

**ESSAY**

## Youth as Strategic Development Agent: between discourses and policies

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### **Youth as Strategic Development Agent: between discourses and policies**

**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to present reflections on the discursive matrixes that support the discourse that presents youth as strategic development agents in the realm of the National Youth Policy. Based on a theoretical perspective and a critical discourse analysis, it analyses public documents and official discourses about the National Youth Policy, from 2005 to 2014. The analysis found the existence of two discursive matrixes that support the youth policy, which operate dialectically associated in opposition, based on contradictions between the field of rights and poverty, risk and social vulnerability.

**Keywords:** Discourse, Social policy. Youth.

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## Presentation

This article is the result of a doctoral thesis and proposes to enrich the debate and understanding about discourses about youth in the realm of the National Youth Policy, based on an analysis of the discourse about youth as strategic agents for development.

Since its creation by modernity, the category of youth has been disputed in terms of its meanings, definitions and adjectives. It is composed of symbolic representations and social situations produced by social groups and by youths themselves. It is a real situation experienced in common by certain individuals, even if in a diverse, multiple form, and integrated to other social categories and historic conditioners (GROPPO, 2000), which justifies its use in the plural, or that is youths. Throughout history it has been an object of social, economic, political and cultural disputes. The discourse of youth as strategic development agents is produced in this field of dispute over youths – integrated to social, economic, political and cultural processes triggered by the globalization of capital, strongly expressed by polarization on a global scale, unequal development and regionalization (AMIN; HOUTART, 2003). This discourse has been circulated and consumed (FAIRCLOUGH, 2008) since the mid 2000s by multilateral agencies and the Brazilian state.

Understanding that the knowledge construction process is integrated to the political and ideological struggle for the construction of hegemony and counter-hegemony in the field of ideas, we analyze the discourse of youth as strategic agents of development, adopting as a theoretical reference the thinking of Gramsci (1978), given that the discourse about youth in the realm of the state is part of the struggle for hegemony, which in turn, includes education for consensus as well as the tensions related to strategies of resistance and discourse against hegemonies. For this reason we also articulate the Gramscian concept of hegemony with Fairclough's idea (2010) that language performs a significant role in socioeconomic changes under contemporary capitalism.

To analyze the law or laws that compose the legal foundation for the National Youth Policy, documents produced by the National Youth Secretariat (SNJ) and the Youth Council (CONJUVE) related to the National Youth Conferences of 2008 and 2011, and political pronouncements about the policy, we adopted a theoretical methodological approach of tridimensional discourse analysis, as proposed by Fairclough, with an emphasis on three dimensions: 1) The text dimension, which addresses the meaning of words; 2) the dimension of discursive practice, which involves interdiscursivity; and 3) the dimension of social practice, which analyzes the social matrix of discourse and its ideological and political effects.

We begin the discussion of this text by presenting the context of production, circulation and consumption of this discourse and then locate the National Youth Policy. Finally, we present the theoretical matrixes upon which are based the discourse of youth as strategic development agents.

## The context of production, circulation and consumption of the discourse of youth as strategic development agents

In the late 20th century, based on a reorganization of capital after the crisis of 1970, the neoliberal project became hegemonic, with proposals to overcome the crisis and legitimize capitalism as a social project, influencing state decision-making and economic and social policies in Latin America. This intensified with the Washington Consensus of the 1990s, which was supported by a development concept that sought macroeconomic stabilization aimed at controlling inflation and reducing public spending, by implementing structural reforms for the deregulation of markets, trade liberalization, privatization of state companies and public services and a relaxation of price controls, accompanied by a resurgence of investments and economic growth associated to the distribution of income for countries (BARUCO, 2005, p. 65).

