

The origins of “*vale-tudo*” in the city of Curitiba, PR: memories on identity, masculinity and violence

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Abstract: This article aims to analyze how teachers (masters) and former practitioners of fighting sports and martial arts present their memories about the early days of practice that became known as *Vale-Tudo* (“Anything Goes”) in Curitiba, Brazil. Through theoretical procedures of Oral History we observed that memory fragments analyzed are not restricted to interpretation of the origins of that practice, since they are also traversed by discourses related to the process of identity construction and constant virility tests. We come to the conclusion that memory established and that male ethos have their core element in the – real and symbolic – violence that accompanies the formation of fighters.

Keywords: “Vale-tudo”. Memory. Identity. Masculinity. Violence.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, the city of Curitiba was the scene of a series of strong physical confrontations between practitioners of fighting

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sports, especially representatives of Muay Thai¹ and Capoeira.²

Such confrontations used to occur on streets, nightclubs and in any place where there was the opportunity for those fighters to demonstrate their technical superiority while testing their virility. Therefore, Edison Luis Gastaldo and Adriana Andrade Braga (2011), in an ethnographic study with Kickboxing practitioners in Porto Alegre-RS, explain that:

The practice of disputes and competition can be considered a widespread feature of male ethos. [...] In several distinct cultures, social assertion of ‘being a man’ includes disputes with other men, whether directly, in a close combat or through more subtle means such as verbal challenges, insult tournaments or betting on cockfights (GASTALDO; BRAGA, 2011, p 880).

The main clashes in Curitiba in the 1990s happened between practitioners from the main Muay Thai gym at the time – which later became a great place to form “Vale-Tudo”³ fighters – and by capoeirists linked to one of the people who brought “Capoeira Angola”⁴ to Curitiba (in the early 1970s). Therefore, leaders of the two gyms made an agreement to restrain confrontations between their athletes, which were becoming more frequent and violent. The way to reduce such conflicts was by holding an event that explored the rivalry existing between athletes while giving them a chance to promote their respective sports.

Even the master of the above mentioned Muay Thai gym involved in that challenge admitted his participation in the first

¹Muay Thai or Thai Boxing is an Eastern martial art also known as “Fight of the eight weapons”, since it involves contact blows using both fists, elbows, knees and shins.

²Capoeira can be considered a hybrid practice because it contains elements of dance, play and fight.

³“Vale-Tudo” tournaments (also known as interstyle or freestyle competitions) aimed to confront representatives from different fighting sports in order to prove which was the most efficient; differently from what the term might suggest, they were not ruleless fights where everything was allowed.

⁴The so-called “Angola” Capoeira came to challenge another style of Capoeira, known as “Regional”. The main representatives of the two styles were Master Pastinha (Angola Capoeira) and Master Bimba (Regional Capoeira).

major event with practitioners of different modalities, explaining:

[...] “Vale-Tudo” started here because a Muay Thai student at my gym fell out with a Capoeira student and the capoeirists suggested that we chose five of their representatives and five Muay Thai practitioners to fight in the Military Circle gym. (Respondent 8 – Muay Thai master – interviewed on Nov. 19, 2012.).

According to almost all respondents in the study⁵ that originated this article, it was about “settling scores” between rivals but also a smart business move, as evidenced by the following narrative:

[...] Instead of fighting in a gym to see who was the best, who was the strongest, to solve their disagreements, they looked at the business side of it: Why don’t we promote it as an event instead of doing it here just for 30 people at the gym? We can do it for three thousand people at the Military Circle [gym], and that’s when it all began. (Respondent 10 – former Wrestling professor and former “Vale-Tudo” fighter – interviewed on Nov 23, 2012.).

This institutionalized confrontation between capoeirists and Muay Thai practitioners took place on August 29, 1993, and became known as the birth of “Vale-Tudo” in Curitiba. More than factual data, what we seek through the memories presented in this article is what Michael Pollak (1989) called “memory framing work.”

That is, we seek to understand how such memories about the origins of “Vale-Tudo” in Curitiba were formed and the meanings and significances underlying such memories. Therefore, it is possible to identify in the selected narrative fragments perceptions and interpretations of the process through which a fighter must pass before being accepted by his/her group, which is also a process of identity formation, both individual and collective. Notions and

⁵Ten interviews were conducted with people directly involved in Martial Arts in the city of Curitiba, PR, especially involved with modalities and events indicated throughout this text.

understandings of masculinity and virility also emerge in such narratives (memories) that are part of the identity of fighters' ethos.

