

Crackland: Beyond Crack Cocaine

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Abstract

Background: Crackland is a marginal neighborhood located in the center of Sao Paulo. It contains a crack cocaine market and serves as a home for the homeless. **Objective:** This study describes the social reproduction of subjects who visit or live in Crackland and analyzes their life trajectory. **Methods:** The study employs the theoretical and methodological perspective of historical and dialectical materialism and approaches drug consumption as a complex social process. This is a qualitative case study, utilizing in-depth interviews with ten individuals living in Crackland (nine men and one woman) who were recruited using a snowball methodology. We collected the life histories of these individuals and used a set of variables related to social reproduction in order to

determine the Social Reproduction Index (SRI) of the individuals' families, allocating them to different social groups. **Results:** The individuals came from families with different SRI, and came from various states of Brazil. They migrated to Crackland for diverse reasons: threats to their life, escape from imprisonment, political persecution, and, especially, to seek better social conditions. With regards to drug use, seven reported using crack cocaine and other illicit drugs. People in Crackland are primarily trapped in processes of impoverishment and marginalization and they lack social protection. The occupants of Crackland are part of the *lumpen proletariat*, being marginal to most institutional social protections. They develop self-defense strategies and survive by working in informal and sporadic jobs, staying active, and even providing for their families of origin. **Conclusion:** Crack cocaine use is a small part of the lives of our subjects. Instead of focusing on the effects of the drugs on the brain and individual subjectivity, this study brings to light that *social issues* are the central category for understanding the "social subjects" who live and work in Crackland. **Keywords:** Public Health; Drug Use; Crack Cocaine; Life History; Social Marginalization; Social Protection; Social Problems; Brazil.

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Introduction

This study is about "social subjects" who live in Crackland, an area of public crack cocaine consumption located in the old downtown area of São Paulo, Brazil.* The constitution of this social space is best understood as a complex mixture of the historical, the geographical, and the social. São Paulo was the first Brazilian city to record the presence of crack cocaine consumption in 1988 and today features Brazil's most famous Crackland.¹

*"Crackland" is capitalized, as we understand that its unique features mark the place as an icon with broad social recognition.

The development of São Paulo's Crackland has been marked by distinct cycles. First, it was an area of grasslands and wetlands. Then it became an area where the wealthy of the city resided. Eventually, it degraded to its current social constitution.

For a long time, the area now known as Cracktown was an unused state property; it only became part of São Paulo after 1867, when the Luz railway station began operations. The São Paulo Railway linked the countryside to the port of Santos. From the early 20th century on, the elite began to flee the neighborhood. They migrated to emerging neighborhoods to the south and west of the city, fleeing from the recurring flooding of two important rivers: the Tietê and the Tamanduateí.²⁻⁵

The migration of the elite led to diversification in the region. Various social groups occupied the territory, and in the mid-20th century, the region started to deteriorate with the development of slums and increasingly precarious conditions of social reproduction.[†] Impoverished people and indigents began to gather in the area, living in slums and clandestine flophouses and working in informal jobs. Beginning in the 1980s, the area becomes a major center for crack cocaine consumption.⁶

Data from surveys conducted by the Economic Research Institute Foundation⁷ document that the highest concentration of homeless people occurs in the central region of São Paulo within which Crackland sits. Most people living on the streets (74%) say they consume alcohol and/or other drugs or both. Among young people aged to 18 to 30 years, alcohol and drug consumption is as high as 80%. Among older individuals, alcohol is the most commonly used substance (65%). A study by

[†] Social reproduction according to Campaña (1997, p. 133)³ is "the entire social life characterized by the ways of working and consuming, by the relations that human beings establish with each other to produce social life, by the way in which they transform nature, the way in which they distribute and exchange socially produced goods, the institutions they generate, and the level of awareness and organization they achieve. Critical (or social) epidemiology (Breilh, 2015)⁴ has adopted this concept to analyze social inequalities. Basically, it provides practical support for the establishment of relationships between different health-disease profiles and the material life conditions of individuals, families, and social groups. It is based on the assumption that variables related to ways of producing and consuming have the potential to reveal the social belonging of individuals, families and social groups when analyzed articulately.⁵

Varanda et. al.⁸ questioned the conclusion that people ended up on the streets as a consequence of drug use; in most cases the reverse occurred: people became substance abusers while on the streets. Their reasons for consumption were actually the same reasons that led them to live on the streets: the difficulty of staying in the labor market, lack of social protection, and other factors such as poverty, domestic violence, child labor, neglect, and imprisonment.

