

## “Capitães da Areia” by Jorge Amado and Pierre Bourdieu’s “heretical discourse”

*Capitães da Areia de Jorge Amado e o “discurso herético” de Pierre Bourdieu*

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### ABSTRACT


The aim of this article is to mobilize interpretative lenses to show how fruitful the relationship with literature can be. The intention is to interweave the (literary and scientific) sensitivities of two intellectuals who left us two decades ago: Jorge Amado and Pierre Bourdieu. The work *Capitães da Areia* (1937) was the main reference to carry out this analytical exercise, at a moment in which we can observe the upsurge of social, cultural, moral, and doctrinal questions that marked the last century. Besides demystifying the “performative discourse” put into practice by State authorities with the support of the media, Jorge Amado constructs a “heretical discourse”. By presenting a kind of (sociological) portrait of children subjected to social racism, *Capitães da Areia* is the explicitation of the vulnerability of these children, which involves abandonment, family ties, stigmatization, rootlessness, illiteracy, sexual precocity and virility, the pleasure of risk.

**Keywords:** Jorge Amado. *Capitães da Areia*. Pierre Bourdieu. Heretical discourse.

### RESUMO

Mobilizar lentes interpretativas para mostrar quanto a relação com a literatura pode ser frutífera é o objetivo deste artigo. A intenção é entrelaçar as sensibilidades (literária e científica) de dois intelectuais: Jorge Amado e Pierre Bourdieu. A obra *Capitães da Areia* (1937) foi a referência principal para levar a efeito este exercício analítico, num momento em que se observa o recrudescimento de questões sociais, culturais, morais, doutrinárias, que marcaram o século passado. Além de desmistificar o “discurso performativo”, posto em prática pelas autoridades do Estado com o apoio dos meios de comunicação, Jorge Amado constrói um “discurso herético”. Ao apresentar uma espécie de retrato (sociológico) de crianças submetidas ao racismo social, *Capitães da Areia* é a explicitação da vulnerabilidade dessas crianças, que envolve o abandono, as ligações familiares, o efeito de estigmatização, o desenraizamento, o analfabetismo, a precocidade sexual e a virilidade, o prazer do risco.

**Palavras-chave:** Jorge Amado. *Capitães da Areia*. Pierre Bourdieu. Discurso herético.

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## RESUMEN

Este artículo moviliza las lentes interpretativas para mostrar lo fructífera que puede ser la relación con la literatura. La intención es entrelazar las sensibilidades (literarias y científicas) de dos intelectuales que nos dejaron hace dos décadas: Jorge Amado y Pierre Bourdieu. *Capitães da Areia* (1937) fue la principal referencia para realizar este ejercicio analítico, en un momento en el que se observa el auge de las cuestiones sociales, culturales, morales y doctrinales que marcaron el siglo pasado. Además de desmitificar el “discurso performativo” puesto en práctica por las autoridades estatales con el apoyo de los medios de comunicación, Amado construye un “discurso herético”. Al presentar una especie de retrato de los niños sometidos al racismo social, *Capitães da Areia* explicita la vulnerabilidad de estos niños implica el abandono, los vínculos familiares, el efecto de la estigmatización, el desarraigo, el analfabetismo, la precocidad y virilidad sexual, el placer del riesgo.

**Palabras clave:** Jorge Amado. *Capitães da Areia*. Pierre Bourdieu. Discurso herético.

I want writers, artists, philosophers and scholars to be able to make themselves heard directly in all the areas of public life for which they are competent. I believe that everyone would have a lot to gain if the logic of intellectual life, that of argumentation and refutation, were extended to public life.  
Pierre Bourdieu (1992, p. 352)<sup>1</sup>

Inspired by the aphorism attributed to Bernard de Chartres (-1130): *We are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, for we can see more and farther than they can, not because of the acuteness of our vision or the height of our bodies, but because we are supported and elevated by their stature*,<sup>2</sup> I decided to invest my reflective energy in re-reading the work of a Brazilian writer with the criticality of a French sociologist as a reference. I’m referring to the “Bahian giant” Jorge Leal Amado de Faria (1912–2001) and the “French giant” Pierre Félix Bourdieu (1930–2002), who wrote their literary and scientific work in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They left us two decades ago, but their immense legacy remains to help us understand processes of domination and social reproduction that transcend time.

Jorge Amado, one of the icons of Brazilian literature, was a writer, journalist and politician. His national and international fame is based on his almost 40 works in various literary genres, published and translated into around 50 languages. Some of them have been adapted for cinema, theatre, television and comics. In addition to the various honorary titles he has received from institutions in Brazil and abroad, Jorge Amado was the fifth occupant of Chair 23 of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, having been elected on 6 April 1961 and become one of its “immortals”.

Pierre Bourdieu, for his part, devoted himself to analyzing two canonical works of art and literature. His intention was not only to test his conceptual arsenal, but also to open up new perspectives for sociological analysis. The novel *Sentimental Education* by Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880) allowed him to construct the notion of the genesis and structure of the literary field.<sup>3</sup> For Bourdieu, this novelist’s aesthetic project was made explicit at a time when the autonomy of intellectuals was at a critical stage.

