009). The lives of the portrayed women are not causally determined by a background that supposedly attests to their precariousness, but can be described in the face of a background of vulnerabilities that change from the actions and connections that are daily and autonomously constructed and reconstructed in the texture of livable and possible lives.¹⁷

Vulnerability As Biopolitical Control or a Means for Resistance?

The six images selected show two great moments in the process of implementing the *Bolsa-Família* Program. As a “before and after” that follows the guidelines of exemplarity of a project being accomplished, the photographed women who

¹⁶ From the original: “rendre sensible veut dire aussi que nous-mêmes, devant ces failles ou ces symptômes, devenons tout a coup sensibles à quelque chose de la vie des peuples.”

¹⁷ “The question of autonomy is that of the expression of experience: when and how to build trust in one's own experience, discover the validity of the individual and singular trajectory” (LAUGIER, 2009, p.431). Text in Portuguese: “A questão da autonomia é a questão da expressão da experiência: quando e como construir confiança na própria experiência, descobrir a validade própria do particular.”

characterize the main characters of *Bolsa-Família* in the press go from a situation of “extreme poverty” (faceless images) to one that is considered as a better one, facing “hardships” and vulnerabilities (which need to be overcome as weaknesses, and not as dimensions that inform practices of resistance). This works not only to demonstrate the efficiency of the program, but to justify its permanence as a successful emergency action that needs to be kept to solve the remaining difficulties faced by those lives (these are images in which the face is highlighted, as a sort of leading role as typical of the neoliberal ideology that wishes for the end of vulnerability).

We base our reflections on the idea that certain images of poverty and impoverished women and their different framings produced institutionally and by the media, through certain behaviors, set a sort of neoliberal governmentality (FASSIN, 2010; 2015; RAGO, 2017) that structures these women’s potential field of action.

Consequently, the appearance of impoverished subjects, and particularly of impoverished women, in mediatic institutional images involves a delicate operation of framing the framework (BUTLER, 2009).¹⁸ In other words, it questions the images in search for the cracks that inform that the framework is unable to determine precisely what we see, think, recognize, and learn. Besides, the framework that makes marginalized subjects visible in mediatic discourses usually contributes to increasing their precarity and erasure.¹⁹

The first image (Figure 1) illustrates an article published in 2003, when the *Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger) Program was presented by the Ministry of Social Development and, little by little, transformed into the *Bolsa-Família* Program. It is possible to see, in the bigger picture, a very thin woman bent over a pot of beans at the entrance of a very humble house, with oppressive luminosity. It is important to highlight that cities in the state of Piauí, such as Guaribas, are indicated as the “ground zero” of the Program, being the first ones to receive the transfer of funds.

¹⁸ For reference, see footnote 4.

¹⁹ The analyses conducted here dialogue with previous theoretical and empirical research by the authors (MARQUES, 2009; 2010; MARTINO, 2010; 2016a; 2016b; MARQUES; MARTINO, 2017; MACHADO; MARTINO; MARQUES, 2018).

a só será
conhecido
a divulgação
"Anual

MINGOS
LUEDES

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Mulher prepara comida em seu barraco em favela no Piauí; no destaque, Lula discute detalhes do Fome Zero, com Grauziano, Grajew e Gushiken: famílias receberão R\$ 50 por mês

Figure 1

Caption: Woman prepares food in her shack, in a Piauí slum. In the highlighted picture, Lula discusses details of Zero Hunger with Grauziano, Grajew and Gushiken: families will receive R\$50 per month.

Photo: Roberto Castro/AE. *Source:* DOMINGOS, J.; GUEDES, G. *Fome Zero* starts today, but still incomplete, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, Nacional, 30/01/03, p.8. *Public domain:* <https://acervo.estadao.com.br/pagina/#!/20030130-39916-nac-4-pol-a4-not>

This framing does not allow us to see the woman's face clearly; the gaze is attracted to the curvature of her body, followed by her arms up to the perception of the scarce food revealed by the spoon. The direction of the reading of the image reveals, in the first place, the scope of patriarchal institutionality and its *mise en scène* of the biopolitical management (political men in suits, in a comfortable room, defining the ways to help vulnerable women and families). Next, the feminine body is centralized in the image: an arched body, photographed from a slightly superior plane that reduces it. The environment, allowing a quick word play, is in the archaic field as a synonym to "precarious," in the rammed earth walls. The "archaic" appears here in the sense of "origin," but also as an opposition to "modern": the coal cooker or woodfire, supported by a tripod, is distant from all "modernity" at the same time it evokes something employed in the registry of the past. The disposition of the objects, as Barthes (1977)²⁰ and Benjamin (2008)²¹ suggest, is an essential part in the elaboration of meanings on

²⁰ For reference, see footnote 7.

