

Labor As Seen By Social Anthropology

José Sergio Leite Lopes¹

1. Introduction: the economic sphere and labor in social anthropology

Anthropologists have traditionally studied labor in their monographs about indigenous groups, ethnic minorities, the peasantry, fishers and artisans. In these studies of labor, as in the economic sphere in general, it appears as enmeshed in the totality of the social life of these “traditional”, “pre-capitalist” groups. Generally such anthropological studies focus on the centrality of gift giving and reciprocity, which negate or obscure economic interests for the benefit of the logic of honor or of symbolic capital. They regard the gift as a total social fact where the market principal is subordinated to that of reciprocity and redistribution. Labor in these studies is not the central theme of interest, but appears in a form subordinated to other aspects with which it is interrelated.

Between the 1950s and 1970s, anthropologists engaged with the question of the critical application or appropriation of concepts from diverse currents of so-called economic theory. Such concepts were constructed to explain the capitalist economy, but anthropologists embraced these economic principles in general to understand all societies. A debate arose between “substantivists”, who praised the historicity of concepts and the necessity of new instruments for the economic analysis of non-capitalist societies and the “formalists” who gave a wider reach to existing economic theories to apply to their ethnographies. The substantivists were located in some American universities and drew heavily on the work of and disciples of the Hungarian economic historian Karl Polanyi; later they would have an important repercussion in the whole anthropological field.² They devised instruments and procedures for the study of non-capitalist societies that were greatly valued by scholars in the social sciences, historians and even economists.

The study of non-capitalist societies was initially undertaken by economists, sociologists and historians, but progressively also became the domain of anthropologists, or at least some of them. This was accomplished through studies of proletarianization or the

¹Professor of Anthropology, National Museum – Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

²In Brazil, the most famous book of Polanyi, *The Great Transformation; the origins of our times* was originally published in 1944, but was only translated in 1980. A collection of many of his articles, *The Livelihood of Man*, was recently translated in Brazil. (Polanyi, 2012). (My first published article with reference to the work of Polanyi was in 1971. Leite Lopes 1971).

subordination of peasants and direct small producers (with or without the ethnic characteristics of their social identities) in the capitalist sphere.

Brazilian anthropology, as *anthropology made at home*, as the English have said since the end of the 1980s, and no longer an “overseas” anthropology (of colonies and ex-colonies), was a discipline that initially focused on indigenous peoples in Brazilian territory, exploring different groups, phenomena and social processes in this geographical space. Yet early on – perhaps earlier even than “metropolitan” anthropologies due to the weight of academic traditions in Europe and North America – Brazilian scholars engaged in the urban anthropology of so-called complex societies, including groups of industrial workers.

Brazilian anthropology embraced such tendencies that would only be followed later in the academically dominant countries for a number of historical reasons among which was the specific conjuncture in which graduate studies in social anthropology in the country developed. When the first graduate program in the country arose at the National Museum of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in 1968 (followed by others soon after), the country was ruled by a military regime characterized by the repression and censure of university activities especially in the human sciences, sociology and history where there were critical professors, undergraduate courses and the student movement.³ Social anthropology was developed as a graduate course without an equivalent undergraduate program (and therefore without the immediate repression of the undergraduate student movement) and since its traditional object of study was indigenous societies, it was more removed from what the state considered as dangerous academic themes. Social anthropology could count on a relatively calmer academic environment in which to explore the general problems of Brazilian society through the “backdoor” of supposedly peripheral social groups. It could also study the processes of subordination and proletarianization of the peasantry through the “social impacts” of capitalism on different social groups, including industrial workers. Thus, it could construct a new approach to work and workers in a somewhat different way than that of the industrial sociology of work that had developed at the University of São Paulo in the 1960s, the dominant pole at the time of the Brazilian social sciences. In the conjuncture of the 1970s and 1980s, graduate courses in social anthropology could attract students from general undergraduate programs in social sciences and explore themes, until then dominated by sociology and political science, in original ways.

³ For an analysis of the history of the creation of the graduate program in social anthropology at the National Museum of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, see Garcia Jr. (2009).