Considering the evaluation that the Washington Consensus failed in its development strategy for Latin American countries, a reformulation was conducted in the late 1990s, called the Post-Washington Consensus or the Expanded Washington Consensus. This involved a series of strategies in a development model defended by international financial institutions that, based on instrumental rationality, transforms the action of states and the subjects benefitted in means to address this proposal, encompassing an understanding of development with a more useful and pragmatic approach, based on poverty reduction. If, poverty was previously characterized as low levels of income or consumption, it came to be understood as “the incapacity to achieve standards and know if they are attained or not” (BM, 2004, p. 36).

The strategies to reduce poverty, one of the main goals, included the promotion of opportunities, empowerment and increased participation in the formulation of effective policies, which determined the government's responsibility to promote human and social capital, requiring the state to complement the market, which is considered the motor of economic development. Poverty reduction should be based on two foundations:

1) a guaranteed right to property and contracts and the maintenance of political and macroeconomic stability, among others; and 2) investments in and empowerment of people, especially the most poor, given that development will only be fast and sustainable when there is a contribution of human and social capital, avoiding wasted resources and the generation of social conflicts (BM, 2004).

The new development model defended by the World Bank is based on the Comprehensive Development Framework, created by the bank President James D. Wolfensohn in 1999, which determined that bank agreements and assistance should be guided by four principles: the developing countries must establish macroeconomic, social and structural goals; they should focus on results; be based on strategies conducted by these countries; and the beneficiaries of development should contribute to the strategies adopted by the countries (BM, 2004).

Based on Amin and Houtart (2003), we emphasize that development, as an ideological concept, supposes the definition of its respective social project and its realization is based on certain values and mechanisms. In this case, the reduction of the concept of development to the expansion of the market undermines all objectives for social transformation that go beyond the basic logic of the system. Not only growth is identified as development, “but the set of collective values is submitted to an instrumental rationality determined by the objectives of the market” (AMIN; HOUTART, 2003, p. 365). This proposal, however, is inserted in the process of the globalization of capital, whose polarization on a global scale is manifest in new forms through new mechanisms, transferring the conflicts to new planes, such as the control of technology, finance, weapons, natural resources and communications that, together with unequal development, thus become the main contradictions in the contemporary world, given that the globalized law of value produces unequal remuneration for labor of equal productivities, while the prices of goods and remunerations of capital are equal on a global scale (AMIN; HOUTART, 2003).

Language performs a significant role in the socioeconomic changes conducted in contemporary capitalism, which also come to be driven by discourse (FAIRCLOUGH, 2010). The neoliberal project uses discourse to shape the realities that it affirms to describe, emphasizing the vocabulary of globalization, flexibility, governance,

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employability and others. International institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have outstanding influence, given that in the proposal to provide stability to the global economic and financial order, they have an important function in producing the discursive hegemony (SHIROMA; CAMPOS; GARCIA, 2005), mainly through the massive dissemination of official documents. An example of this is found in the report prepared in 1995 by the European Union’s Commission on Wealth Creation and Social Cohesion, which defended that words are important and make a difference, suggesting meanings for terms such as wealth, sustainable development, inclusion, flexibility, security and liberty, beneficiaries, citizenship, volunteering, and others (SHIROMA; CAMPOS; GARCIA, 2005).

It is in this context that the interest and concern for youth began to gain space in the discourses of the multilateral agencies and Latin American countries, especially driven since 1985 by the United Nation’s International Year of Youth,

whose theme was participation, development and peace, and expanded by the Post-Washington Consensus, which sought the support and participation of youth in the development processes of countries. In this proposal, the education of human resources to process the development sought became essential. According to Rodriguez (2003, p. 14), strategies should be implemented for better use of human capital “in the search for economic growth, social equality and democratic affirmation, implementing new development strategies.” The incorporation of youth in this development process must consider them from a dual perspective: as recipients of services and as strategic development actors. For Rodriguez (2008, p. 278), the discourse of youth as individuals with rights does not consider the contribution of youth to the construction and renovation of society, unlike the discourse of youth as strategic development agents, which articulates the improvement of living conditions for youths with their active participation in society, considered as a “right to be guaranteed, but also and above all a useful tool for human development itself”.