²¹ BENJAMIN, W. Little History of Photography. In: BENJAMIN, W. *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin; translated by Edmund Jephcott *et al.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. pp.274-298.

photography. The objects offer a testimony of the precarious daily life and its vitality: the presence of many domestic life objects in the image reveals aspects of the fabrication and constant elaboration of a way of life that combines suffering, broken family bonds, unmade social relations, precarity, lack of respect, illegibility/invisibility in face of wider spheres of self-presentation and expression of their experiences.

If, on the one hand, photojournalistic images of women benefited by *Bolsa-Família* show them frequently isolated (almost never in groups and rarely talking or expressing themselves to a peer interlocutor), on the other, the life of the objects makes clear the constant and daily investment they take on the maintenance of their house work in order to ensure food, fulfillment of tasks and the most ordinary care. Certainly it is within a scenario of inequality and asymmetry that characterizes the gendered division of labor and the bonding of women to the domestic environment and motherhood. The task of safekeeping life is shown in the way the objects are articulated to the bodies of the women in the pictures, shaping a possible existence based on the perseverance of a way of acting that tries to produce a habitable world. The definition of what is a human life and what counts as life is closely related to tactical potentialities, achievements, imaginary, and solidarity that allow them to negotiate with the embarrassments clouding over them. They are surviving women who create possible worlds based on the sedimentation of ideas, meanings, gestures, and practices. These guarantee them a patient work of constant weaving and re-weaving of a form of knowledge that consists in creating arrangements, articulations, and work-arounds in order to change the situation of vulnerability they find themselves in, allowing for the emergence of transformations and changes (MARQUES, 2017).

In a certain way, the enclosure and oppression observed in that image are also extended to Figure 2. The aestheticization effect, also recalled by Barthes (1977),²² is present in the play of light and shadow but, mostly, in the disposition of the people. In the second image, adults have distant gazes, either towards the camera, in the case of the man (in the foreground, as to affirm the patriarchal and marital family model) or perpendicular to the observer, in the case of the woman (placed behind her partner, with the young children). However, there is something unexpected in the image's vanishing point: the baby's gaze that, breaking from the aesthetic pre-configuration, is curiously

²² For reference, see footnote 7.

an enquiry, in an expression that challenges both his own framing and the meaning of the image. This new gaze challenges by capturing a question that confers movement to the image.

These two images can be considered iconic for the register of the situation of women benefited by the Program from 2003 to 2010, during which time the framing tends to dissolve bodies into domestic or natural landscapes, so that the conditions and possibilities of subjectivation appear determined by their previous geographic and private insertions, and by the conceptions that insert and restrict women to the domestic context, to motherhood and to submission to the husband.



Francisca Oliveira e Antônio Paulo Rodrigues (à direita) com os filhos, na casa de taipa onde moram, no interior do Piauí

Figure 2

Caption: Francisca Oliveira and Antônio Paulo Rodrigues (right) with their children, in the mud house where they live, in the countryside of Piauí. *Photo:* Eduardo Anizelli/ FolhaPress. *Source:* CARVALHO, D. Families leave extreme poverty, but still face difficulties; read stories, *Folha de S. Paulo*, 03/02/2013.

Public domain:

https://acervo.folha.com.br/leitor.do?numero=19394&anchor=5851849&origem=busca&_mater=9b7edc4e0edc275c

It is very important to highlight that the analyses carried out here do not intend to reduce the complexity involved in the operationalization of the *Bolsa-Família* Program to the frameworks produced by the media. It is not a question of evaluating the merit of this social program, but to bring to light ambiguities in its presentation in mediatic images.

