

# Crime as a Consequence of People's Exclusion From the Consumer Market\*

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This paper aims at understanding how people excluded from the consumer market end up in the criminal milieu as a viable solution for them. The literature review addresses one of the aspects of the capitalist system, which leads to exclusion and segregation in a large part of the consumer market population and, thus, can engender alienation and incursion into the criminal world. We intend to refer our study to the method of archival ethnography, since the material of our analysis is part of a research with people in deprivation of liberty. The process of interpretation makes it possible to understand that the segregating dynamics of the consumer market is responsible by an attempt of including people, even though in an alienated way, since they chose the crime instead.

*Keywords:* consumption, segregation, alienation, crime, prison

## Outlining the Question

We would like to begin our reflection by stating that crime has always existed but, nowadays, we cannot study it without making the necessary articulation with the political, social, and economic prevailing discourses. These discourses (science, through the production of truth and capitalism, with the proliferation of objects), control and shape great masses, being the mark of subjectivity in contemporaneity that depends on the feedbacks of the time that are imposed, recognized, and accepted.

Another side of the coin is the search for fads, one of the main problems in the contemporary world, since the eagerness to acquire material resources as a form of pleasure, vanity, success, and social recognition has become more and more frequent. The exaggerated display linked to consumerism and ostentation has reached different age groups and social classes. This scenario comes from a capitalist society, which organizes itself in a segregative and unequal way, leading poor people to engender survival strategies, viewing crime as a resource. However, it is a possible resource in which the human being is immersed in a kind of alienation and cannot even realize the total inversion of values in which “having” is in the main scene, instead of “being”. In this way, the field of criminal activity acquires a large contingent of people who, by not finding values, ideas, and references in their family, or in the social context, end up being segregated and massified by the systems of stigma and marginalization.

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In these conditions, the objects of consumption acquire a value that precedes that of life, exacerbating desires that are transformed into destructive power. To possess some objects means, for the human being of the present day, to have power and be socially recognized. Such a condition provokes a kind of alienation that impels people to desire goods at any cost, unleashing the most varied degrees of violence, followed by the illusion of satisfaction whose value surpasses life itself. In this regard, Kehl (2008) pointed out:

Market reasons only offer us the repetition of their own triviality, covered with the appearances of a “knowing how to live” that works if we manage to reduce life to its flatter dimension: the circuit of satisfying needs. This circuit seems to be that of the agitation of an insatiable desire, but it is not; for the objects offered for our satiety are as banal and equivalent as all commodities. Moreover, they are objects that exist in the world, creating the permanent illusion that desire can be satisfied—whereas the object of desire is a nonexistent object, lost forever, whose pursuit throws the subject into a relentless repetition. (p. 10)

Thus, Kehl drawn attention to the impossibility of satisfying desire and the appeal of the media-enforced consumer market, which incites the importance of “having” certain objects as well as forges a discourse based on very poor metaphors that promote the illusion of satisfaction.

It is on these paths that we will reflect on the narrative of a prisoner who, in the 1990s, was in deprivation of liberty for having committed a crime in which he participated as complicit for having lent a car to a friend. It is a 35-year-old man, married, father of two, who used to work in the same profession as his father, maintaining gas stations. He was sentenced to 12 years of imprisonment for participating in a kidnapping, having already served four years. At the time, he believed that because he was a worker, he would not be affected by the unfolding of the criminal action, although he knew that the person to whom he lent the vehicle had passages in the crime world.

Our objective is to understand how the affiliation with the criminal world can be an attempt to elaborate a traumatic experience related to living in precarious conditions, such as poverty, lack of security, among others. Thus, state managers, by neglecting the application of public policies, contribute indirectly to the exclusion of people from the consumer market, producing a way of alienation that favors the practice of many crimes, a factor that can further accentuate the traumatic experience due to the imprisonment.

### **Methodology**

The passages that shape the “corpus” of this study are derived from a history of the book: *Because, Anyway, We Kill?*, written by Francisco Ramos de Farias. It is worth clarifying that the temporal distance of the research is based on ethical precepts, such as preserving the integrity of the researcher and the identity of the person interviewed, so that they are not recognized in their reports. Currently, the results of this research are organized in the form of a dossier registered at the National Library Foundation in 2018 and it is available to researchers interested in the subject.

We chose the method of archival ethnography, because it is a means by which a material, derived from a research, can be transformed into conceptions of documentary value. That is, these same archives represent a rich field of research, increasingly used by researchers: A space where it is possible to observe and reflect. What was once held to be a repository of actions over others is now recognized as a place in which the process of constructing its objectification can be understood. According to Angrosino (2009, p. 69), in archival ethnography, we deal with “analysis of materials that have been stored for research, service and other purposes, official or not”. Because it is a qualitative methodology, the archival ethnography allows us to reflect on a reality and

requires more than the pure and simple incorporation of techniques. Still, it requires the development of another sensitivity in which the researcher needs to be available to revise concepts and conceptions, establishing communication with the multiplicity of perspectives that surround the members of the relationship.