1 The translations of quotations (both French and Portuguese) are author’s responsibility.

2 *Nanos gigantum humeris insidentes*. This aphorism would also have been used by Jean of Salisbury (1115–1180) in his work *Metalogicon* (1159).

3 This dense study was published in *Les règles de l’art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (1992).

In order to characterize the notion of a “symbolic revolution”, the result of the so-called “Manet effect”, which triggers epistemological and social ruptures, Bourdieu analyses some paintings by Édouard Manet (1832–1883). He argues that they lead to the birth of the artistic field. The theme of the courses he gave at the Collège de France between 1998 and 2000,<sup>4</sup> the thesis of the symbolic revolution, is placed within the framework of a kind of historical sociology of the Impressionist movement.

The challenge I have set myself here is therefore to bring together the critical views of these two intellectuals,<sup>5</sup> using content analysis as a methodological guide, in the terms elaborated by Bardin (1977). Woven in detail along geographically and culturally distinct and distant trajectories, trajectories travelled by sensibilities rooted in historical contexts and in different social, economic, political and cultural spaces, their views reveal a strong political commitment. For Jorge Amado (1961, n.p.), for example, “[...] the very condition of being a writer is a political condition, so politically powerful that it transcends the immediate performance of being a writer”.<sup>6</sup> For Pierre Bourdieu (1998a, p. 16), “[...] there is no real democracy without a real critical counter-power”.

In order to carry out this reflection, I have decided to focus on one of Jorge Amado’s works, after having carried out a non-exhaustive survey of the productions that have mobilized Pierre Bourdieu’s thought in the analysis of Amado’s work *Capitães da Areia*<sup>7</sup> (1937/2003); a canonized work, recognized for its critical density and political power, as the quote following transcribed illustrates.<sup>8</sup>

Several books considered to be propagandists of the Red Creed were incinerated: On the 19th day of November 1937, in front of the School of Sailor Apprentices, in this city of Salvador, and in the presence of the members of the commission for the search and seizure of books, appointed by letter number six, of the then Executive Commission of the State of War, composed of the gentlemen [...], were incinerated by verbal order of Mr. [...], commander of the Sixth Military Region, the books seized and judged to be sympathetic to the communist creed, namely: 808 copies of *Capitães de Areia* [...]. (Report published in Estado da Bahia, page 3, on 17 December 1937)

*Capitães da Areia* has been on my mind for a long time, not only for the pleasure that a text of this caliber can give, but above all because it is a real laboratory for sociological experimentation. Rereading it at a time when the atmosphere is very repressive and the social, cultural, moral and doctrinal questions that largely characterized the mentality of the first decades of the last century are reappearing, has aroused my “reasoned emotion”; an emotion that, according to Sérgio Miceli (2005),<sup>9</sup> guided the reflexivity of the intellectual Bourdieu (2004b) in the process of writing his *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*.

Of course, it is not my intention to add new comments to the work of an author who has been the subject of countless editions and translations and who has been scrutinized through a variety of epistemological ‘binoculars’. My intention is simply to mobilize the interpretive lenses that Pierre

4 These courses were put together by his collaborators and are available (Bourdieu, 2013).

5 In various texts, Bourdieu promotes a reflection on the notion of the intellectual; it is to this reflection that I turn here. In addition to the author’s own texts, see Valle (2018) for more details.

6 The writer’s political commitment was made explicit in his inaugural speech at the Brazilian Academy of Letters (1961).

7 This novel has been presented as a literary reference, studied in secondary schools and indicated on the entrance exams of various Brazilian universities.

8 This note appears on the back cover of the 110<sup>th</sup> edition, published in Rio de Janeiro by Editora Record in 2003.

9 As Miceli (2005, p. 15-16) points out, “To the extent that the author’s testimony urges the reader to remember the past, one soon realizes that there is no other way out than to transform another’s drive into a search for oneself.”

Bourdieu has painstakingly constructed, which allow us to carry out a kind of analytical exercise on the (social and/or psychological) world.

Given my interest in the continuum of crystallized inequalities, their multiplication, diversification and re-signification, my aim here is to show that Jorge Amado contrasts “performative discourse” with “heretical discourse”, as defined by Bourdieu, for whom discourses are not just signs to be deciphered and understood. They are signs of authority to be recognized and obeyed. While the former aims to impose a dominant view as legitimate, relying on an efficacy that is “proportional to the authority of the one who proclaims it,”<sup>10</sup> the latter “[...] aims not only to break with adherence to the world of common sense by publicly professing to break with the ordinary order, but also to produce a new common sense” (Bourdieu, 1982, p. 140 and 151).

## CONVEYING A “PERFORMATIVE DISCOURSE”

Before beginning the narrative of the situations experienced by more than a hundred “young bandits”,<sup>11</sup> “precocious criminals”, between the ages of eight and 16, told in *Capitães da Areia*, so called because they make the pier “their headquarters”, Jorge Amado explains the critical tone that he mobilized—and that mobilized him—to construct the plot. It is in this critical tone that I recognize his reflexive construction around the notion of “heretical discourse” that produces “heretical criticism”. In other words, it is a literary work of resistance to orthodoxy and ‘performative discourse’. According to Bourdieu (1982, p. 154), the dominated are partly bound to this order because they are unable to “[...] constitute themselves as an independent group, to mobilize themselves and the power they possess, without questioning the categories of perception of the social order which, as a product of this order, imposes on them its recognition and thus their submission”.