One of these oppressive elements can be related to the way women are reduced to mothers and care takers. As demonstrated by Fineman (1991; 1995), distinct

discourses on poverty and impoverishment characterize women as mothers, wives, care takers, essential backbones for the maintenance of the family life. Family bonds considered as “deviating” are pointed out as cases with no legitimacy for the obtention of support by public policies, since they privilege, reinforce and value normativity. Thus, a technical form of governmental rationality in the collective administration of impoverished women and mothers consists on affirming their function of reconstituting and keeping the balance in the house and its predominantly patriarchal structure.

It is possible to highlight that the conditions and possibilities of subjectivation allowed to these women are previously determined by their geographical insertion, their living conditions, race, and ideologies that insert and restrict them to the domestic context, motherhood, and submission to precarious work. According to Fineman (1991; 1995), such notions reinforce the conception that the problems and vulnerabilities faced by women are caused by their own behavior, which reduces their existence to a simplistic and negative evaluation of women who are mothers for their responsibility or lack thereof, according to their relationships with men.

Another ambiguity is seen in Figure 3: there is a shift in the framing of the images of women benefited from 2010 to 2013. Women are given names, some direct citations in the article, but continue to appear in narratives that present them as daily life heroines, examples to be followed, whose merit is undisputable.

An exemplar woman is shown in Figure 3. She is evaluated by the journalistic discourse as “worthy” of the benefit for having led her life in dignity, despite extreme poverty. This image, specifically, combined with the citations to the portrayed benefited women highlighted in the article, displays the experience of impoverished women that face multiple oppressions, but have the possibility of taking emancipatory alternatives at the same time.²³ Even though this woman is outside her house (holding a bucket in her

²³ In the case of this beneficiary, Aparecida Martins, the male tutelage is registered by her discourse in three dimensions. The first one reveals the paternalist relationship established by the program and reaffirmed in the election period: “Here everybody votes for Dilma. We do not know if she has done something, but Lula did a lot. If José Serra wins, he will stop everything, won’t he?” The second vulnerability dimension imposed by patriarchy is highlighted in the article by the restrictions imposed by her husband in face of her will to attend classes in the nightly literacy program in the municipal school. She says that she tries to avoid her husband’s jealousy, since she values learning. By affirming her autonomy, she also reveals the paternal constraint and its force in defining the choices available to her: “My father used to say that studying grants you no future, what guarantees future is the farm. But he was wrong, right?” Both citations indicate a third dimension of gender vulnerability, since Aparecida ends her reflections by asking the reporter, who is a man, always looking for his confirmation about what she

hand), she remains at the door, at the threshold between domesticity and the publicity of the participation in the life of the Polis. The gesture of covering the eyes with her hand means more than protecting it against the sunlight as the caption points to the “hope” that becomes her aspiration for what is beyond her house. She is between two spaces and two ways of life: she sees beyond that place but is still tied to it, to the landscape and the social position agreed on by a given identity. This woman’s exemplarity is unable to provide us with the opportunity to read the occurrences of collective life in her body language: on behalf of the legibility of the scenario, her singularity and her demands are withdrawn from the image, silenced and replaced with the availability of a body easily classified by biopolitics (RANCIÈRE, 2003).