Other important theoretical contributions have been made, not specifically about the beginning of the practice of "Vale-Tudo" in the city in question, but about fighters' identity formation process – in different fights. Examples include the works of Gastaldo (1995); Cecchetto (2004); Nunes (2004); Mayer (2005); Polato (2006); Teixeira (2008), among others.

Given the foregoing, the question is: which are the memories and discourses of teachers (masters) and former practitioners of different types of fights and martial arts who took part in the early days of the practice that became known as "Vale-Tudo" in the city of Curitiba, and how do those memories and discourses manifest themselves?

In order to answer that question-problem, the methodology used in the process of capturing and processing the interviews is Oral History (Alessandro Portelli, 2010a, 2010b, 1996; and Verena Alberti, 2005). Respondents' discourses (memories) were analyzed based on concepts from different disciplines (History, Oral History, Sociology, Anthropology and Gender Studies), since the narratives include a number of notions that overlap and require different theoretical perspectives. To analyze the concepts of (individual and group) memory and identity, we adopted Michael Pollak's (1989, 1992) texts, whereas Edson Luiz Gastaldo (1995), Robert Connel (1997), Guacira Lopes Louro (2001) and Fátima Regina Cecchetto (2004) helped to reflect on violence, identity and masculinity. In addition, some of Pierre Bourdieu's (1983) interpretive categories – especially the concepts of habitus and class ethos – were also used here.

This article proposes an interpretation of interpretations. Therefore, it is important to consider the significant number of layers that overlap while amalgamating, always generating new interpretations. In this regard, oral historian Alessandro Portelli says that memory:

[...] is less a ‘testimony’ on events and more a ‘construction’ made of words through the collaboration of editors, interviewers, witnesses and narrators, each of them seeking to give form and meaning to experience and memory through language (PORTELLI, 2010a, p. 187).

2 THE PROCESS OF FORMATION OF INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AMONG *VALE-TUDO* PRACTITIONERS

In the late 1970s, the city of Curitiba saw the emergence of a new martial art form that quickly became popular and revealed athletes of national and international reputation: Muay Thai, also known as Thai Boxing. The fight, previously unknown, arrived in Brazil through the Curitiba experience and then spread to other states such as the Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. According to respondents’ narratives, the individual responsible for the introduction of that fight was then Taekwondo black belt holder Nélío Borges de Souza, also known as Nélío “Cobra”.

The successful career record of several Curitiba athletes who acquired national and international prominence in “Vale-Tudo” events and later in Mixed Martial Arts⁶ is seen as a result of Muay Thai’s pioneering role in the city. According to some respondents:

Curitiba is now a showcase for “Vale-Tudo”. It’s a fighter factory. It’s something that came up unintentionally and today we have several fighters like Anderson [Silva] who are known worldwide. (Respondent 4 – Capoeira master – interviewed on Nov 7, 2012).

[...] Curitiba grew because the DNA of MMA fell in Curitiba. (Respondent 1 – former Muay Thai practitioner – interviewed on Sept. 21, 2012).

⁶Mixed Martial Arts, best known as MMA, is a sport that encompasses techniques from several fights such as Jiu-jitsu, Muay Thai, Wrestling, Boxing, Judo, Capoeira, Taekwondo. Although there is a connection between “Vale-Tudo” and MMA, this relationship cannot be seen as continuous or linear.

When I started practicing, there was already a structure; a foundation of wisdom had been built, the science of Muay Thai, and thank God I was practicing at that time. (Respondent 3 – Muay Thai master – interviewed on Oct., 20 2012).

I went to plenty of events at the time, when I took part in competitions. And when people learned I was from Curitiba, they would come to take pictures with me before the event and they didn't even know if I was any good. Because of the importance we had – Muay Thai emerged here, it's the flagship of Curitiba fighters. (Respondent 5 – former Muay Thai fighter and master – interviewed on Nov. 8, 2012)

That Muay Thai which led several fighters to be champions, it was because they have a very fine tuned was of fighting. (Respondent 8 – Muay Thai master – interviewed on Oct. 19, 2012).