Eight meetings were held in contexts in which two axes of analysis and interpretation of the narratives were extracted, without a previous script to be followed, and the purpose was to understand how a life experience paves the way to the criminal world, also contributing to accentuate segregation and alienation.

Throughout the analysis, we sought to understand the socio-cultural context of the criminal person, shaped in the form of a web of relationships. This context of life reverberates in his memories, as well as in the production of meaning for the experiences lived in the prison environment and it is necessary to do so since we do not have and will never have direct access to what the narrators have lived, but only "their versions of constructed truth" (Riessman, 2008, p. 8). In this sense, the narrative constructed in present time is important since it is related to the life story of these people, placing the different crisscrosses marked by the precariousness in diverse conditions of life.

In order to base the analysis procedures, we make use of two lines of argument, according to the evidence embodied in the material organized in the field situation:

1. To detect in the narrative of the arrested person the traumatic experiences related to the precariousness of life;
2. To understand how the capitalist system, which produces a large part of the population of the consumer market, generates alienation and submission to the criminal world.

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

The material is constituted by narratives obtained through answers and questions and also by the emergence of spontaneous productions presented as explanations and justifications in relation to the subjective universe of the person in prison, showing, through the remains and traces of memory, traumatic experiences that led this person to enter the criminal world. It should be noted that the participant voluntarily decided to speak about himself and the reasons that led to his arrest. We build our interpretation based on three axes of interpretation and they were based on material evidence that allowed the alignment and the approach to the second line of argument.

#### **Axis 1—Why Do People Choose the Criminal World?**

In order to preserve the participant identity, we are naming him "Checker" due to the fact that Checker used to exercise, on a prison labor basis, the daily conference of the other prisoners before the cells were closed.

In the first meeting, Checker reports his age, stating that he is incarcerated for the first time. In his words:

I am not a bad guy. I am married. I have two daughters. I worked at a gas station... I did not commit the crime, but a colleague participated in the crime with the truck that belonged to both of us, he was arrested first and then he went to my house with the police, they broke through the door and brought me.

It is possible to observe in this fragment of the narrative that the incarcerated person does not see himself recognized as a bad guy, resorting to the fact of being married and the father of two daughters as a way of justifying that he used to have a life in the way society requires for a good person. The resource used to justify this condition "I am not a bad guy", represents a form of resistance to stigmatization imposed by that term in the social context. For this reason, he refuses to assume this identity, since he will stand out more than any

other social role, such as being married, the father of two daughters and a worker, roles for which he wants to be recognized. He also points out the fact that the "bad guy" label ends up being so reified in people that there are very few spaces left to negotiate or abandon the ingrained identity, as if the acceptance of the term "bad guy" meant a rupture with social representations of normality. Due to these circumstances, he refuses to assume a demonized identity by saying: "I am married. Father of two daughters". In this way, Checker wants to be recognized, through the norms and social values that designate a good person, not accepting the negative status of a "bad guy", attributed to him after entering the prison system. More emphatically, he says: "This is not a place for any man. This is only good for really bad guys".

In this passage, Checker talks about the experience of incarceration, a chaotic scenario where several abuses are committed: overcrowding, precariousness, insalubrity, abuses, and beatings committed by unprepared and disqualified prison officers, whose violent acts usually go unpunished.

Checker also points out that the difference between being a man and being a bad guy, in the sense that the only way to survive in this scenario is to become a bad guy. From this statement, we can deduce two aspects: Firstly, there are many ways to enter in the criminal world and, secondly, in this space, there is no separation between pre-trial prisoners and convicts. These recidivist people generally hold parallel power within the prison and most of the time they go unpunished in relation to their attitudes, because it prevails the law of the strongest, the law of the silence.

Researcher: What crime have you been charged with?

Checker: Kidnapping, but the person did not recognize me. This was not necessary.

In this case, Checker explicits how much he felt wronged and did not deserve this punishment. It is worth noting that the law of heinous crimes has aggravated even more the chaotic situation of the prison system, since the various crimes listed by it, such as kidnapping, murder, and armed robbery no longer have the legal benefit of the progression of regime, causing the sentenced to complete the sentence in a closed regime. Faced with this reality, when Checker says "This was not necessary", he is mentioning the feeling of impotence and despair derived from the total lack of perspective.