The social anthropologists in graduate programs that studied labor and workers through explorations of the relations between peasants, rural and urban workers were confronted by the prevalent vision of researchers in the 1960s and early 1970s of the dominance of the “rural origins” of the working class in Brazilian industrial centers (in particular, in the metropolitan area of São Paulo). These analyses distanced the Brazilian working class from the different formation of workers in advanced capitalist countries, constructing ideal types and models. The sociology of work in this period emphasized the new urban capitalist society that had developed in Brazil, whose principal example was São Paulo, in detriment to the dynamic of other regions of the country and even to the very social processes of working-class formation of the São Paulo proletariat. Interpretations that viewed the weakness of Brazilian industrial workers as a result of their rural origins obscured the relevant insights that these São Paulo-based sociologists had produced in monographic studies. Beginning in the 1970s, the criticism of the rural origin of the working class as something “archaic” and “incipient” continued through empirical studies of the peasantry and rural workers as well as through sectors such as industry and its workers who were initially seen as “traditional”.⁴

Anthropologists offered an alternative research program through ethnographic studies, direct observation, long field trips, profound respect for the populations studied and empathy for their understandings and conceptions of the world. The ethnographic methods utilized with success in social anthropology were adopted in other disciplines and today are common in all the social sciences.

I will discuss the state of the anthropology of labor from my own research experience and those of my closest colleagues with whom I share interests as well as the interdisciplinary literature that is appropriate for such studies.

2. The appropriation of an anthropological and interdisciplinary literature for the study of labor

My research experience is based on the comparison between two social groups of workers from the point of view of their relation to the history and formation of a collective memory. Composed of industrial workers, they were among the less commonly studied

⁴ Consult, in particular, the project “Employment and socioeconomic change in the Northeast (Emprego e mudançassocioeconômica no Nordeste), where the first concentrated analysis of diverse interrelated social groups was made and where the notion of “ideal-types” is discussed. Palmeira et al. (1977). Also, see the appreciation of the effects of this project in Garcia Jr. (2010).

groups in anthropological studies, but due to their obscure and peripheral relationship to the industrial centers of the country and their recent rural origins, they were particularly appropriate to explore within the orbit of ethnographic investigation. They are (a) industrial workers in sugar plants (studied in the state of Pernambuco in Northeastern Brazil and compared through secondary sources to the situation of this occupation on a national scale) and (b) female and male textile factory workers, and their families, in a factory and a company housing complex in the city of Paulista, in the state of Pernambuco, representative of factories in the first seventy years of Brazilian industrialization in the twentieth century. Based on the existing literature and empirical processes and phenomena observed through research, I will outline some characteristics of the universe of my research interests. At the same time, I will demonstrate the connections between my research and those of colleagues whose work is closest to mine within the larger literature.

These two groups studied successively and in comparison *a posteriori* present a different, even polarized, relationship with respect to conceptions of history. The sugar plant workers display a conception of a cyclical time structure, alternated by successive changes in the administration of their lives.⁵ Due to the importance of the relations constituted within such administration, migrations of work teams periodically occurs in the labor market of sugar mills: when a foreman or supervisor of a section leaves, he tends to bring with him trusted co-workers. This is a male story, where the workers' family stays in the background and is dependent on the male breadwinner (fathers of the family). Such a conception has all the appearances of a "cold story", above all if compared to their neighbors in agro-industrial processing, the rural workers situated in the same plantation area.

Since they were "industrial" workers, the operatives in the sugar mills benefitted from national labor laws instituted in the 1940s during the dictatorial government of Getúlio Vargas (which contributed to breaking employer resistance to these measures). In contrast with workers in the rural part of the plantation (a great majority of which were excluded from these rights), the industrial workers began to occupy positions of relative superiority in the hierarchy of the mills. The rural workers, on the other hand, *residents* and afterwards street workers, also known as *clandestines*, studied by colleagues more experienced than me in the original research team to which I belonged, only had access to labor rights twenty years after the factory operatives. They won these rights during a period of full democracy and strong social mobilization and soon became the principal targets of repression in the sugar fields by

⁵See Leite Lopes, 1976.

the new dictatorship implanted by the military in 1964. The process that began with the late access of rural workers to social rights and the subsequent expulsion of residents by owners, gave to these workers a comparison between an idealized past, from access to concessions related to housing and personal relations with some bosses, counterpoised to a present full of difficulties. The cognitive instrument shaped by this vision of the past, allied to the short period of a feeling of freedom in the early 1960s, gave to this social group the possibility and the will to fight for their demands even under severe conditions of repression (see Palmeira, 2013 and Sigaud, 1980a and b). Yet the sugar mill workers regarded the introduction of rights in the 1940s with much more distance without the same mobilization of the rural workers and peasants twenty years later. In the repressive post-1964 period, they did not have access to the same associative means, resisting the daily exploitation of work in an atomized form.