The transcription of a report entitled “Children of Thieves”, published on the *Fatos Policiais* page of the *Jornal da Tarde*, illustrated with clichés (one of the Comendador’s house, the other of one of his moments of decoration), brings to light “the dark adventures” of children who “have given themselves over to a life of crime during their green years” (p. 3-6).

The article called on the Juvenile Court judge and the Chief of Police to take urgent action to eradicate this “gang of rapists” who, “naturally because of the disregard for their upbringing by parents with little Christian feeling”, were terrorizing the town and not allowing it to “sleep in peace”. This “group of robbers and thieves who infest the city” is well known and has been denounced on several occasions, but so far they have not found “the place where they hide the proceeds of their robberies”.

After identifying the “gang of young bandits” and their “commander”—“a boy of 14, the most fearsome of them all” — and before reporting on the robbery, the article describes the “beautiful villa” of Comendador José Ferreira, who is presented as “one of the richest and most respected businessmen”. The recipient of an honorary title that gives him distinction and symbolic capital, as Bourdieu would say, the Comendador lives in a palace “surrounded by gardens, in its colonial architecture”, a true “haven of peace and honest work”, located in the “heart of the most fashionable district of the city”.

At around three o’clock in the afternoon, when “the city was sweltering with heat”, the gardener Ramiro noticed some “vagrants” hanging around the house and immediately chased away

10 According to Bourdieu (1982, p. 141), the formula “[...] ‘I authorise you to leave’ is only *eo ipso* an authorisation if the person who utters it is authorised to authorise, has the authority to authorise”.

11 The quotes in quotation marks, without indicating the respective pages, have been taken from the narrative (Amado, 2003). The intention is to bring the reader closer to the tone used by the author. Only the pages where the different parts of the text are located will be mentioned.

“these annoying visitors”. A few minutes later, the gardener’s attention was drawn again by “terrified screams coming from inside the house”. Armed with a “scythe”, he entered the dining room just in time to see “a bunch of demons” fleeing through the windows “laden with valuables”. Going out into the garden, Ramiro was astonished to see an unusual scene: Raul, the Comendador’s grandson, a “beautiful child” of 11, “in his innocence”, was laughing at the “evil” leader of the Sand Captains, who was recognized “by a cut on his face”. When he threw himself at the thief, the gardener was surprised by the “reaction of the child, who turned out to be a master of these fights”, stabbed him in the shoulder and arm, and “was forced to let go of the criminal, who fled”.

After reiterating the need for “a measure that will bring a just punishment to such scoundrels” and restore peace to the alarmed and fearful “inhabitants of the aristocratic neighborhood”, the article concludes by highlighting the “great courage” of “little Raul”, one of the “most dedicated gymnasts of the Antônio Vieira College”. Raul said he liked the “terrible leader of the Sand Captains” because he seemed to be “one of those film kids who run away from home to go on adventures”. When he mentioned “that he had a bicycle and lots of toys”, the “soulless boss” told the boy that he was “a fool and didn’t know how to play”, while he “had the road and the pier”. The article concludes with a warning about the “delicate problem for childhood that is the cinema”, because it imparts so many “wrong ideas” about life.

As we can see, Jorge Amado offers, from a “police fact” that was commonplace at the time and strongly recurrent, the mirror of a world that naturalized the struggle of all against all, making it “[...] destructive of all values of solidarity and humanity and, at times, of a violence without phrases” (Bourdieu, 1998a, p. 98). Surrounded on all sides by precariousness and the threats derived from it, the powerful arm themselves with a common lexicon and distribute it drop by drop, through euphemisms, making use of the different means of communication. This lexicon is broadcast everywhere, throughout the day, as soon as you open a newspaper, turn on the radio or television, producing profound effects, capable of nullifying defenses and subversive dispositions (*ibidem*).

This is how the *Jornal da Tarde* does things when it publishes a performative discourse which, as we have seen, “[...] intends to make what it announces come true in the very act of announcing it” (Bourdieu, 1982, p. 140). Its report contributes to promoting a veritable “social neo-Darwinism”<sup>12</sup> because, by emphasizing the “individual dramas” of the powerful, it corroborates a kind of social hygienics, stigmatizing the unborn and holding them responsible for their own misfortunes.

## INSTANCES OF POWER IN TENSION

Since the power of the state,<sup>13</sup> which is tied to the dominant parties, is constantly being contested, those who occupy positions of prestige, such as high-level administrative functions, have to ensure their own legitimacy, which is always at the mercy of the (party’s) political game or jeopardized by the prestige conferred by the position they hold. This can be seen in the reactions to the *Jornal da Tarde* report. Two letters were sent to the editorial office from important authorities explaining their actions and/or omissions in the face of the incident.

The first, published on the front page, is from the Secretary to the Chief of Police and is accompanied by a cliché of the Chief and “an extensive commentary of praise” (p. 7). The letter begins by referring to “Dr. Chief of Police” and his knowledge of the robbery at the Comendador’s residence, carried out by a “gang of delinquent children” called the Sand Captains. The Chief informs the newspaper’s management that “the solution to the problem is the responsibility of the juvenile

12 Bourdieu (1998a) develops this notion when analyzing the strength of neoliberal ideology, pointing out that it rests on the idea that triumph is for the “best and the brightest”.