It is necessary to understand that the penal system and the prison system, although they have an egalitarian nature, aiming at reaching people through the principle of equity, in fact have an eminently selective character, in which its clientele ends up being made up of poor and black youths. Checker reports that his work in prison has to do with the control of cleaning and filing, activities that, according to him, "give him a feeling of freedom". By doing a job in prison, a condition that is possible only to very few prisoners who have an excellent behavior, these activities give the prisoner a status of social integration, which in the prison context works as a strategy for survival, since in several passages Checker talks about the importance of work in his life, even before entering the prison system.

Checker: My father was a gas station fitter. I always traveled with him on vacation from high school and I learned the profession: gas station assembler technician.

In this context, we see that work represents more than the act of working or selling its labor force in search of remuneration. There is also a social remuneration for work, that is, work as a factor of integration to a certain group with certain social rights. It also has a psychic function: It is one of the great foundations of the constitution of the subject and of its network of meanings, as Dejours (2004) asserts.

Checker continues: I completed the seventh grade, but I could not go on.

This fragment uncovers a sad reality in Brazil: From the more than 700,000 people imprisoned throughout the country, 8% are illiterate, 70% did not finish primary school, and 92% did not finish high school. It does not reach 1% those who enter or have a higher education diploma, as explained by Julião (2012). Despite the profile of low schooling, directly associated with social exclusion, not even 13% of them have access to educational activities in prisons.

The numbers reflect the omission of public power in conflict with national and international legislation. *The Law of Guidelines and Bases of Education—Law No. 9.394/1996*, which regulates the 1988 Federal Constitution in its Article 208, Item I, establishes that all the Brazilian population have the right to compulsory and free basic education, being guaranteed the offer to everybody who does not have access to it at the right age.

*The Criminal Enforcement Law (No. 7.210/1984)* encompasses school education in the prison system. In its Article 17, it establishes that the educational assistance will comprise the educational instruction and the professional formation of the arrested person. Article 18 establishes that elementary education is compulsory and integrated into the school system of the federative unit and Article 21 requires the implementation of a library by prison unit provided with instructional, recreational, and didactic books. In an international level, the document *Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners*, approved by the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 1957, provides access to education for incarcerated people.

The researcher keeps on asking:

Researcher: What about your marriage?

Checker: She was eight years old and I was nine years old. I really get along with my wife. I always apologize to her for being conniving.

In this section, it is the first-time Checker assumes that he participated in the crime. That is, when the researcher asks about his marriage, Checker admits his participation in the crime, even though in several other sections of the narrative he continues to deny or identify himself as a bandit:

I want to leave here to take care of my family, my professional life. I want to get out of here without rancor. I'm not joining the bastards anymore, it happened because I joined bad people.

In this section, we can verify his subjective position with the purpose of trying to justify his connivance by attributing to others his participation: "I had already thought about leaving his company, I had already realized that he did the wrong things", referring to the colleague who used the truck in the crime, the fact that imputed his participation. Later he says: "I wanted to leave, but there was something that dragged me to stay with him and I ran out of time". We can see in the passage: "I wanted to leave, but there was something that dragged me to stay" an aspect that shows the derivatives of the repressed that are revealed and hidden in the very act of constitution in and by language.

## **Axis 2—Walking Through Precarious Conditions**

The incursion in this axis has to do with the first line of argumentation, since it considers a course through precarious conditions marked by situations of absence of the state in the application of fundamental assists to survive. To live in such circumstances can, of course, set up a scenario of traumatic experiences because of the demands in the production of mechanisms that guarantee at least a dignified life, as we can illustrate with the

situation pointed out by Checker in terms of the interruption of his studies, what, in a way, is a limiting factor in the access to jobs with good salaries, being also a fruitful way for the segregation. The following evidences accurately demonstrate this.

Researcher: Tell me about your family.

Checker: I do not know anyone from my mother's family. I did not know my grandparents or my uncles. To be honest, I do not know their names. My mother said that she met my father in Bahia. There Cilene and Dilson were born. They said they were married but they did not. There are eight brothers ... My father was always traveling and my mother was running the house. I wonder how she managed to split a chicken into eight pieces while my father was traveling.

As far as family is concerned, we understand that it is the foundation matrix of the human being and it articulates between the social and the particular, thus configuring the symbolic structures that are established in the historical content determined by social, political, and economic development. These variables are articulated by representations in the way of human thinking and acting: They are the symbolic references. It is important to emphasize that the symbolic structures present a logical relation with the psychic structure. In this way, the human being presents his way of thinking and acting from a logic situated in an exteriority to constitute himself.

Regarding the person we are considering in this study, we can affirm that there is already a great social disadvantage in terms of the weakening of affective, relational bonds, and a sense of micro-social belonging, besides the reinforcement of material and affective misery, giving rise to crumbled life stories, marked by exploitation and social inequalities, belonging to an environment of denial of rights, having their realities miles away from knowing what is peace and the possibility of a better world.