In Brazil, a development proposal and the discourse of youth as strategic agents of development began to be circulated and consumed in 2003 with the implementation of the “new developmentalism” and the creation of the National Youth Policy.

## 2 The discourse of youths as strategic agents of development in the National Youth Policy

Amid the international influence on the creation of specific youth policies, we can affirm that Brazil was late to begin this process, despite the fact that it has the world's fifth largest population of young people, with a total of 34 million individuals from 15 to 24 in 2000 and 36% of the youth of Latin America and the Caribbean and 80% of the youth of the Southern Cone – comprised of – Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Chile and Uruguay (UNFPA, 2010).

The launching of a national process for youth policies took place after 1995, during the two governments of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC) (1995-1998/1999-2002), with the realization of the I National Encounter of Youth Technicians, organized by the Fundação Mudes – the creation of the Youth Assistance, affiliated to the Ministry of Education (MEDEIROS, 2009) – and the implementation of programs aligned to the guidelines of the World Bank, IMF and Inter-American Development Bank for the public policies of this period, with a focus on the socially vulnerable populations, a decrease in the state apparatus and realization of partnerships with civil society.

In this period, the concern for youth drove financial investments by international cooperation agencies in projects of non-governmental organizations for work with youths. Although there was a predominance of projects aimed at serving youths in situations of risk, aimed at social integration, as emphasized by Abramo (1997), others saw youths from the perspective of rights and their recognition as individual citizens, which resulted in important experiences, such as the Youth Network of the Northeast, the Permanent Circle of Dialog about Youth and Public Policies, and others. These initiatives contributed to the emergence of the discourse that presented youth as social, political and historic subjects (RAMOS, 2009), and the circulation and consumption of this discourse were aimed at youth movements, organizations formed by youths and scholars of the issue, who came to criticize the approaches focused on youth as a problem, and defend that youths should be understood as individuals with rights and emphasize the diversity of possibilities for experiencing youth.

These actions, combined with pressure from multilateral agencies and the rates of mortality and violence suffered and committed by youth expressed in the Maps of Violence, prepared by Latin America Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO), among other reasons, found resonance during the two governments of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2006/2007-2010) in the presentation of projects, programs and spaces for dialog for discussion, proposing and negotiating the creation of a public policy aimed at youth<sup>1</sup> in the realm of the executive and legislative powers. These projects stem from a process of mobilization and demands organized by various youth movements and by scholars and NGOs that work with youth, leading to the creation in 2005 of the National Youth Policy (NYP), aimed at individuals from 15-29, and composed of the National Youth Secretariat, the National Youth Council and the National Program for Inclusion of Youth: education, qualification and community action (ProYouth).

In the following years, important actions took place related to youth, such as the realization of two National Youth Conferences (2008 and 2011); the approval of a legal landmark for youth – Constitutional Amendment 65/2010 and the National Youth Statute (Lei n. 12852/2013); and the unification of six programs (ProYouth, Youth Agent, Knowledge of the Earth, Social Consortium for Youth, Citizen Youth and Factory School) into the Integrated Youth Program (ProYouth), which came to operate in four modalities; adolescent ProYouth, Rural ProYouth, Urban ProYouth and Worker ProYouth. In addition, 17 programs were implemented by 11 ministries or secretariats, which included the fields of education, healthcare, employment, culture, sports, public safety and the environment.

Based on an analysis of the discursive formulations of the constitutional amendment for youth, and the documents produced by the SNJ and CONJUVE to support the National Youth Conferences, and the political pronouncements of the administrators of the National Youth Program, we identified that the discourse that presents youth as strategic development agents coexists and disputes hegemony with the discourse that sees youth as a problem or potentially dangerous phase and of youth as citizens with rights. By associating the discourse of youth as individuals with rights with the discourse of youth as strategic development agents, the later is presented as a progressive discourse. But what does this discourse consist of?