Recent research estimates that about 80% of Brazilian crack cocaine consumers use this drug in public spaces of social interaction.⁹ The typical consumer is a young man, with little formal education, unemployed, without fixed income, and usually living on the streets.⁹ Rui describes Crackland as a "huge market, inside of which crack cocaine is bought, sold, exchanged, negotiated and, essentially, exploited."^{10,p72}

Drug use is not the only reason for the high number of people living on the streets and the precarious job market in central São Paulo; real estate speculation also plays an important role in Crackland. Many properties have been expropriated by the government to make way for a new urban plan – the Nova Luz project – which is led by a consortium of construction companies headed by Cia City. Cia City has been involved in real estate speculation since the early 20th century.¹¹ Property speculation has a large impact on many policies, programs, and actions in the public sphere, including the health sector. It can ultimately trigger public health efforts to remove poor and troubled people from the area.

The *social issue*, following Netto¹¹, is considered to be the set of political, social and economic problems imposed by the emergence of the working class on the course of capitalist society, and it is thus deeply linked to the conflict between capital and labor. "Social subject" refers to an individual's property of being located in history and conditioned by social formation. "All social and cognitive processes do have a meaning which is indeed 'constructed' by the subject, but the subject is a *social* subject, rather than an individual, and his or her activity is socially and historically conditioned."¹³

The fundamentals of historical and dialectical materialism support an understanding of the phenomenon of drug use as a social process and allow the development of a theoretical framework to explain drug consumption in the present based on

structural determination and the mediation of social dynamics inherent in the current model of capitalist accumulation.¹⁴ We assume that people in Crackland are part of marginalized social groups. Marginalization is an attribute of the *social issue* and shows the inability of the poorest strata of the working class to access socially produced assets, especially urban infrastructure. This population is involved with drugs in some way, as shown by an evaluation of a harm reduction unit that reaches out to people working in the streets in the São Paulo metropolitan area.¹⁵

It is in this context that one can speak of “social subjects” who join Crackland. Our assumption is that Crackland is a consequence of the *social issue* and houses part of the *lumpen proletariat*, given their condition of social marginalization. We chose to capture their individual stories in order to identify their class of origin, their current condition, and the common traits that keep people in a space of social invisibility,

Research Question

This study was designed to: a) characterize the social reproduction of subjects who visit or live in Crackland; b) analyze the life trajectory of these persons.

Materials and Methods

This research analyzes ten case studies. Data was collected in Crackland in November and December of 2013. As a health worker well acquainted with Crackland, the lead investigator took an ethnographic approach to contact the participants, mostly on the streets. Interviews were conducted in commercial establishments in the area with the permission of the owners.

The snowball strategy was used to establish new contacts based on the social relations of the participants. Ten interviews were carried out with nine men and one woman.

Semi-structured interviews were used with closed questions about social reproduction variables and open questions about the lives of the subjects in Crackland, their social relations, and the use of crack cocaine. Life histories of the participants were explored using open-ended questions¹⁶ in order to understand changes that occurred in the work and life of research participants.

Analysis of data followed the general precepts of dialectical methodology. To bring out the essential categories necessary to understand the

paths that led the subjects to Crackland we employed content analysis¹⁷ of qualitative data from the life histories, as well as the social reproduction index (SRI)⁵ to classify the families of origin of participants.

The social reproduction index (SRI) is a classification of individual families developed by Trapé to place families into one of four social groups (I, II, III, IV).⁵ It uses a standardized set of variables (see Table, page 11) and was administered to all subjects. The SRI relies on *production variables*, which refer to the householder, and *consumption variables*, which refer to the whole family. The table shows the variables and their assigned weight (A to I). These weights are analyzed by pre-determined equations and used to classify each family in one group with Group I being the most stable and Group 4 the least stable.

Ethical Aspects

The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Nursing, University of São Paulo, in accordance with the *Resolution 466*.¹⁸ All participants signed a Free and Informed Consent form and confidentiality was ensured.