13 Bourdieu’s entire work is permeated by the notion of symbolic power. As it won’t be possible to develop this notion here, I suggest looking at Bourdieu (2001) in particular.

court, not the police". The police should only act "in obedience to a request from the juvenile court judge". Nevertheless, he assures us that all measures will be taken to prevent further attacks and to ensure that the perpetrators are "arrested to receive the punishment they deserve". He also clarifies that if this has not yet happened, it is because the police "have not been asked to do so by the juvenile court judge".

The content of this letter apparently provoked a reaction from the juvenile court judge. In his letter to the editor of the *Jornal da Tarde*, published "with the cliché of the judge in question in a column", accompanied by "a small complimentary comment" (p. 8-9), he begins by alluding to his "delicate position" and his "rare moments of leisure" in the face of his "many and varied concerns". The judge explains that that morning, while leafing through the "brilliant evening paper", he learned "of a letter from the tireless Doctor Chief of Police of the State", explaining why he had not yet intensified "the meritorious campaign against the juvenile delinquents who infest the city". "For the sake of the truth", a truth that he said he had set up as a beacon to illuminate the path of his life, he felt obliged to "declare that the excuse does not hold water". It is not the court's job to "pursue and arrest juvenile delinquents", but only to "determine the place where they should serve their sentence" and "ensure their subsequent fate". The judge also points out that he can be found wherever his duty takes him, because "in 50 years of uncouth life" he has never failed to fulfil it.

His letter, with a strong appeal to the ideology of competence, ends by stating that he had sent several "delinquents" to the reformatory in recent months and could not be held responsible for their escape. Because they are not impressed by "the example of work they find in this educational institution", they become "more perverse" and leave "an environment where peace and work breathe and where they are treated with the greatest affection". A problem that, in his opinion, only psychologists can solve.

Despite the tensions between the police and the executive authorities that are revealed in the letters to the newspaper, especially with regard to functional competencies, what can be observed is the predominance of a performative discourse that materializes in directives, orders, regulations, and police reports. For Bourdieu (2004a, p. 164), this discourse "[...] imposes a point of view, that of the institution [...]" that determines "[...] what people have to do, taking into account what they are". In other words, the journalistic narrative reproduces, as Jorge Amado shows, the performative enunciation underpinned by the "official point of view".

## ROOM FOR CONTRADICTION

The official (performative) discourse, with regard to the Sand Captains, acts to legitimize the structural violence it puts into practice. The media, in turn, as Bourdieu (1998a, p. 88) teaches us, presents itself as "[...] a depoliticizing factor that acts primarily on the most depoliticized fractions of the public, on women more than on men, on the less educated more than on the more educated, on the poorer more than on the richer", but this action needs to be concealed. For this reason, it strives to preserve its credibility and tries to protect itself from suspicions that might indicate bias. This was the procedure adopted by *Jornal da Tarde* when it published a mother's letter to the editor on the fifth page, between the advertisements, without clichés or comments (p. 10-11).

Maria Ricardina, a seamstress, began her letter by apologizing for the mistakes and the handwriting, as she was not "a seamstress when it comes to writing". She had seen a news report about the Sand Captains' thefts, talking about "that reformatory" where the "doctor of minors" sends the children of the poor, and she wanted to "put the dots on the ii". She claimed to have personally witnessed what had happened in the reformatory, because her son had been in that "living hell" for six months and if he had not been taken out of there she did not know if "he would have lived another six months". For this mother, if the children did not make amends, it was because



“the least that happens [...] is that they get beaten up two or three times a day”. What’s more, “the director there is always falling down drunk and likes to see the whip sing on the back” of those who have the misfortune of “falling into the hands of those soulless guards”. That is why the Sand Captains existed, she said, and she would rather see her son “among them than in the reformatory”.

Maria Ricardina ended her letter by suggesting that the newspaper secretly send someone to the reformatory to “see what food they eat, the slave labor they do [...], and the beatings they take”. She insisted that the visit should not be announced, because “if they know, it will become an open sky”. If they wanted to see “something heartbreaking”, they had to arrive “suddenly”. She also suggested that they talk to Father José Pedro, who “was chaplain there and saw it all”.

Mentioned by the mother, Father José Pedro also sent his letter to the editor of *Jornal da Tarde*, which was published on the third page, without comment, under the title “Será Verdade?” (p. 12). After offering his “greetings in Christ”, the priest informs us that he has read the mother’s letter calling on him, as a person, to clarify “what life is like for the children in the juvenile reformatory”. He therefore felt “obliged to come out of obscurity to say that unfortunately Maria Ricardina is right”. On his visits to the reformatory, he sees children “treated like beasts”, because they have forgotten “the lesson of the gentle Master”. When they should be trying to win them over “with good treatment, they make them even more angry with repeated beatings and truly inhuman physical punishment”. The consequence of this is that they are “unwilling to accept the consolation of religion”, because of the “hatred they are accumulating in those young hearts so worthy of pity”.