The terms used – “factory”, “DNA”, “science”, “base” and “structure” – show that individuals who were involved with the sport during that initial period and its subsequent development attach features such as tradition and evolution to the practice.

The success of local fighters⁷ in international competitions would be due to their practice that originated in the Curitiba experience with Muay Thai and the acquisition of their own style of fighting and practicing. Moreover, some fighting events⁸ that slowly emerged in the city were among major events in the national scene at the time, with audience and technical level as their parameters.

Other aspects that have also led Curitiba fighters to become champions and “make it” were an attitude and a very specific

⁷Some prominent names on the international scene of Mixed Martial Arts who practiced in Curitiba's Muay Thai were: José “Pelé” Landy, Wanderlei Silva, Murilo “Ninja” Rua, Assuério Silva, Mauricio “Shogun” Rua, Anderson “The Spider” Silva, and Cristiane “Cyborg” Justino.

⁸Street Fighter (1996, 1997, 1998); Meca World Vale-Tudo began in 1999 and had nine editions; Storm Samurai appeared in 2003 and had 15 editions until 2004.

practicing method:

The technique of the gym with this very aggressive Muay Thai, mixed with its philosophy that coaches convey to athletes to get them to be hardened, to go to the end of the fight. Practicing sessions were also very hard. [...] Some think it was arrogance, but it was good. [...] This confidence I consider positive for the athlete, he comes with the obligation not only to himself, but you know there's a team behind him. [...] I think that many who don't have this philosophy end up giving up easier. (Respondent 8 – Muay Thai master – interviewed on Nov. 19, 2012).

Accepting and facing challenges are seen as pillars of masculinity (GASTALDO; BRAGA, 2011). In this context, the fighter enters the fight with the obligation to win, regardless of the consequences. Self-confidence – and in some cases, an arrogant attitude – is part of the group's philosophy and shows the pressure on members, especially from other members in competitive situations.

In the construction of masculinity, learning a fighting technique is an integral part of body formation, especially in competitive situations in which an aggressive attitude toward the opponent is associated with virility,⁹ strength and masculinity, according to Louro:

[...] Competition is inherent in most sports practices. Of course being the best in sports may represent a valued symbol of masculinity, especially for a boy or a young man (LOURO, 2001, p. 75).

Therefore, “tenacity and determination would be required from men when seeking victory in combat” (CECCHETTO, 2004, p. 142) – values that are also known as “spunk”, “giving one's blood”, being “a warrior”. In that process of becoming (and proving

⁹Virility, according to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, can be understood “[...] both as sexual reproductive capacity and as fitness for confrontation clash and the exercise of violence” (BOURDIEU, 2007a, p. 63).

to be) a fighter, there is appropriation of what Wacquant (2002, p. 34) called *pugilistic habitus*, which in turn is characterized by both the individual and collective perspectives as the individual

[...] appropriates, by progressive impregnation, a set of body mechanisms and mindsets so closely interwoven that they erase the distinction between physical and spiritual, between what emerges from athletic abilities and what regards moral faculties and will (WACQUANT, 2002, p. 34).

Overestimation of this fierce attitude, which can cause attacks as the result of identity construction of both athletes and their group, enables transmission of status and power relations that reveal meanings of belonging and self-assertion.

From this point of view, a gym where martial arts, fights and combat sports¹⁰ are practiced is a male space not only because it requires huge sacrifices from practitioners' bodies or because these practitioners, in order to gain recognition from their peers, must show a "warrior" spirit by constantly overcoming situations of pain, injury, fear and challenges.

Respondents attribute a sense of pride to their experiences when undergoing the strenuous practice "of that time":

[...] Curitiba has created top level fighters because Muay Thai has been here for a long time and it has been "chewed" [made easier]. Those who started in the 1980s gave it already "chewed" to them and they suffered a lot. (Respondent 2 – former Muay Thai fighter and master – interviewed on Oct., 6 2012).