Results

The participants' families of origin were placed in different social groups using the SRI. It is not possible to generalize the SRI results to the entire group of people who make up Crackland, since no procedures were used to obtain a representative sample. Likewise, subjects presented to the researcher based on their social circle, thus making them part of the same relationship group with its own criteria for accepting members.

Group I

The families of origin of two subjects were classified in this group, which was defined as having the greatest stability of social reproduction. These families were characterized by the following features: access to basic sanitation, home ownership, skilled labor by the householder, and access to various forms of leisure.

It might be supposed that people from families with stable conditions of social reproduction ended up in Crackland because of crack cocaine use. However, information collected in the interviews revealed important social features for understanding

Table: Components of the SRI (Social Reproduction Index)*

Variables Related to Production			
Dimensions	Assigned weights	Dimensions	Assigned weights
Technical preparation for current job	(A)	General Services Occupation	
• No	0	• informal sector wage earner, house worker, freelancer	11
• Yes		• single task job, unemployed	10
Occupations	(B)	• retired, pensioner, out of work due illness and employer or formal sector worker	12
Poorly Defined Occupation		Unskilled Labor	
• informal sector wage earner, house worker, freelancer	2	• informal sector wage earner, house worker, freelance	14
• single task job, unemployed	1	• single task job, unemployed	13
• retired, pensioner, out of work due illness, and employer or formal sector worker	3	• retired, pensioner, out of work due illness and employer or formal sector worker	15
Support Activities		Semiskilled labor	
• informal sector wage earner, house worker, freelance	5	• informal sector wage earner, house worker, freelancer	17
• single task job, unemployed	4	• single task job, unemployed	16
• retired, pensioner, out of work due illness and employer or formal sector worker	6	• retired, pensioner, out of work due illness and employer or formal sector worker	18
Works in an office		Trained Professional	
• informal sector wage earner, house worker, freelance	8	• informal sector wage earner, house worker, freelancer	19
• single task job, unemployed	7	• single task job, unemployed	20
• retired, pensioner, out of work due illness and employer or formal sector worker	9	• retired, pensioner, out of work due illness and employer or formal sector worker	21
Planning and Organization	22	Businessman, Director, Manager	23
Variables related to Consumption			
Residence ownership?	(C)	Access to sewage public service?	(F)
• Ceded, Other	0	• No	0
• Rental	1	• Yes	1
• Mortgage	2	Go to church for leisure?	(G)
• Ownership (Regular or Irregular)	3	• No	0
Receive water bill?	(D)	• Yes	1
• No	0	Pay municipal residential tax?	(H)
• Yes	1	• No	0
Receive energy bill?	(E)	• Yes	1
• No	0	Number of bedrooms in the house?	(I)
• Yes	1	• 0	0
		• 1	1
		• 2	2
		• 3 or more	3

Source: Trapé, 2011⁵

how individuals from families with stable patterns of social reproduction could end up in Crackland. These elements are related to the contradictory nature of the Brazilian social protection system, which was decisive for this social group.

In Interview 1, the subject's family of origin was typical for Group 1. However, he had been adopted and this led to significant changes in the social patterns he experienced. Thus, despite being a member of a family with access to goods, he did not experience the usual patterns of socialization and he had difficulty joining the appropriate social group. As he explained:

I was born in São Paulo. I don't know my biological mother. I was collected by the Guardianship Council and then adopted by a family (...) I studied in a good school, but people called me names such as monkey and mistreated me. So I had to defend myself, right? Nobody wanted to understand my feelings. Then, I lost the will to go to school. I met only another "bro" outside school, who really was a dude. (...) Now I've lost my relationship with my mother (...) (II)

The adoptive family and the school institutions were unable to help this boy from a poor background. Consequently, he was discriminated against and marginalized. The school, a socializing agency, proved unable to accept him; on the contrary, his experiences in school forced him to return to his social group of origin. No strategies of solidarity welcomed him and he was not well received in the "good school." He ended by breaking up with a social group with which he had not formed the expected bonds. Thus, the search for a group that might welcome him started very early.