The ‘sacred’ tone used by the authorities is radically opposed to the ‘profane’ tone used by the mother of one of the Sand Captains and by a priest who ends up being associated with the “propagandists of the Red Creed”. Published between advertisements, the mother’s letter dealing with a police matter reveals how little importance is given to the complaint, but above all to the complainant. It is clear that she is someone with no authority to challenge the official point of view. The priest’s letter, on the other hand, may indicate the newspaper’s intention to legitimize itself as a vehicle for enlightenment, since it introduces doubts about the supposedly educational functions carried out by the Reformatory, right from the title given to the article: “Is it True?”.

## THE DIRECTOR OF THE BAIANO REFORMATORY SPOKE

The reaction of the director of the reformatory to the mother’s and priest’s statements was, of course, immediate and based on the inaccuracies typical of controversial situations. As Bourdieu (2004a, p. 80) reminds us, “[...] the choice of words, especially in polemics, is not innocent”. His letter was published on the third page of *Jornal da Tarde* with a cliché of the reformatory and a notice that an editor would visit the institution the following Monday (p. 14-15).

The director began his letter by saying that he was aware of what he called “the campaign that the brilliant Bahian press [...] has waged against the terrible crimes of the Capitães da Areia”. He pointed out that it was with great interest that he had read “two letters of accusation against the establishment”, which, if he were not so modest, he would call “modular”. He explained that the two letters affected him differently.

The first came from “a little woman from the village” who was incapable of understanding the educational work being done and was just one of many who wanted to prevent the reformatory from fulfilling its mission. According to the director, these mothers first came “to ask for a place for their children”, but then they missed “the proceeds of their thefts”. That was why they were the first to complain when they saw their children “living an exemplary life” instead of “kissing the hands of those who make good men of their children”. They educated them “on the street, in the street” and allowed them to form this “gang of delinquents that frightens the city and prevents it from living in peace”. As you can see, the principal’s speech showed how demobilized and demoralized families

were treated by the accumulation of failures and disappointments: it was an “impossible mission” to face the “[...] inertia of an atomized and atomizing administration, locked in the rigidity of its routines and assumptions” (Bourdieu, 1993c, p. 354).

On the other hand, the second letter, with its “serious accusations”, shocked him even more, especially because it came from Father José Pedro. This priest had forgotten the duties of his office and abused them to enter the “educational institution”, even “at times forbidden by the regulations”. For the director, since this “priest of the devil” began to frequent the institution, “cases of rebellion and violation of the rules have increased. This “false minister of Christ” was “an instigator of the general bad character of the minors” and encouraged them to rebel and disobey. For this reason, he would “close the doors” of the reformatory.

His letter ended by saying that he wanted the newspaper to send an editor on Monday so that the public could have “exact knowledge and true faith in the way the minors who are being reformed in the reformatory are treated”. He also explained that if he did not suggest that they come “on any day, it is because these visits must be made at the times allowed by the regulations” and that it was not his custom to deviate from them.

The director’s statement reveals, without any subtlety or concealment, his total contempt for the poor and their precarious living conditions. The lack of solidarity, humanity and tolerance of a person in charge of an institution dedicated to the reception of “delinquent and abandoned minors” was also expressed in his attachment to regulations. These regulations guided routine procedures and legitimized prophylactic disciplinary measures that were often implemented through abusive and violent practices; practices that led to the replacement of the educational function by the police function. Bourdieu (2004a, p. 98-99) pointed out that “[...] the more the situation is fraught with potential violence, the more it is necessary to adopt certain formalities [...]” because “[...] *there is a virtue in form*”.

## THE CONSECRATION OF THE “PERFORMATIVE DISCOURSE”

The story “Thieving Children” ended with a visit by the editor of *Jornal da Tarde* to the Baiano Reformatory. Jorge Amado transcribed the headlines of the article published in Tuesday’s second edition, spread over the entire front page and illustrated by several clichés of the building and one of its director (p. 15). The headlines were clear enough to explain the content covered, as well as the tone adopted by the newspaper to deal with an issue that generated controversy, tensions and doubts: “A model establishment where peace and work reign”; “A director who is a friend”; “Great food”; “Children who work and have fun”; “Thieving children on the road to regeneration”; “Unfounded accusations”; “Only an incorrigible one complains”; “The Baiano Reformatory is a great family”; “Where the Sand Captains should be”.

It is clear from Jorge Amado’s literary sensibility how much the journalistic press plays into the hands of those in power, placing itself at the service of the dominant powers. And this, in the case of the report on the Sand Captains, was not only due to the accusatory and discriminatory tone adopted, but also to the greater or lesser visibility given to the letters sent to the editor and the different weight given to the clichés that illustrate each story.

## SOCIAL FATE BROUGHT THEM TOGETHER

Jorge Amado (2003) began his story by describing the place where the Captains of the Sand slept: “Under the moon, on an old, abandoned pier,” next to a huge house lost in the immensity of the sand that had taken over everything. After being inhabited by rats, who had become its “exclusive masters”, making their “playful runs” and gnawing on the “wood of the monumental doors”, its new inhabitants had arrived: “children of all colors and ages, from 9 to 16”.