I practiced until 1989, when the floor was still Vinyl, there was only one glove and we used bamboo to harden our shins. (Respondent 1 –

10 The designation Combat Sports implies a pattern of fighting practices, martial arts and combat systems systematized as modern cultural events, guided by the codes offered by sports institutions. Aspects and concepts such as competition, measurement, application of scientific concepts, comparison of results, codified and institutionalized rules and norms, maximizing body performance and spectacularization of body language are some examples of this modern transposition of secular "fighting" practices (CORREIA; FRANCHINI, 2010, p. 2).

former Muay Thai practitioner – interviewed on Sept. 21, 2012).

Those who begin practicing today have no idea of what we used to do in the 80s [...] it was elbow and knee blows; it was a dark business [...] And thank God I practiced at that time. (Respondent 3 – Muay Thai master – interviewed on Oct. 20, 2012).

There is a nostalgic feeling about the context of “hard” practice in the early times of the sport. In a way, today’s practice would be “chewed” (facilitated) due to sportivization process that the sport underwent over time. Those circumstances that manufactured bodies through hard practice were necessary for the sport to reach a refinement stage.

The training experiences gradually established a fine body method as well a *habitus* typical of the fighters of that period.

The term *habitus* is used here according to Bourdieu (1998), who explains that the set of dispositions that become internalized by practitioners can be understood as “[...] subjective principles of vision, cognitive categories through which individuals see and construct the world as meaningful, live reality” (BOURDIEU, 1998, p. 19).

Understanding pain as a necessary and essential means to strengthen bodies can be interpreted as part of the *habitus* built by the group. That set of action-oriented references and dispositions is seen as “[...] a pre-reflective way for the body to internalize cultural patterns and experiences and transmute them into an ‘embodied policy’” (BOURDIEU, 1998, p. 19).

These inscriptions on the bodies of individuals happen through construction of capitals as very particular forms of investment based on practice (injured shins, face cuts, broken teeth, fractured ribs, etc.). That is a form of capitalization through pain. This embodied physical capital is a form of cultural capital acquired with effort and in a personal way, through a continuous – and long-term –

process of learning and accumulation of individual knowledge.

The incorporation of a *habitus* about what it means to be male into the process of constitution of male subjectivity is so ingrained in our society that the differences start to be seen as natural and immutable. However, dealing with masculinity just as the opposite of femininity does not give it actual existence, since it is historically possible to detect that “[...] all societies have cultural records of gender, but not all of them have the concept of masculinity” (CONNELL, 1997 p. 35). Thus, the concept of male and notions of masculinity exist as individual and social constructions linked to certain social views and norms, socialization processes, and power structures and relations formed and transformed in history and, therefore, “[...] genders are constructed within social relations” (LOURO, 2001 p. 22).

In general, physical practices aimed at body performance are associated with the male gender because they enable the display of virility. Identification with the male gender is still amalgamated “[...] with a kind of scale where an individual’s masculinity can be symbolically ranked over another’s” (GASTALDO; BRAGA, 2001, p. 886). Considering this gender polarization and the hierarchy of masculinities, it is important to highlight some of the rites that determine this demarcation process.

3 How a fighter is “forged”: the construction of masculinity in gyms and also on the streets

At the micro-space studied – the city of Curitiba – it was possible to detect that rituals linked to fights, martial arts and combat sports in general include a symbolism originated in the field of male virility. These “initiation rites” that occurred within gyms would be forms of distinction and male identity formation. According to Louro:

In their social relations, traversed by different discourses, symbols, representations and practices, subjects are constructed as male or

female, arranging or disarranging their social places, their dispositions, their ways of being and living in the world (LOURO, 2001, p. 28).

In the environment of combat sports gyms, recognition requires traveling a well-marked path until it happens: the grade or belt, for instance, attests that practitioners have undergone situations such as overcoming several pains, mastering techniques and knowing their own bodies.

For example, transition between grades – present in sports such as Muay Thai, Jiu-Jitsu, Capoeira, Judo, Taekwondo, among others – contains an idea of tradition, which is an important part of both individual and collective memory, further strengthening group/tribal identity and the distinctive feeling toward those who do not go through the same path. According to Louro (2001, p. 91), “[...] in order to give those subjects the sense of belonging to the institution, it has to distinguish them from others who are outside its walls”.