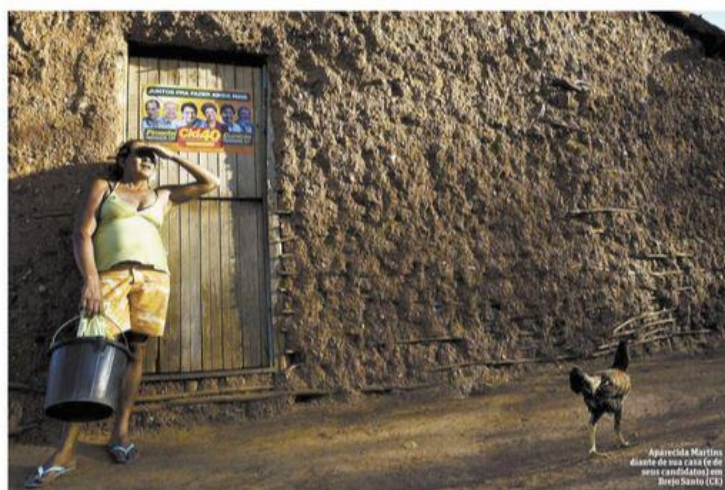


Figure 3

Caption: Aparecida Martins in front of her house (and of her candidates), in Brejo Santo (CE). *Photo:* Marilene Bergamo/FolhaPress. *Source:* FRANCO, B. The hope for water becomes the greatest canvasser in the sertão, *Folha de S. Paulo*, Especial Eleições, 22/09/10, p.E5. *Public domain:* https://acervo.folha.com.br/leitor.do?numero=18424&anchor=5819154&origem=busca&_mather=9b7edc4e0edc275c

In addition, this image reveals how benefited women were “compelled” to prove their precarious condition in order to receive the benefit during the first years of the Program. Displays of precarity, reports of narratives of vulnerability as impediment to agency and the possibility of subsistence, standardized forms and interviews with social workers are examples of biolegitimating processes. Institutional agents commonly require narrative or physical proof of the hardships. On this matter, Fassin (2010) argues

thinks, placing the legitimacy of her voice as depending on the recognition and approval of the male law, be it from a political, marital or mediatic institution.

that a combination between managerial and suffering policies leads to a redefinition of the moral economy of our time.

There is a sort of violence in this biopolitical and vulnerable framework of women that condemns and sentences them to shame. It is as if those women were less dignified than the ones who are able to face and hold their gaze toward a reader that possibly questions and evaluates their behavior (FASSIN, 2010).

In our corpus, many of the photojournalistic images that give visibility to *Bolsa-Família* and its success rates translate feminine emancipation as individual and valuable economic success, showing little of the contingencies crossing the range of experiences and choices available to impoverished women. The recognition of these women as responsible for the financial support of the family as creative and entrepreneurial subjects constructs their life projects often by adapting it to the needs of neoliberal governmentality rather than their own (RAGO, 2017). The newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*, for example, has even created a comparative parameter for success and failure for the families that, throughout the first decade of the Program, either achieved or failed to achieve specific goals, classifying them according to moral parameters that separate lives considered “worthy” from the ones deemed unworthy (Figures 4 and 5):

In these images, it is also possible to notice the presence of women who are the sole care-takers for their children and household. Although the photojournalistic images emphasize the patriarchal nuclear family model (wife, husband and children) as the one to be followed, single parenthood begins to appear in the images more frequently in 2010. It should be noted here that single parenting cannot be pointed out, without due care, as the cause of female impoverishment, since many married women or with partners remain poor or still see their precariousness increase. We highlight that the Program was not created to mitigate gender inequalities, but to reduce and eliminate family generational poverty. However, as Georges and Santos point out (2016), the government instrumentalizes women by imposing on them the burden of leading their families to success or failure.



Figure 4



Figure 5

Caption: Fig. 4 — Sueli Dumont with some of her grandchildren; in eight years, her 10- person family increased to 17, since four of her daughters got pregnant as teenagers. Fig. 5 — Minicéia Santos Silva with her children Luan and Isaque; the other two, Alan and Vanessa, and the husband, Pedro, make ends meet with retirement pension and the resources granted by the *Bolsa Família*. *Photo:* André Felipe/FolhaPress. *Source:* “After ten years effects of *Bolsa Família* are unequal,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, 20/10/2013. *Public domain:* https://acervo.folha.com.br/leitor.do?numero=19653&anchor=5899856&origem=busca&_mather=9b7edc4e0edc275c

Fassin (2006) defines *biolegitimacy* as the current way in which the access to governmental social policies is granted. He claims that the production of rights, recognition and access to services and the attendance by the State are connected to the availability of services to precarious individuals; that is, it demands that they utter and fill out forms to certify a status, a condition, an internalization of dependence and a total surrender to correction and control apparatuses. What politics does to lives is not just a question of discourse and technologies, of strategies and tactics. It is a question of form and life (FASSIN, 2009, p.57).