In the first place, this discourse presents the idea that youth are one of the priority segments and main beneficiaries of development, as we observe in the following discursive samples:

I only want to say to you the following: that since 2003 *our government included youth among the priority sectors* to be served by our public policies (SILVA, 2010, p. 2, emphasis ours).

With the Lula government, there has been a new approach to the theme of youth in the national realm and *youths became one of the segments most benefited by the advances of social policies and economic development* (MACEDO, 2011b, p. 1, emphasis ours).

Moreover, more than beneficiaries, youth are considered “a triumph for the construction of a more prosperous, solidary and democratic world” (SILVA, 2008, p. 1-2), and investment in youth is essential to achieve the development proposal in progress. As Macedo emphasized (2011a, p. 2): “For us, a rich country is a country without poverty. And to attain this objective, to invest in youth is a fundamental condition”. In the same line, the SNJ and CONJUVE affirmed (2008, p. 7): “Among concerns and hopes, one thing is certain: it is necessary to speak about youth. Because, on one hand, young people need Brazil. And on the other Brazil needs them”.

This discourse is articulated with the proposal by Rodriguez (2003), a leading consultant to multilateral agencies, who, in relation to youth policy, affirms that the focus on youth as individuals with rights is limited by not considering the contribution of youth to society, proposing the adoption of the focus and discourse of youth as strategic actors in development, defending that the effectuation of rights be associated to the participation of youth in human development. In the same way, UNESCO (2004) argued that there is no justification for youth to be maintained as the receivers of rights, mainly given the goals of economic growth that developing countries must attain and also by proposing that youth are considered individuals with rights and strategic actors in development. These discourses are inserted in the matrixes of social and discursive practice that integrate the social and hegemonic relations and structures that constitute them, and their reference is the hegemonic struggle that can reproduce, restructure or even challenge the orders of existing discourse (FAIRCLOUGH, 2008).

### 3 Social matrixes of the discourse of youth as strategic development agents

The discourse of youth as strategic development agents has been presented as progressive and innovative, with the intention of going beyond the discourse that presents youths as a social problem and protagonists. For this reason, it is supported in two matrixes of social and discursive practice that are presented, dialectically, in association and in opposition: the matrix of law versus the matrix of poverty, risk and vulnerability. In the social matrix of law, even if the law is created in the limits of capitalist society and used by the state “in its incessant quest to impose consensus on society” in name of an abstract universality, its materiality permits the creation of new conditions in the trajectory of humanity, and it also depends on a system of mediations created and activated by social subjects in the individual and collective realm (GUERRA, 2013, p. 43). Integrating the struggle for hegemony of the meanings of youth, the texts of the National Youth Secretariat and the Youth Council reinforce the importance that “the rights of youth be completely guaranteed in Brazil” and that policies must be implemented, not “to address the violence suffered and committed by youth”, but to “guarantee rights” (SNJ; CONJUVE, 2008, p. 9; 13).

The discursive formulations analyzed here register the rights of youths based on the approval of the two main documents that establish the rights of Brazilian youth: Constitutional Amendment 65/2010 and the National Youth Statute. Constitutional Amendment 65/2010, inserts the term youth in the federal constitution of 1988, establishing that:

It is the duty of the family, society and the state to ensure children, adolescents and youth, with absolute priority, the right to life, health, nourishment, education, leisure, professional training, culture, dignity, respect, freedom and family and community life, as well as to guard them from all forms of negligence, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty and oppression (BRASIL, 2010, Art. 227).

We emphasize the importance of the rights of the youth mentioned in this amendment – to life, health, nutrition, education, leisure, professional training, culture, dignity, respect, freedom and family and community life – and considered to be the responsibilities of the family, society and the state. This concept is related to the contemporary struggle of youths, for recognition as individuals with rights, and the need to guarantee rights in the present, with the responsibility, even legally, to protect youths from negligence, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty and oppression for a generation that affirms that, among the worst things of being young, is the conviviality with risks, above all drugs and violence (ABRAMO, 2005).