The narrative does not have the idyllic, romantic, adventurous content that Raul, the Comendador’s grandson, found in the cinemas; on the contrary, it shows the contradictions that surrounded the lives of Brazilian children. Those whom Father José Pedro’s sister prepared to teach at the Normal School were “children with books, with a father, with a mother... they won’t be the same as those abandoned in the streets, sleeping under the moon, on the bridges, on the docks”. The Captains of the Sand began to live in a physical space that socially segregated them. It is important to remember, with Bourdieu (1993a, p. 251), that “[...] the structure of social space manifests itself in different contexts in the form of spatial oppositions, with inhabited (or appropriated) space functioning as a kind of spontaneous symbolization of social space”.

However, Jorge Amado’s real effort was to sketch a kind of (sociological)<sup>14</sup> profile of some of the Captains of the Sand. First, by recognizing that personal experiences, even the most dramatic ones, have their roots elsewhere. Their social destinies led them to that abandoned shipyard and house, as abandoned as they had been since childhood. Unquestioning victims of a redundant state that treated the dispossessed population as if they had no social existence, they ended up in a place that was “[...] degrading and filthy, destined for the degradation that weighs on them like a curse” (Bourdieu, 1993b, p. 344).

Jorge Amado then shows, as Bourdieu would later do through the notion of habitus,<sup>15</sup> that social structures are progressively transformed into mental structures. In the case of the boys chosen to make up the group of Sand Captains, it was the demands of survival, felt at every moment, that forced them to move between the world of children and the world of adults, leading them to develop tactics and tricks that were exclusive to adult men. Sem-Pernas, for example, “had never had the joy of a child. He had become a man before the age of ten in order to fight for the most miserable of lives: the life of an abandoned child. As Bourdieu (1984) shows, the breaking down of generational barriers confirms the complexity of the relationship between social and biological age, which only aims to set limits and produce an order that must be maintained and that must keep each person in his or her rightful place.

The Sand Captains came from different places, but their social origins were very close. Each (sociological) portrait presented is described in the development of the literary plot (p. 17-256). In other words, the boys acquired an identity as they moved through the city, as they saw it as their own, and so they built their bodily hexes.<sup>16</sup> Through it, they expressed their relationship to the social world: “Dressed in rags, dirty, half-starved, aggressive, cursing and smoking cigarette butts, they were in fact the owners of the city, those who knew it perfectly, those who loved it perfectly, its poets.”

In order to carry out my reflection, I will take some of these portraits as a reference to illustrate the analytical dimensions prioritized, namely: abandonment, family connections, the stigmatization effect, uprooting, illiteracy, sexual precocity and virility, the pleasure of risk. My intention is to show that Jorge Amado, as well as demystifying the performative discourse anchored in diversified forms of violence, put into practice by state authorities and broadcast by the media, constructs a heretical discourse.

14 The inspiration behind these profiles, although based on a different methodology, comes from Bourdieu’s (1993a) *La misère du monde*.

15 “The conditioning associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable and transmissible dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as generating and organizing principles of practices and representations [...]” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 88-89).

16 For Bourdieu (1979, p. 100), bodily hexis includes the actual physical conformation of the body, the way one presents oneself (pronunciation, the way one dresses, grooms oneself, puts on make-up, chooses a type of sport, etc.) and expresses the ‘deep being’, the true nature of the person, according to the postulate of correspondence between the physical and the moral.

## ABANDONMENT

The first violence experienced by the Sand Captains is certainly abandonment, which was common to all of them. Pedro Bala, the chief, for example, has been “wandering the streets of Bahia” since the age of five, when his father (Loiro, as he was called) was “caught by a bullet” while fighting for the rights of the dockworkers on strike at the docks. He no longer had a mother; she had died when he was just six months old. The position of boss was won in a fight with Raimundo, the former boss, who cowardly beat Barandão, which cost him the “red scar on his face”. The right to lead them was secured from then on. Abandonment also characterizes the trajectory of João Grande, who lost his father, “a gigantic cart driver”, run over by a truck “when he was trying to move his horse to one side of the road”. From the day he went down the hill to conquer the mysterious city, he lived with the group and became one of its leaders. His muscular strength made him fearsome and that was why he slept “at the door of the pier, like a dog, dagger in hand, to avoid any surprises”.

## FAMILY CONNECTIONS

They lost their family connections very early on, usually as a result of the death of their parents, or especially their mother, and were forced to survive on their own. They therefore had a vague idea of what a family could be, they lacked references. This didn’t stop them from dreaming of a family environment. This is the case with Sem-Pernas. He resented the rejection he had experienced at an early age because he had “no one in the world”, because he was “crippled”, but he also kept the memory of the gentle caress of a kiss deep in his heart, “a caress like he had never had, a mother’s caress”.

The night Dora arrived, the only girl admitted among the Captains of the Sand, accompanied by her six-year-old brother, Zé Fuinha, whose parents had been taken away by smallpox, brought “great peace”. After wandering the streets looking for work, they were taken to the wharf by João Grande and João José, the Professor, causing a great deal of confusion, as the boys looked at her as they would a woman: “Can’t you see she’s a girl,” shouted the Professor. Dora’s delicacy meant that she was quickly welcomed as a mother: “she’s like a little mother”; as a sister: she was “exactly like a sister”; as a bride: “exactly like a bride”, thought Pedro Bala as he admired the reflection of the stars “in the blue sea of Bahia”. The feeling of abandonment had become lighter: they saw in Dora “a strong sertaneja, defending her piece of land against the colonels [...]. The blonde hair was thinning, the sweet eyes were the flat eyes of the sertaneja, the serious face was the gloomy face of the exploited peasant. And the smile was the same proud smile from mother to son”.