Consequently, Fassin (2009) highlights that social public policies nowadays play an essential role in the biopolitical management of bodies and of ways of being, characterized by a governmentality that corresponds to the rationalization of the art of ruling and not to the practice of government. We criticize the tension between these two processes that shape the program. On the one hand, it promotes visibility to its beneficiaries, as they are perceived as citizens with “purchasing power” and material existence; on the other, it may lead to destabilizing and humiliating experiences that send beneficiaries back to ostracism and lead them to distance themselves from public

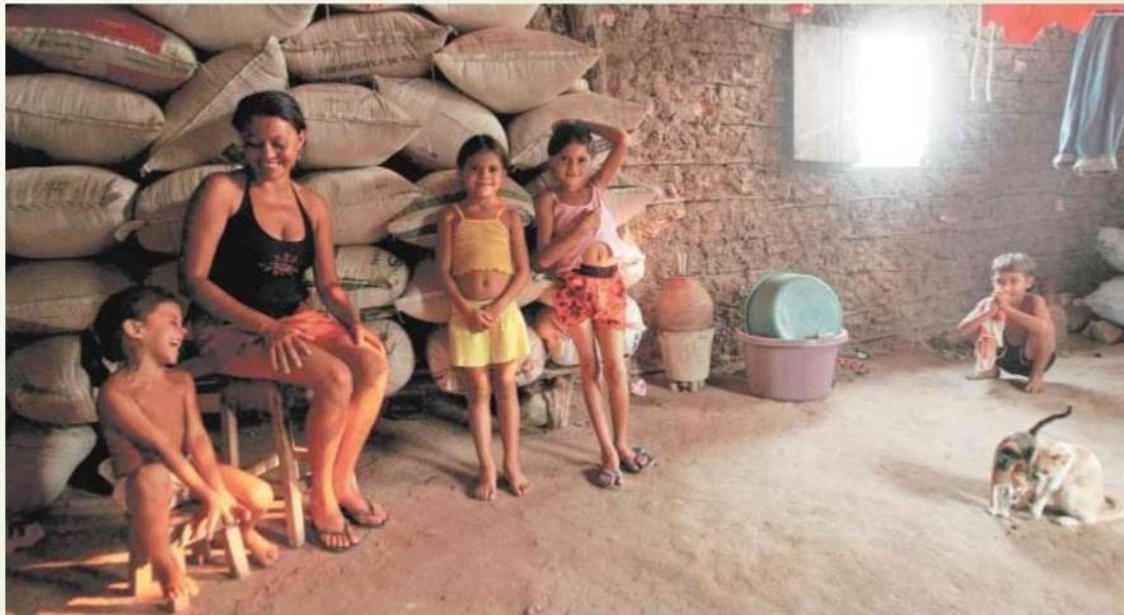
life. An example is the association of the program's support to governmental charity – a framing that is present in the media – and, consequently, the classification of beneficiaries as beggars and social pariahs).

In many of the images, what is left to photographed subjects is to use their own bodies to evince and narrate their lives, whether they agree with the frameworks appreciated by biopolitics or reveal the detachments and ways of capture and control by governmental and mediatic apparatuses. Thus, approaching the female body discursively produced as precarious, such as exposed in the photojournalistic picture, implies not only exploring the discursive forms of biopolitical that highlight their invisibility, but also looking for indicatives of resistance, displays that may reveal how they find ways to hinder the caption of their faces and bodies, creating gaps, dissonance and oppositions between their “presence” and the narrative registry (both visual and verbal) of their exposition.

In the Thickness of Daily Lives, the Biopotent Vulnerability

Generally, when an article highlights unhealthy conditions and hardships, the photographs' frames privilege a general plane of the families in front of their houses, highlighting a desolate geographic and human landscape. However, when one wishes to highlight women's prominence and the conquests achieved by collective actions between municipal and national governments, the framings are closer: women and children's faces and bodies are placed in the foreground, and the domestic environment acquires a new perspective – even though for the female figures there still remains a framing with gestures related to pleading, conformation, and gazes that avoid the lenses and face a point that is never where the photographer and, in this sense, the reader are.

Another observation to be made is the absence of spontaneity in the images. They show a constrained posture of the women's bodies as if they felt the weight of other people's judgment about their lives and their invented ways of survival in the world.