The other individual whose family was classified in Group 1 presented a similar situation of exclusion due in this case to a work accident. The participant's rights were not guaranteed and his medical needs were not met by existing social institutions. He had no personal financial resources to pay household expenses and was blamed for the accident (in which there were other victims). His requests for help were denied. When he violently threatened to take his own life, he was admitted to a

‡ Popular Revolutionary Vanguard (PRV) was a radical left-wing Brazilian armed group founded in 1966 that struggled against the military regime of 1964 in Brazil. The PRV sought the establishment of a socialist government in the country. For more information, see:

psychiatric unit and was immediately medicated without full evaluation of his condition.

I had polytrauma. That was back in 1998, I was laid off permanently, I was retired... (...) I called the (...) [company I worked for] and got no response about money or anything. (...) One day when the company had already cut off my electricity, I put on my uniform and badge and put 4 liters of gasoline in a backpack. I went in the (...) [company] building (...) I threw gasoline on my body and all over the carpet (...) I said I would set fire to everything. (...) When I surrendered, I ended up in Osasco [a city near São Paulo, Brazil]. I got injections and was hospitalized for 28 days in the (...) [a mental health service]. Finally, I came straight back here [Crackland]. (I2)

Group 2

The families of five individuals were classified in Group 2. The primary issues in this group were precarious assimilation into the labor market and the occupational history of the heads of the families of origin.

Two of the five subjects showed characteristics that were distinct from the rest of the group. The first had an important history of membership in a left-wing revolutionary group; he reported having been a Popular Revolutionary Vanguard (PRV) militant. He came from a Jewish immigrant family. He reported that his higher education took place in prison while serving a sentence in Carandiru, a former Public Detention House of São Paulo. Through a program in the prison system, he obtained a degree in social communication from a renowned private university. He currently works as journalist.

The second subject was a worker who has been living in Crackland for many years. He had attended school through the sixth grade and is currently owner of one of the hostels rented by the municipal government of São Paulo for street people.

Chagas FAG. The Revolutionary Popular Vanguard: dilemmas and perspectives of armed struggle in Brazil - 1968-1971 [Master's degree thesis]. School of History, Law and Social Work, São Paulo State University "Júlio de Mesquita Filho", 2000.

It is important to emphasize that these two subjects did not use crack cocaine and had never used it. They live in Crackland because they feel attached to it: it was the first place they came to in São Paulo when they left their hometowns. It is the place that welcomed them.

The other three participants had low-skilled jobs: kitchen helper, recyclables collector, and building electrician.

(...) as [I collect] it is cardboard, it is very cheap, so I have to work all day long to earn 10 or 20 reales (about US\$5) (I3)

Then I worked a little, washing in the kitchen, but I used to stay at night in a shelter with my son (...) (I4)

I4 discussed the trajectory of his family in their search for a better life.

My mother was badly injured and, you know, my father came from Ribeirão and he always worked in the fields there, but then they lost the plot where they grew cane. Have you been there? There is a lot of sugar, to [make] alcohol, the city smells of burnt cane. Then my father had to work in the sugar cane plantation, cutting cane. Have you seen what it's like? That's no life, it's death itself standing with the knife in his hand. There I heard talk about crack for the first time, you know? My father always said that it was other workers, just like him, who used it within the sugar cane fields. Seriously! Do you believe it? Then my father decided to leave because that was almost slavery.(I4)

Three individuals were crack cocaine and cocaine users and reported that they had left their hometowns because of problems with the law. For them Crackland seemed to be an invisible place within which to continue their lives.

There is nothing good here, the only good thing is that drugs are as easy to get as candy in the market, and also it's good here because no one will ever bother you if you are caring for your things. (I3)

These interviews show Crackland as a place for social protection in contradictory ways. In this place, you cannot trust anyone, but at the same time, any violent action receives sanctions that provide a sense of security that other territories cannot offer.

Here I feel safer than in my husband's house. If someone touches me he better have a good reason, otherwise he will have problems... (E4)

Group 3

No subject's families were classified in Group 3.

Group 4

The families of three individuals were classified in this group, defined as having the least stable patterns of social reproduction. Their families rarely had access to basic sanitation, the household heads had no schooling other than some elementary education, and they all performed domestic work.

These three individuals were from other states: Pará, Rio de Janeiro, and Minas Gerais. Two of the three respondents came to São Paulo to run away from trials in both the traffic and the legal system.