Therefore, the higher the grade, the greater the moral power in the hierarchy scale existing in gyms/teams, especially within groups, as evidenced by the following excerpt:

We used to learn most Taekwondo moves until the second belt. From the third belt on, we learned Muay Thai. So in the first and second belts you’d learn more kicks. And from the third grade on, there would be the more traumatic moves of hands, elbows and knees, besides traditional Boxing. (Respondent 5 – former Muay Thai fighter and master – interviewed on Nov. 08, 2012).

Also according to respondents, being within this martial hierarchical structure not only used to mean submission to the master and senior mates, but also limitation on access to techniques within a rule-bound process of expertise transmission. The change of grades, considered a rite of passage, would indicate practitioners’ progress in status within the group after they showed improved mastery of techniques.

The figure of the master is also presented as the highest rank in the hierarchy, as the top authority in that microcosm of the world of martial arts, because he is given the power of legitimate knowledge of the techniques to be taught. He exercises a legitimizing and key role in the practice process, i. e. in practice in general. As arbitrary as his indications might seem, hardly anyone would question his power, as seen in the following account:

Today I stop and think about the absurd things our master would tell us to do. We had no protection for shin, chest, our helmet was all torn and there was only one. [...] And in the move we could hit a face with our knee or elbow. Each day someone would go to the hospital [...] Some things can't be practiced, can't be taught. (Respondent 3 – Muay Thai master – interviewed on Oct. 20 2012.).

While the master's authority was indisputable, the lack of his presence to guide students' actions could also cause disorientation. The teacher's absence was an argument to get involved in fights out of the gyms:

It's easier when you solve things "by hand" [fights]. That was the time that we lived, we were all young, I migrated over here and pulled away from my master, I had no guidance. I learned a lot by getting beaten in life, I had lots of trouble with fights, lots of lawsuits. (Respondent 6 – Capoeira master – interviewed on Nov. 9, 2012).

The process of acquisition of combat techniques includes aspects involving social construction of masculinity and its constant (re)assertion through public displays of violence and that, in turn, [...] "can be a way of strengthening or asserting masculinity in group fights" (CONNELL, 1997, p. 44).

Identification of someone as male occurs in polar situations of victory or defeat by applying techniques and physical strength acquired by an almost always exhaustive process. Respondents often emphasize that commitment to practicing and mastery of specific combat movements should be tested in real competitive situations.

The fact that there was no chance for disputes between rival teams in rule-bound competitions is pointed out as a factor causing fights in different spaces, rather than that specific to gyms, and combats under rules were restricted to fighters’ own gyms and among group mates:

Curitiba had two gyms and they were real rivals, not only in sports, but real rivals! And at the time there were no such confrontations with it. We’d fight with our practicing partners. (Respondent 5 – former Muay Thai fighter and master – interviewed on Nov. 8, 2012).

People here in Curitiba are used to hand fighting and there were no events. In my time as a fighter, I used to fight only within the academy in belt examinations because there were no events. (Respondent 2 – former Muay Thai fighter and master – interviewed on Oct. 6, 2012).

For a fighter, a combat represented, among other things, the opportunity to publicly demonstrate aspects that were socially valued in the construction of his identity, as perceived by Louro (2001, p. 12): “therefore, recognizing oneself in an identity presupposes responding positively to a challenge and establishing a sense of belonging to a social group of reference”.

The ability to create violence, linked to other aspects associated to the male gender, such as the courage to take risks, to get in the ring and exchange traumatic blows, would satiate the “[...] desire to see the recognition of one’s excellence in a particular field” (GASTALDO; BRAGA, 2011, p. 889).

Still about this aspect, instrumental aggression in fights has often been defined as preexisting or as latent “energy” that would need to be let out. Conflicts between groups and power relations become almost a theory of primal instinct rather than something socially learned and fed (WACQUANT, 2002). This self-perception of a fighter identity considered masculine is guaranteed not only by anatomical attributes, but also by the individual’s affiliation to a

group and to certain values and behaviors considered masculine (GASTALDO; BRAGA, 2011).

There is a process of socialization in the practices that are produced, reproduced and repeated in those spaces of belonging and voluntary pursuit of risk. Both – the process of sociability and the pursuit of risk – emerge in a context of violence. Regarding fighters, the association of heavy exercise to shape the body by strengthening muscles with the aim of preparing for fights and specially the acquisition of combat techniques enhance the ethos related to the willingness for combat existing in the socially regulated cult of violence (WACQUANT, 2002, p. 33).