Meanwhile, by detailing the rights of youths, the National Youth Statute assures their right to quality education, professional training, work and income; the right to diversity and equality of rights and opportunities, healthcare and quality of life, culture, communication and free expression and the practice of sports; to territory and to mobility, sustainability and to an ecologically balanced environment and to live in a safe environment. These are rights that go beyond economic issues and are related to the right to experience youth. As the National Youth Secretariat and the Youth Council express - SNJ and CONJUVE - (2008, p. 11), they are areas “determinant for guaranteeing the quality of life as a fundamental right of human beings and of youth in

particular”, and the recognition of “experimentation and quality of life [...] as a right”, which are an advance for which they should be considered subjective and objective aspects:

In objective terms, there are the socioeconomic issues that interfere in the opportunities youth have to access goods and social conquests. The subjective pole implies the meaning and understanding of the individuals and of social values, the valorization of differences, the revival of the values of solidarity, pleasure and satisfaction. To think of this concept implies considering a set of factors that refer to the social conditions in which the life of youths develop, which positively or negatively influence their quality of life and opportunities for experience and experimentation. They include attention and access to healthcare, the experience of practices of sports and leisure and the use of free time (SNJ; CONJUVE, 2011, p. 13).

We know that the approval of these legal foundations is inserted in a field of disputes and tensions of social policy, which is a process and results from complex and contradictory relations established in the sphere of the state. In this form, the analysis of the international and national contexts, as well as the discursive formulation, allow us to affirm that these laws are presented as the “conquest of various generations” (MACEDO, 2013, p. 1). Also as a commitment of government in the construction of a route that leads to the “consolidation of the rights of citizenship, civil rights, economic rights, and social rights of Brazilian youth” (ROUSSEFF, 2013, p. 5), related to the demands of the multilateral agencies for the consolidation of a normative mark for the rights of youth, which are considered essential for the “consolidation of a state policy for youth” (LEÃO, 2012, p. 29).

The second matrix, of poverty, risk and vulnerability, uses the economic discourse of the development proposal to convince the elites of the importance of investment in youth, above all poor youth. With elements that integrate the discursive formulations of the New Developmentalism, the discourses analyzed direct their criticisms at the neoliberal model executed by the governments of Fernando Collor (1990-1992), Itamar Franco (1992-1994) and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-1998/1999-2002). In this proposal, the priority of the state is economic development and fiscal responsibility (BRESSER-PEREIRA, 2012). In addition to strengthening its capacity to regulate the economy, constituted by a strong market and a functional financial system, the state also strives to return to its role as the agent that defines and stimulates a new standard of accumulation (IPEA, 2010).

In the discursive formulations analyzed, we found the affirmation that the state is responsible for “conducting a truly democratic national development project” (SNJ; CONJUVE, 2008, p. 14) and is the “main inductor” in leading a “development project that corresponds to the yearnings of the Brazilian youth population” (SNJ; CONJUVE, 2011, p. 6), emphasizing the need to strengthen its action in response to economic crises and generating “conditions to decrease inequality” (SNJ; CONJUVE, 2008, p. 17), to “provide the conditions for social ascension and guarantee specific rights that make the experience of the condition of youth a trajectory for emancipation” (SNJ; CONJUVE, 2011, p. 6). In this way, they, defend that:

the development project must relate economic growth with environmental sustainability and distribution of income; the generation of jobs with a guarantee of decent work; investment in healthcare, culture, education and sport; information and communication technology; mobility and accessibility; and a deepening of democracy based on structural reforms such as political, tax, social security, agrarian and urban reforms (SNJ; CONJUVE, 2011, p. 6).