MUDANÇAS - Lucineide com filhas em casa de adobe que já foi choupana de palha: ajuda de R\$ 95 reduz desnutrição dos filhos e faz o voto em Serra, em 2002, migrar para Lula

Figure 6

Caption: Changes: Lucineide with daughters in adobe house that was once a straw hut: R \$ 95 aid reduces malnutrition of children and votes in Serra in 2002 to migrate to Lula. *Photo:* Sérgio Castro/Estadão Conteúdo. *Source:* SANT'ANNA, Lourival. "Bolsa Família conquers the grottos and can reelect Lula," O Estado de S. Paulo, National, 10/09/05, p.A14. *Public domain:* <<https://acervo.estadao.com.br/pagina/#!/20051009-40899-nac-14-pol-a14-not>>

In this photograph (Figure 6), there are two vectors that attract our gaze: the brightness that comes through the window and makes the smile of the child in the left corner more radiant, bathed in the sun rays that diagonally cut across the image; and the way the two girls, smiling, look straight into the camera. There is a harmonious complicity that articulates the human presence in the domestic scene with utensils, toys and animals. Here, our gaze goes through the elements that fill the domestic space. As we read the image, we contemplate the boy in the left corner who excitedly smiles, contrasting with the one that remains squatted in the right corner. The supporting smile of mother and son reminds us of what is outside the frame and, because of that, destabilizing a forged script for the exposition of an impoverished family. Both are resisting disappearance, since they act as "supporting roles" that break with a sort of contract imposed by the biopolitical framework, acquiring the power to recreate the sensible scene in which ways of seeing, reading and saying are invented, changing the declarative regime of bioglegitimacy exactly because they appear and break in the image through another lexicon, another language, which makes them singular and, thus, makes

it harder for them to be dissolved into the classificatory homogeneity necessary for the control.

It is as if the smile allowed another fabulative composition of the scene (contrary to the logic of the interpretation of the image as an official document), which is possible because of the capture of instants or moments that disarticulate a certain stereotype of the “presumed real” instead of promoting it, that is, moments that disconcert a premeditated reading of the subjects that figure in the image, based on a moral judgment that does not allow the indecision of the spectators before what they see. Such a bewilderment emphasizes the way the mother is a central figure in the daily maintenance of the invisible threads that sustains the magic of “any moment” (*moment quelconque*), that is, the moment that, according to Rancière (2018), contradicts the usual way of occupying a space, identifying oneself as a subject, and inscribing oneself in the play of connection between prescribed temporalities and fabulous temporalities.

It is as if the smile we see in this image, a product of the reverie invented by maternal stories to mitigate child insecurities, contradicted the chain of cause and effect, predictability, and the relationship between what would be predicted and what actually happens. The fabulative intrigue triggered by laughter, rare in the images of subjects who must always attest (according to the rules of biogitimacy) to their suffering and precariousness, belonged to “the gift that life has, in the most humble and common way, of moving beyond itself to take care of itself” (RANCIÈRE, 2018, p.97).²⁴ In its own unique way, the fabulative creation of any moment reaffirms the ability to invent, which belongs to anyone, revealing the tremor that lies on the exact boundary between nothing and everything, between what is expected of a vulnerable life form and the unlikely arrangements it produces in the face of the urgencies and contingencies that mark the survivors.

This detachment between the subject’s presence and the place the biopolitical narratives prepares for them reveals a way of existing that is set between the passibility (being affected by occurrences) and passivity. The vulnerable and precarious swings between these two places and, for that reason, challenges us to gaze upon them, to slow down our expectations for quick and superficial apprehension and categorization. To understand them demands time, demands making room for the approach of otherness, of

²⁴ Text in Portuguese: “ao dom que a vida tem, nos mais humildes e comuns, de transportar-se além de si mesma para cuidar de si mesma.”

the unsettling other that has not yet given in to the concept and rigidity of biopolitical classification.

As highlighted by Didi-Huberman (2012), the survival of life in image is related to the elaboration of an incorrect, de-territorialized, syntax, which, at the same time, connects and disconnects the actor of the main story, operating at full light, showing what can be said and what cannot. Such detachment gives sound back to daily silencing, thickness to spaces and times squeezed by repetition, visibility to naturalized power relations.