The relationship with my family is great. I talk to my mother almost every day. But I cannot go back there [Fortaleza]. I have debts with justice (I7).

I'll be honest! I came here because I had problems with the one [drug dealer] who controls the slum in Cantagalo. I had to leave because my mother and my brothers did not deserve to suffer because of me. I left quickly and came to where I had relatives, but there they did not welcome me because they knew I ended up working with the drug traffic in Rio and they said that the problem was mine, I had made bad decisions and must pay for them (I8).

These three people came from homes which did not have access to basic sanitation. There was not even regular sewage disposal in the house. One of the subjects explicitly said he had lived in a slum and assumed the poor conditions of his home of origin.

This group came from families that were already highly impoverished, and despite having their own house (under regular or irregular conditions), they affirmed that they did not pay taxes, as their houses had low value, they lived as squatters, or in houses that were located in unsafe areas.

I came from Bonsucesso[§], the jobs in the rural area were ending in Paraná, then I

[§] Neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro.

*thought - I am not going to work as "boia-fria."** I was going to try my luck in São Paulo and I came here. In the beginning, it was very difficult. I arrived at the central bus station and stayed there for forty days, eating banana peels. (110)*

Discussion

In Group 1, although the families of origin were part of a more stable social group, it became evident a lack of social protection put them into precarious situation; in Group 2, unemployment forced workers into informal and low-skilled work; in Group 4, workers left their original homes to seek better jobs. For them migration was a necessity not a free choice.

The lack of formal jobs that is a central part of the lives of our subjects and most of their families of origin marks them as part of the "superfluous population."¹⁹ Since the 1980s, neoliberal economic reorganization has eliminated thousands of formal jobs.²⁰ Not accidentally, this was the same period when Crackland was formed and the first crack cocaine stories emerged from São Paulo. By the middle of the 1990s, Crackland had started to attract media attention.

The current neoliberal conjuncture, characterized by a lack of social protection, makes the "refugees" who land in Crackland components of the surplus work force. They are to be exploited in informal or unhealthy jobs.

Migration toward richer areas is a common occurrence in Brazilian history, and the search for jobs is seen as the most important factor in the migration process. The migration histories of our subjects indicate that they too are seeking social stability.²¹ In Crackland, this movement is shown explicitly by the significant number of "arriving people." Milton Santos states that territory is neither a neutral factor nor a passive actor. "True schizophrenia is produced, as the places of choice receive and benefit the dominant rationality vectors,^{††} but also allow the emergence of other ways of life."^{22, p39}

** "Bóia-fria" (cold meal) refers to those rural workers who are hired by the day. They start working very early taking their lunch box to the cane field. There are no facilities to warm a meal.

†† The author uses the concept of vectors to explain how the actions of the two social classes - dominant and dominated - change in the dispute over territories.

The dominant discourse contends that dismissal from work is caused by drug use, especially the use of crack cocaine. It is claimed that removing drugs or drug users from the neighborhood would solve the problem, as affirmed in the literature associated with traditional public health.¹ However, the reality of Crackland is reproduced in many marginalized territories in Brazil, and the war on drugs has changed nothing.

Davis²³ analyzes similar situations in many other marginalized areas. He shows that even though many territories have social institutions, they are focused on the development of palliative actions. These programs do not relieve the tension provoked by unemployment; on the contrary, they aggravate those conditions and have created a mass of more than one billion unemployed people in the world. In Brazil, which adopted neoliberalism in the 1990s, one-third of the workforce is unemployed.

Thus, unemployment, firings, and the lack of formal employment are not confined to Crackland. They constitute a structural element of capitalism and affect the entire working class. The restructuring of production has generated an increase in the number of marginalized people, particularly those who reside in areas like Crackland. As a consequence, workers in Crackland do not expect to obtain formal jobs and search for alternatives in the informal field. Informal jobs are one of the issues that lead to insecurity and lack of social protection. It is appropriate to point out that the informal economy employs high numbers of workers in Latin America and is the source of four out of five "jobs."²⁴

Despite being marginalized in the job market, the *lumpen proletariat* becomes a massive portion

