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1994-07-13T06:20:02Z
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13 - 15 JULY 1994

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

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WORKERS' CULTURE IN SAO PAOLO (BRAZIL):
NATIONAL, RELIGIOUS AND POPULAR DIMENSIONS

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HWS 43

WORKERS' CULTURES IN SAO PAULO (BRAZIL): NATIONAL, RELIGIOUS AND POPULAR DIMENSIONS (SUMMARY)

By R. CABANES

The purpose of this paper is to describe workers'cultures in Sao Paulo as apprehended through the stories recounted by local groups of workers. These stories were centred on labour and professional trajectories. It seems that an interpretation of various groups of practises and symbols through diverse generations of workers would be possible. These groups of practises and symbols change from time to time according to events. New events constitute for the most recent generation their initial melting pot, while events which constituted the melting pot for previous generations exist only through memory. It is there-fore possible to pinpoint these practises and symbols at the moment of their appearance from the most ancient generations, and to examine their evolution, their transformation or their breaking-up.

The matter here will not be to present systematically the historical and social contexts in which these cultural elements occured. This will de delt with only where established institutions and powers shape the historical and social context. The preoccupation in this paper will be, first to extract from workers' stories, initial myths, rituals, practises and representations which build these cultural elements. Secondly, we will touch on the historical and social contexts whenever institutions and powers will appear to play a significant role in the constitution and genesis of these cultural elements; then we will utilize the information obtained from workers'stories.

Suffice it to say, that this paper aims to present some dynamic

principles which structure cultural forms of identification. This paper treats only the locating of these principles and not the history of these forms and their process. Otherwise, we would need a historical analysis which would be much longer and more detailed.

Let's also, from the start of this study, emphasize the contrasts which exist in a country like Brazil. Firstly, there is the context of domination in which is located the worker milieu like elsewhere in the world, this constitutes the first unifying element, or rather, it contains potentialities for a strong process of worker's identification.

Secondly and in contrast, it can be said that the accession to the worker milieu (which is represented by the possession of a work card, what means the guarantee of a declared and regular activity which provides social rights and a true citizenship), may be conceived as a priviledge within the ocean of precarious work and unemployment.

Between the two structural extremities of this position, submission and priviledge, there is considerable scope for human action and many identifying or cultural configurations whose major historical evolution will be described here.

1. CULTURES OF THE LABOURER

For the dominated working-class, whatever it is, urban or rural, well payed or not, tiresome or pleasant, labour is inesca-pable. The labourer is attached to labour like his destiny. Thus, labourers accept with calmness low wages, non payed extra hours

and schedules of labour whatever they are.

The simple fact of working is considered to be a "blessing" (in the religious sense of the word). Individually given, this donation from heaven must not be lost or alienated. Workers' blindness vis-à-vis their own social conditions of labour is intentional: in spite of injustice, there is no reason for them to criticize what appears to be their destiny.

2. THE ANARCHIST CULTURE

Anarchist culture and revolutionary syndicalism were largely dominant in the 1920s and were introduced by European migrants. We will not deal with the birth and development of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism at the time their dominance as doctrines (at the beginning of this century), but we will follow their contemporary paths through the biographies of some workers. Besides, those workers do not claim to be particularly anarchist, even if they know the existence of this worker movement.

Anarchist workers devoted a deep respect to the age of individuals (parents and bosses) who exercised authority. The apprenticeship is thus a period of reception and not of expression. When a teenager reached the legal age (18), he ceased to work in small workshops. Without any transition, unshakable self-affirmation in all circumstances is expected of him.

A code of workers conduct compelled them to overcome the fear vis-à-vis experiencing physical dangers without taking useless risks, avoiding all relationships of dependence at the moment of hiring or the first days of work, refusing relations of competition between peers which may be aroused by the hierarchy and claiming equality of wages for equal tasks, and finally changing

employers in order to avoid falling into repetitive patterns of work.

The anarchist culture had one dimension which was completely opposed to another feature of the Brazilian culture: the **exchange of favours**. The latter occured in the course of relations among peers and more specifically between subordinates and superiors.

The main difference between the culture of the labourer and that of the anarchist, rests on the fact that the latter does not depend on any mystical or religious reference; rather the mysticism lies with the individual, and in some way it is timeless.

3. *THE COMMUNIST CULTURE*

Its essential cultural originality is the supremacy of the political level over its corresponding organization. The trade union was of secondary importance because it constituted only an executive branch of the party. What leaders expected from militants was to build a strategy which would allow the oppressed to constitute a force against domination and exploitation.

The party had remarkable structural qualities of organization which were developed in the last decade, when it came to organize factory commissions in charge of negociations with management.

4. NATIONAL CULTURE AND CORPORATIST SYNDICALISM OF THE 1920S

The state had to assure both the development of the national industry and a minimal social protection and legality in order to attract rural manpower, while maintaining manpower expenses at a reasonable rate but also at a sufficient level for the

development of an internal market. Moreover, the state improved the labour conditions through the "Consolidation of Labour Laws" published in 1943 and which still constitutes the ground for the labour legislation in Brazil. It is updated each year.

During the first 30 years of this system until the 1964 military coup d'Etat, there were permanent negotiations between political power and the trade union system. The latter negotiated its own manipulation by a more or less populist régime, favourable to popular classes. However its various attempts to create autonomous confederations of trade unions failed.

From 1964, this model attempted to perpetuate itself but syndicalism lost its efficiency vis-à-vis a repressive state. The 1974 liberalization of the régime allowed trade union activity to recover; it was endowed with new forms of organization, different from the previous ones which had been discredited because of the failure of its protector: the state.

The contemporary period is characterized by confrontation between these two tendencies or these two cultures. The first one, deprived of state support, receives a discreet and sometimes conspicuous support from employers. As for the second tendency, it is based on the principles of the theology of liberation and adopts some features of previous cultures, essentially anarchist and communist ones. Extending its domain beyond the labour field, this tendency also deals with social needs of oppressed strata.

Syndicalism naturally leads to contact with the political domain. The desire to participate in the political universe appears constant in this form of culture but the levels of this participation are very unequal and correspond to the professional status of persons.

5. A SIMULTANEOUS RETURN OF THE RELIGIUOS AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS

The contemporary socio-political culture is based on the theology of liberation and occurs during the dictatorship (1964-1984). The theology of liberation constitutes a link between diverse forms of resistance or of refusal of the notions of "suffering" and "sacrifice". Its acceptance on earth assures the redemption in heaven. Henceforth, the life on earth becomes a question of dignity for all. This supposes a relative equality, rather than the suppression of the most striking inequalities.

It is in this cultural context that one takes charge of the act of labour. It is different from other cultures of labour because:

- in the official syndicalism labour is first of all perceived in relationships of allegiance and clientelism vis-à-vis the state;

- the Communist culture subordinates labour into political submission;

- the cultures of the labourer are less attentive to social insertions of labour; and finally

- although this last culture appears to be closer to the anarchist culture, the latter is not sensitive to the pain of workers.

It is undoubtedly difficult to speculate about the future of these different cultural forms. For the present, it is clear that their major social forms of support are the trade union and the

party. The trade union and the party favour more the relationship of force rather than cultural creations. Moreover, the trade union form seems to be the most able to capture what appears to be the foundation of a social and cultural renovation: the development and revaluation of concrete labour.