This peculiar ethos has the potential to trigger extremely violent attitudes motivated by the desire to cause pain and suffering to opponents in a situation of competition, whether or not it is institutionalized.

Therefore, they need to prove the superiority of their fight and consequently of their group of belonging, going beyond the established spaces of gyms, with the occurrence of brawls in inappropriate public and private spaces, in what is commonly called “street fight”. That violent rivalry sees the use of brutality, especially physical aggression, as legitimate when tensions between the groups become extreme. As pointed out by respondents:

There was much rivalry and when I got here Capoeira had to assert itself as fight, so a lot of people came to challenge us, so we had to fight. (Respondent 6 – Capoeira master – interviewed on Nov. 9, 2012).

They would meet in the streets and beat each other up. They used to walk in groups, it happened at the beach and also when they met in person. Ten, 15 people, everyone would fight. (Respondent 9 – Capoeira master and former “Vale-Tudo” fighter – interviewed on Nov. 22, 2012).

Those clashes were to show that “mine is better than yours”. Those were real street fights, they were clashing wherever they met. (Respondent

7 – former “Vale-Tudo” and Wrestling fighter – interviewed on Nov. 14, 2012).

Maybe there was already a “Vale-Tudo”, say, “in the closet”, through street fights, which today would be gang fighting. [...] All they wanted was to beat, to fight in the street. It was an ideological issue (Respondent 1 – former Muay Thai practitioner – interviewed on Sept. 21, 2012).

The strong and worked out male body faces constant trials, and “not taking insults” means not letting male skills to be undone or threatened. Virility associated with the demonstration of manly prowess” [...] demarcates one of the major axes through which men situate themselves and classify other men” (CECCHETTO, 2004, p. 79).

One person involved in street fights and also in the first “Vale-Tudo” of Curitiba recalls the rivalry that triggered institutionalization of the clashes:

[...] There was no technical level, it was really crazy. In fact, the referee himself didn’t know what to do because there were no rules, it included blows with head or, elbow, punches. (Respondent 9 – Capoeira master and former “Vale-Tudo” fighter – interviewed on Nov. 22, 2012).

The lack of rules and wanton violence demonstrate that the competitive model presented here (those clashes could not be defined as sports yet) ended up taking the form of appreciation of physical force in order to cause damage to one’s opponent and, above all, an attempt to assert the supremacy of a particular technique or modality.

4 FINAL REMARKS

Curitiba’s former “Vale-Tudo” is an element of the individual – and collective – identities of fighters who participated in that period when, according to respondents, everything was more

difficult: practicing sessions were harsher and body tests – real initiation and/or passage rites – were ongoing.

The memories presented in this article demonstrate meanings ascribed to the constitution of an ethos typical of fighters who participated in street clashes, and also in fights in the still precarious and/or improvised rings, demonstrating their virility and their sense of loyalty to the group to which they belonged.

The memory framing presented by respondents denotes – conscious and unconscious – perceptions and meanings attributed to the past. They include interesting strategies to overvalue a tortuous and austere – and even excessively unruly and violent – past, but which had its results¹¹ and is part of a slice of the recent history of development of Mixed Martial Arts in the international arena through its sportivization process occurred mainly due to its constant incorporation and adjustment of rules.

Nostalgia of a cruel and miserable past has been well studied by authors who looked into the characteristics of historiographical memory. Regarding the gains from such practices, we can invoke Pierre Bourdieu's ostensible research¹² about the different types of capital, their forms of conversion and reconversion, as well as their value in a symbolic but also concrete exchange market.

Since memory is understood here as “possibility”, there will always be other ways and forms of approaching, according to the theoretical repertoire from which we start, but mostly because of what was reported in memory descriptions.

¹¹That gain can be interpreted as the prominent position of some of the subjects interviewed here as well as their new gyms or “business”.

¹²There are several works published in Brazil in which Pierre Bourdieu discusses the notion of capital, its different presentations (knowledge and recognition) and its several possibilities of conversion and reconversion. They include: *Questões de sociologia* (1983); *Poder simbólico* (2007); *A economia das trocas simbólicas* (2013); *A Produção da Crença: contribuição para uma economia dos bens simbólicos* (2001), to name a few.

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