## THE STIGMATIZATION EFFECT

The situation of abandonment that accompanied them had consequences. They were constantly the victims of stigmas: ugly, dirty, evil, bladdery.<sup>17</sup> This is, as Bourdieu (2019, p. 245) reminds us, the effect of stigmatization that “[...] encloses socially designated victims [...] in the vicious circle of failure”, and the curses can become fatal. The Sand Captains lived with contempt and humiliation in every day-to-day situation. As they walked alongside Father José Pedro, who had taken them to see the lights of the carousel that had just been set up in the city, “they looked like a bunch of good kids coming from catechism.” However, they came across the widow Margarida, who didn’t hesitate to vent her scorn: “Aren’t you ashamed to be in this environment, Father? A priest of the Lord? A man of responsibility in the midst of such rabble...” “They’re children,” replied the priest, who was immediately rebutted by the widow: “They’re not children, they’re thieves. Old men, thieves. The beatas therefore seemed to take pleasure in burning their victims: “Don’t come near me, you

<sup>17</sup> An allusion to Ettore Scola’s 1976 film *Brutti, Sporchi e Cattivi*.

filth”. But Father José Pedro was not like the other priests. Like the children, he was stigmatized by the clergy who considered him incapable of “understanding God’s designs. He had no intelligence” and spoke “like a communist”.

When he drew in chalk a man in an overcoat who seemed to have a lot of money, the Professor was kicked twice because the man didn’t like the picture: “Here, bugle, learn not to cheat a man”. The fear of smallpox (bladder pox) also weighed heavily on the children. The lady who had promised Dora a job was afraid to touch her, “she wanted her to leave before she infected the house”. These situations caused the children to suffer deeply from rejection and a lot of hatred: “Nobody wants the daughter of a bladder-picker”; “Who cares about us? Who? Only thieves, only thieves...”

## THE UPROOTING

Translated into a feeling of not belonging, the sense of losing one’s roots accompanied many of those children, generating even more insecurity. Although most of them could not remember how, when or under what conditions they had arrived in the city, or if they had even been born there, some of them kept episodes in their memories that linked them to certain contexts. Volta Seca never forgot that he was Lampião’s godson: “he’s my *padrim* [godfather]...” And it was when he helped Nhozinho França manipulate the merry-go-round that “the hinterland entered Volta Seca’s nose and eyes”. He even remembered which of the horses “had been ridden by his godfather Virgulino Ferreira Lampião”, during one of the toy’s journeys through the hinterland. Suddenly, it all started to make sense to him: “He had always been out of place in the city, speaking differently, talking about Lampião, saying my *padrim*, imitating the voices of the hinterland animals.”

Thinking about the Brazilian Northeast throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the light of the Bourdieusian perspective, Garcia (2005, p. 310-311) helps to understand this feeling of not belonging that haunts Volta Seca: “[...] entering a new world means a break with traditional sociability, but also a break with all the representations that found it [...]. Being uprooted from traditional peasantry absolutely does not provide the tools for taking root in the modern world” (Garcia, 2005).<sup>18</sup>

## ILLITERACY

Illiteracy also leveled them out, confirming the state’s dismissal of the right to education.<sup>19</sup> The Professor was an exception. He read proficiently, even though he had only attended school for a year and a half. Ever since he had stolen “a storybook from a bookshelf in a house in Barra”, he had become an expert in this kind of theft. He read the books by candlelight, “with an eagerness that was almost feverish”, and kept them to himself, protecting them from the rats that lived there. He also read to the other children, who were enchanted by “stories of adventurers, men of the sea, heroic and legendary characters”. Despite being short-sighted, “thin and sad”, his imagination led him to create “the best robbery plans”, making him respected among the boys. In Pirulito’s case, he was learning to read and write with Father José Pedro because he also wanted to be a priest.

It was not like that when it came to calculus. They learned how to handle money very early on and were shrewd in their dealings with adults, abusers and takers: “You give fifty to each of them and it looks like you’re still going to do business. That’s 150 jobs for the three of us. Otherwise, there’s no package.” They were equally adept at playing cards, their trickery going unnoticed by the sailors who gathered at the docks.

18 Pierre Bourdieu and Abdelmalek Sayad (1964) developed an in-depth study on the crisis of traditional agriculture in Algeria. They show the harmful consequences of the colonizing logic on rural populations forced to move to the city.

19 The Federal Constitution of 1934, art. 149, established the right to education as the responsibility of the family and the public authorities, as well as “access to all levels of education”. However, parameters restricting schooling were established by the same legal provision, as shown by Valle and Ruschel (2009).

## SEXUAL PRECOCITY AND VIRILITY

Two conditions are present from an early age among the Sand Captains, the older ones acting as initiators for the younger ones. Gato, for example, did not hesitate to boast about his sexual adventures. He “walked the streets with women [...], whistling as if he were one of those city scoundrels”. This precociousness also fed his virility, a quality recognized by the boys who quickly discovered “the mysteries of sex”: “the little chicken looks like a man”, Dalva murmured after being thrown onto the bed by Gato, “the elegant one of the group”. Bourdieu (1998b) teaches us that, by reinforcing virile solidarities, virility<sup>20</sup> appears as a principle for preserving and increasing (male) honor, remaining inseparable, at least tacitly, from physical robustness, courage, but also from violence. They wandered the sands of the docks, “considered the love bed of all scoundrels, all thieves, all seafarers”. Unsuspecting young women who passed by were constantly the victims of those who “can’t afford a woman and are thirsty for a body in the holy city of Bahia”.