We also emphasize the importance given to the presence of the state in the “periphery” of the country, by investments “in education, professional training, culture, healthcare, and generating jobs for this youth” to “confront the social problem, resulting from the 1980s, and 1990s” (SILVA, 2008, p. 6). This integrates youth policy to other social policies, “so that it is no longer a government policy but becomes a policy of state, and part of the agenda of the other powers (the legislature and judiciary) and administrative spheres (municipal and state)”. It becomes “inserted in a project for the country” (SNJ; CONJUVE, 2008, p. 17) and used as a strategy to confront poverty and reverse the “processes of exclusion that affect Brazilian youth” (SNJ; CONJUVE, 2011, p. 3). The National Youth Policy should contribute to “decreasing inequality among youth” (SNJ; CONJUVE, 2008, p. 14), allow the education of youth to “process their quests, construct their projects and paths for insertion in social life”, and take advantage of the “potential of new generations to strengthen the development process that is underway in the country”, to confront the “different processes of social exclusion”, “guarantee rights and generate opportunities” (SNJ; CONJUVE, 2011, p. 2-5). The universal policies should be combined with emergency and specific policies, and should simultaneously implement:

*Universal policies* that consider the demands and singularities of youth (such as public education and the generation of employment), *emergency policies* (presenting new chances for youth in situations of greater

social vulnerability) and *specific policies* (that recognize and promote the potential and particularities of the condition of youth) (SNJ; CONJUVE, 2008, p. 14, emphasis ours).

The notion of youth as agents or strategic actors of development supports the approach that the youth policies must be articulated in an intersectoral manner, incorporating youth as “human and cultural capital, for the development of social capital”, whose main program should be aimed at confronting social exclusion, supporting youth in the creation of development strategies and artistic and cultural expressions (KRAUSKOPF, 2008, p. 15). Moreover, the confrontation of poverty and the focus on youth who are in situations of social vulnerability and risk have been considered a priority by multilateral agencies because of the relationship that they establish with the economic growth of countries, as emphasized by the World Bank (2004), whose strategy is aimed at the promotion of opportunities, empowerment and participation of the population. The objective is to make social policies more effective, with emergency programs that combine increased schooling, professional training and income transfer aimed at individuals considered to be in a situation of vulnerability and social risk.

The analysis conducted by Spósito and Corrochano (2005, p. 167), about income transfer programs for youth in Brazil, demonstrated that these initiatives are supported in the sociocultural process of construction of an image of youth “based on the fear and perception that poor youth are potentially dangerous and constitute a problem for society”. These authors highlight that despite the benefits that access to income promotes, demands for counterparts in community actions can disseminate “new forms of domination, obscured by a discourse of social insertion and citizenship”. In relation to programs to fight poverty, which are focused and emergency oriented Soares (2001, p. 176) raises questions that help us consider if the focus on social policy is “capable of handling Brazil’s social problems, which are complex and of great dimensions”, and if it is possible to “articulate the multiplicity of actions and small programs into a social policy”, given that these programs steer the social policy to “small solutions”.

## Final Considerations

The discourse that identifies youths as strategic agents of development, although it is presented as an innovative and progressive discourse, because it is associated to the matrix of social rights, is simultaneously based on the matrix of risk, poverty and social vulnerability, reviving practices of adjustment and disciplining of youths in the realm of the National Youth Policy, which came to be disputed by discursive and social practices of youth, youth movements and scholars who defend policies and a development model that recognizes youths as individuals and guarantees their rights. We also emphasize that it is essential to analyze the discourses about youth and the social matrixes that support them to understand the discursive and social practices that guide the policies, programs and actions aimed at this segment, and to assist in the construction of strategies of resistance and emancipatory practices.

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## Nota

- 1 We highlight the creation of the Special Commission for Studying and Proposing Public Policies for Youth (CEJUVENT) of the federal chamber of deputies (2003); the realization of Project Youth (2003), of the Citizenship Institute; and the implementation of the Interministerial Group for Youth of the federal government.



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