This image brings forth elements of dignity that define the existence of women and their children through their daily use objects and “each of these things is part of an existence that is completely contemporary, inevitable, and unrepeatable”²⁵ (RANCIÈRE, 2011, p.293). Therefore, “being aware, even if at a minimum, of these existences and their place in the world is only possible if we establish passageways between the objects and the irrepresentable whole that is expressed in its actuality”²⁶ (RANCIÈRE, 2011, p.294).

This image’s frame receives outlines based on the biopotency (PELBART, 2012) they possess for shaping the common place of daily experiences: inhabited places, the clothes on their bodies, utensils guaranteeing their survival. The potency of life can be seen, and it reveals a politics of aesthetics and of the common related to the way the devices used for the production of images and texts achieve the possibility of cutting out objects from ordinary experience, establishing other ways of sharing space and time and promoting new ways for objects and subjects to appear (MARQUES, 2013, 2014).

While the first analyzed images sometimes place the public as the judge of individuals and others build for them a place of passivity in face of a framing of the “poor” and of “poverty,” this last one invites the eye to gaze upon daily life scenes, its objects and details, in a work of translating a sensible element into another in the elements offered by the image (RANCIÈRE, 2008). Under this aspect, it promotes a meeting, a political approach that redefines vicinities and temporalities among subjects

²⁵ From the original: «chacune de ces choses fait partie d'une existence totalement actuelle, inévitable et irremplaçable» (RANCIÈRE, 2011, p.293).

²⁶ From the original: «rendre compte, même de façon légère, de ces existences et de leur place dans le monde n'est possible que si nous établissons des passages entre des objets et le tout non représentable qui est exprimé en son actualité» (RANCIÈRE, 2011, p.294).

and that is not supported by the conventional meaning of the discursive communication but requires a redefinition of the gaze.

Final Remarks

When we began the analytical work of questioning frameworks, the photographs analyzed here displayed women that were *constructed* to be a representation (easily assimilated and classified within our repertoires of standards and values), not a figuration (excess of elements that dislocate the gaze, produce detachments and allow for encounter with the unclassifiable and radical otherness).

The discourse of neoliberal biopolitical governmentality feeds the understanding that vulnerability should be seen as rarity or weakness, which makes a certain social and political order feasible. It also confirms exclusions and perpetuates inequalities. Part of this imaginary, or invulnerability fiction (FINEMAN, 1991; BIROLI, 2018), is the fact that mediatic and social frameworks, the value and evaluation systems to which we submit ourselves, designate categories of vulnerable people, defined by their supposed physical frailty and their questionable autonomy or precarious ability to decide and make choices (FERRARESE, 2016; BUTLER, 2004, 2011; RAGO, 2017).

Therefore, to deny vulnerability and to glorify invulnerability has become the greatest objective of social and mediatic representations and framings at the service of capital and of a balance between forces that may favor certain subjects, groups, and institutions while leading others to ostracism, humiliation, and death (COLE, 2016).

When commenting on this unequal distribution of vulnerability between individuals and groups, Butler (2016) highlights the importance of considering the resignification of the concept. This would allow us to glimpse, in situations of vulnerability, the emergence of singular experimentations that, as they are not captured and mapped by rule, create new ways of life outside disciplinary regulation and update the becoming of the common, which communication and interdependence tentatively try to construct. Vulnerability, thus understood, reveals a way of being in the world that is constituted between passibility (being affected by occurrences) and the ability of agency.

Vulnerability is not a concept essentially related to suffering; nor does it define solely the tendency of being subjected to harm. There is potentiality and ambiguity in

this concept. Lazzarato (2006) suggests an alternative understanding of what precarity and precarious are as dimensions of vulnerability. Instead of dismissing the ability to act, he suggests that a life can be defined as “precarious” not only in the sense of a material and symbolic dismissal, but as someone whose identity oscillates between many names and, for that reason, escapes the classificatory mechanisms that define lives. The precarious remains a subject who is not completely coded; hence, he/she is non-institutionalized and non-standardized, thus having the chance of creating multiple emancipatory actions.

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