Influenced by world economic dynamics, these forces produce contradictions are expressed in these territories. From this, it is possible to argue that the territory of Crackland, although devalued by its occupation by the socially unprotected population, remains strategic to the city by the geographical centrality. It receives vectors of the fraction of the dominant class associated with real estate speculation. This speculative process changes the ways of living of those who inhabit Crackland when real estate begins to explore the territory and pushes drug users to more exposed places where they suffer more intense police action. This forces the creation of new forms of existence in the place where they are unwanted, but from where they do not wish to leave. Therefore permanent conflict is established in opposition to the rationality of the vectors produced by the dominant class.

of capitalist society. Social mobility may occur as people move from being in the proletariat to being in the *lumpen proletariat* and visa versa.²⁴

The *lumpen proletariat* is composed primarily of informal workers and is an expression of the marginalized peri-urban communities commonly seen in places like Crackland. Drug dealing is a very popular informal job.

Some unprotected groups stand out in the context of marginalization, such as poor migrants. This group seeks better living conditions and social protection by migrating to big cities. Many migrants go to Crackland, as the territory allows them to become invisible. It is also a desirable territory because it is located near the arrival points of São Paulo city; hence, it contains various third-sector social institutions (non-governmental organizations and other non-profit groups) as well as public institutions, who offer a guarantee of assistance in situations of extreme misery and illness.

The “collective ill-being”²⁵ seen in Crackland is therefore directly connected to both exploitation, which creates extreme social inequality, and the lack of social protection, which abandons individuals to their own destiny.

Castel²⁶ calls this type of ill-being “disaffiliation,” a concept we also found useful for understanding Crackland. It describes a condition resulting from the failure of the state to maintain a society able to guarantee that all subjects, regardless of background, have access to an existence free from unemployment, illness, and work accidents. Among other things, it means the working class is not protected. The present insecurity is largely a result of the “fragility of protective regulations.”

In a study conducted in Canada and the United States, Bourgois²⁷ makes a similar argument. He concludes that the structural dimension of unemployment and the inefficiency of public policies create groups ever more exposed to drug consumption, such as African-Americans, Latinos, rural-urban migrants, and prisoners. In Brazil, the “war on drugs” is one of the most efficient incarceration engines, affecting mainly the poor and black youths.²⁸ The study of macrosocial contexts can confront the reductionist hypothesis that drug use is related to the power of the drug over the brain and/or is a matter of individual choice.²⁹

Conclusion

The social reproduction of ten individuals who live or circulate in Crackland was analyzed by using

the SRI. This revealed that having no social institutions, or having ineffective ones, served equally to aggravate social insecurity and to marginalize stable groups that need societal institutions at some point in their lives.

Are there other solutions for them? What happens when people’s lives are submitted to the logic of the market without the necessary support of social institutions? Crackland seems to be one answer, one that proves that capitalism in its present phase reproduces social marginalization and aggravates pauperization.

The problem of poverty and misery in Crackland is not explained by the consumption of crack cocaine, but by the worsening of the *social issue*. Our results show that the “social subjects” who make up Crackland can be characterized as individuals who want to work, but appear to be discouraged by the absence of formal or decent job opportunities. Some thought that their lack of education was the real reason for their condition. Yet most people with formal education do not have stable jobs or are unemployed. There is much suffering and resentment, but not much consciousness regarding how society assigns them to their role as lumpen proletariat.

We also conclude that the use of crack cocaine is a phenomenon of the public rather than the private sphere. The media’s reporting on the “war on drugs” points the finger at the drug or the drug traffickers, not at capitalism’s failure to fulfill its civilizing promise to ensure human rights for all.

The occupants of Crackland are thus exposed and devoid of social protection. They must rely on their own self-defense strategies developed by living on the streets. One of these strategies is not to sleep at night; stimulant drugs serve this purpose very well. Staying up all night provides a sense of protection, as people on the streets are more at risk of being raped or even burned during the night.

The purpose of this research was to produce a basis for further emancipatory public policies developed from the harm reduction movement in opposition to the policies based on the “war on drugs.” The limitations of this study are mainly related to the impossibility of building complete life histories with long in-depth interviews and getting feedback from the interviewees on the findings, since they are people who are hard to reach. Future work should examine Crackland as a space of socialization and “protection” for the marginalized

portion of the *lumpen proletariat* that appears to find refuge there.

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