In the above excerpt, we could also note the presence of some traumatic reminiscences. Going through situations of extreme limitation can be considered as a crossing by traumatic experience, which is characterized by not being totally assimilated at the moment of the event due to an abrupt rupture of the memory chains. In addition, situations of misery and hunger can be considered traumatic. The traumatic event produces remains: an unspeakable excess.

### **Axis 3—Alienation and Submission to the Criminal World**

In order to conclude the analysis, we will follow by indicating a third axis that combines the two argumentative strands proposed. Firstly, regard the justifications listed by the person arrested when explaining his situation in the context of crime; and secondly, the manner in which he expresses clear evidence of being answering the demands of the consumer system, without being aware of his condition of socially segregated. These evidences are drawn from his subjective positions as he ascends to the position of a human being who speaks in his own name.

Researcher: What do you think of the criminal world?

Checker: There is no consideration here. If there is a suspicion, talking is not an option. We tell the truth and nobody believes in you. There are a lot of innocent people paying for what they did not do. This is the worst place in the world. They think we are animals. But we have family, we work. I myself am married and I work.

Thus, we find a very clear contradiction expressed in his words, not because of a lack of understanding, but because of the topic to be addressed: When asked about crime, Checker produces a displacement of themes and speaks about the poor conditions of the prison. In this way, crime is not even considered in his speech. What would have been his subjective motivation to undertake this change? Probably, he is engaged in

portraying the poor condition of the prison to soften his condition as a criminal. We are not unaware of the possibility of this maneuver bringing him some relief.

Checker highlights a common practice in prison, and it will be difficult for him to get rid of the representations of dangerousness, irretrievability, and cruelty; expressions that echo the demoralization of the value of the prisoner, often making the attempt to leave the criminal world unfruitful. In this context, the person arrested, over time, ends up assimilating these characteristics, without having the slightest notion that it is part of the prison culture. Consequently, in prisons bodies move as beings flattened in their subjectivity, corresponding mainly to a radical transformation of the body, from docilization and, obviously, to a production of submissive, obedient, and molded human beings, according to the criteria of the criminal, penitentiary, and legal politics. Deepening this theme, the researcher asks Checker about the idea that prison is a solution to crime. Upon being summoned to express his opinion, Checker promptly states the contrary:

It is not. This is a crime school. When you are here you learn about crime. This only increases the crime rate. Most people come here, know other people and form gangs. They become friends, they are always together. When they leave here they will act outside. To say that the guy is coming and he will get out better does not exist, because he does not get out. We suffer a lot of violence, physical aggression, knife, it has everything. A guy condemned to thirty years in jail only thinks about doing shit. There is only one way out, killing in here or trying to get away.

We can deduct from his complaint that the person, when incarcerated, is included in an alienated way in the prison system, functioning as an easy prey in order to be able to manifest a criminal potential, covered with stigma of bandit and subjected to the determinations of the prison, a precarious space that does not offer the least preparation for the return to the conviviality outside the walls. What remains for them, as Farias (2010, p. 28) stressed out is “to occupy a place in the context of the social relations of an evil residue that must be expunged from the social web”.

### **Closing Remarks**

Through the studies carried out, we understand that economic poverty is not a triggering factor for crime, of exclusion and segregation to all those who cannot fit into the market logic in which the process of economic development tends to produce a new type of social exclusion marked by the formation of social groups deemed economically unnecessary, that is to say, not having “fashion” consumption objects is equivalent to a lack of social recognition. With this, objects of consumption take the place of the old ideals; and the demand for new and present goods take the place in the scene, a true cult for the new, which ends up becoming the malaise in culture. A new object every day becomes less new, having to be changed quickly by a younger one, which illusively transmits the sensation, for its possessor, of being socially recognized.

In this regard, Debord (1997, p. 18) asserted that a new value has arisen in the social scene, which is no longer the “being”, nor “having”, but “appearing”. That is, it only has social recognition what appears and occupies the place of admiration and desire. However, there is a fleeting decadence of all newness, in which objects are discarded more and more rapidly, as well as the economy of personal relations, which may seem plentiful but often deeper and deeper. In the society of “spectacle”, the need to “appear” in order to obtain social recognition can produce an ethical decline in the person, a true alienation. This conception is aligned with Freud's (2011) questions about the reasons for the malaise of civilization, seeking to understand what prevents harmony between men. It theoretically assumes a condition for the human being of the irremediable division, always in conflict between morality and satisfaction. There is, therefore, no harmonization in their

being and the desire to possess certain objects can legitimize violent actions and the practice of crime through physical aggression against people who can lead to disability and death. It remains for the agent in charge of these actions the possibility, among others, of alienated enrollment in the repetitive circuit of crime.

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