## THE PLEASURE OF RISK

Risk was a kind of stimulant for the Sand Captains. Used to walking on a razor’s edge, they found pleasure in putting bold and dangerous plans into practice: “a sand captain is like a brave man”. However, they did not hide the fear that haunted them when carrying out these plans: “I was scared shitless”. But they faced it with courage, sharing their experiences and the tactics they adopted in situations that required improvised reactions and unforeseen skills. Pedro Bala recounted the adventures he had had the previous night in prison when he got caught because he wanted to recover the image of Ogum, belonging to Don’Aninha, which the police had taken. He promised to give it back to this great saint-mother, a friend of “all the blacks and all the poor of Bahia”, who “deserved to be put at risk for her sake”. The risk was often linked to a feeling of loyalty, present not only among the members of the group, but also among those with whom they formed alliances of trust, with whom they established certain solidarities.

## THE POWER OF A “HERETICAL DISCOURSE”

From the outset, my expectation has been to show how fruitful the relationship between sociology and literature can be, as it allows us to associate different types of sensitivity, both for their historical and trans-historical<sup>21</sup> possibilities. Through the work *Capitães da Areia*, woven into the complex dynamics of the institutional, economic, political, legal, police and religious game, Jorge Amado creates a heretical discourse that opposes the performative discourse. Because it represents the interests of the powerful, the performative discourse perpetuates an accusatory tone towards the poor. Its aim is to substantiate common sense, give legitimacy to the violence that particularly victimizes children and naturalize all types of social racism (related to class, ethnicity, gender, intelligence, disabilities).

Any discourse that breaks with the established order is considered subversive because it jeopardizes crystallized privileges, handed down from generation to generation. Jorge Amado’s heretical discourse therefore contributes to eroding the moralistic and ideological pillars that support this order. He shows that “minors” are not “born criminals”, but children who are victims of the contempt of social institutions which, instead of protecting them, subject them to punishment and torture by those who have the privilege of privileges and rely on the magic of institutional

20 Bourdieu explores the notion of virility in his work *Male Domination* (1998b), referring to its ethical aspect, the quiddity of virtue, of honor, which implies a duty-to-be that imposes itself on the world without discussion, and it is no exaggeration to treat it as one of the signs of (male) nobility.

21 For Bourdieu (1992, p. 14), “[...] scientific analysis, when it is able to present what makes the work of art necessary, that is, the informing formula, the generating principle, the reason for being, provides artistic experience, and the pleasure that accompanies it, with its best justification, its richest nourishment”.

acts.<sup>22</sup> Persecuted by a state that only represents the interests of “good men”, who are also “men of possessions”, these children learn from a very young age to know and live with all the miseries of the world. They have to survive the actions of the police, whether in prison, in the Reformatory for Delinquent and Abandoned Minors that houses the boys, in the Orphanage that houses the girls, or condemned to death, as in the case of the lazaretto, where the poor bladders are taken (the “rare man who comes back from there”).

The strength of Jorge Amado’s heretical discourse lies not only in the seductive aspect of his literary text, but also in the critical sensitivity he mobilizes to grasp the dialectic between the spaces of authority — and authoritarianism — and the spaces of resistance that stubbornly maintain and strengthen themselves. *Capitães da Areia* is a representation, in dramatized language, of the inequalities and social injustices that persist in Brazilian society.

NO, says Jorge Amado with all his power as a writer, they will not become what they are (ugly, dirty, evil, blubbery). Despite the life they have been given, they are children, they have dreams. Pedro Bala, who thought “the strike was great” and saw it as “the feast of the poor”, dreamed of the revolution. He had been taught that “the revolution is a homeland and a family”. Dora dreamed of leaving the orphanage, because she wasn’t “a girl without anyone”, she had “a fiancé, a legion of brothers to look after”. The Professor, for his part, dreamed of going to Rio de Janeiro to learn how to paint, he wanted to do the boys’ portraits. Volta Seca’s dream was to find his *padrim*; he felt that “the hinterland was calling him, the struggle of the gang was calling him”. While Gato wanted to get rich, Pirulito wanted to fulfill the dream of Father José Pedro, who had never seen “such a determined vocation. He had become his “great conquest” among the Sand Captains.

YES, cries Jorge Amado, they are children, children who try to sleep in spaces they share with rats, peeking through the cracks of the mansion, “with their eyes drawn to the lights of the ships, their ears caught in the songs that came from the boats”. Whether asleep or awake, “indifferent to the wind that howled around the house, indifferent to the rain that often washed them away”, the Sand Captains dreamed children’s dreams. When they played, they forgot that “they were not the same as other children”, they forgot that “they had no home, no father, no mother, that they lived by stealing like men, that they were feared in the city like thieves”, and inside each one of them “there was a springtime joy...”

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22 Bourdieu (1982) develops this notion as part of a reflection on what he calls “rites of institution”.

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