The male and female workers of the large industrial textile factory that created a city at the beginning of the twentieth century (and which today has approximately 300 thousand inhabitants) were highly sensitive regarding the singular appropriation of the external events that brought consequences to local social life.⁶The trajectory between the country and the factory, common to a great number of these workers, the greatness and charisma of the bosses, the struggle for the enforcement of rights since the 1940s, strikes during the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s and the movement against the repression of stable workers between 1968 and the beginning of the 1980s are all factors in the elaboration of a “hot history” (comparable to the rural sugar workers from the 1960s to the 1980s and not the sugar mill workers).

What was available in the literature at the time to analyze these industrial workers in an anthropological form? Since my initial research was conducted within a collective project that aimed to study sugar plantations as a whole, we began with studies by Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz on the Caribbean within the American cultural anthropology tradition.⁷The theme of proletarianization appeared in studies on the peasantry and peasant societies as well as in studies by Pierre Bourdieu at the beginning of the 1960s on the peasantry and urban workers in Algeria. Such themes were also present in the chapters of historical analysis anchored in the empirical material of Volume 1 of *Capital* by Karl Marx. We also knew of the urban-based research on the folk-urban continuum of Chicago School-influenced anthropology and sociology such as the interactionist analysis of institutions of Ervin

⁶See Leite Lopes, 1988.

⁷The references to the authors cited in this text are located in the bibliography at the end of the article.

Goffman. And finally, we could take advantage of concepts created for the study of “tribal” societies (“simple”, “indigenous”, etc.) such as the collective classifications of Mauss and Durkheim, the “savage thinking” of Levi-Strauss, the “structural time” of Evans-Pritchard, all of which were adapted for the agricultural-industrial and factory context that we were studying.

We also faced the question of access to field studies within the domain of companies which not only included the factory, but also company housing for its workers. As to this theme, when I wrote the introduction to my 1975 book on the sugar mill workers, *The Devil's Steam* (Vapor do Diabo), I drew on the reflections of Simone Weil in her studies of French factory workers in the 1930s. I could not yet draw on the analysis of Robert Linhart on Citroen in Paris that was only published in 1978. And I knew very little of the experience of Donald Roy, researcher turned worker in the 1940s in Chicago, supervised by Everett Hughes, who had recently been rediscovered. (Revisiting Roy's study, Michael Burowoy consecrated the ethnography of factory workers at the end of the 1970s, and in 2006 Roy's articles were edited in France by Briand and Chapouli with a Afterward by Howard S. Becker). In my case, it was not a matter of becoming a worker to do participant-observer research, but simply gaining access to workers with the possibility of establishing the relations of trust necessary for ethnographic research.

In the middle of the 1970s, consequently, I thought I was entering territory unexplored by anthropology, that occupied by the working conditions and life of factory workers. In fact, only later I searched for the antecedents of an anthropological focus in university or non-university studies on the working classes as well as among professional anthropologists. In part, factory operatives had been found by ethnographers at some point in the middle of the folk-urban continuum formulated by American cultural anthropologists. This was the case for the indigenous textile workers in Cantel in Guatemala studied by Manning Nash in the 1950s, the workers of Yankee City described by Lloyd Warner as well as by Donald Roy who incorporated himself as a native and non-declared scholar among the metalworkers of Chicago. The proximity between anthropology and sociology in the Chicago-school tradition made anthropologists such as Warner and Foot-Whyte move between studies of classic themes in the anthropological discipline (in the case of the former) and urban ethnic communities (in the latter) to studies similar to industrial sociology although strongly instrumentalized by ethnography. In the 1940s, some American universities founded institutes of human relations associated with industry where applied anthropological projects were conducted, generally by reformists and reformers, around the theme of “industrial

relations”. This was not unrelated to what was taught at the Free School of Sociology and Politics of São Paulo, with the presence of Donald Pierson alongside disciplines in administration and industrial relations. Similar developments occurred with the appointment of the anthropologist, Mario Wagner Vieira da Cunha, as the first director of the Institute of Economy and Administration at the University of São Paulo and of his recruitment of Juarez Brandão Lopes.

I think it is pertinent here to make a small digression. Since I mentioned the School of Sociology and Politics of São Paulo and its generations of sociologists in the 1940s and 1950s I would like to situate the experience of José Albertino Rodrigues, who was something unique compared to his colleagues among São Paulo sociologists. Although he is situated in the classic bibliographies as belonging to the same group of sociologists of labor in São Paulo who produced their studies in the 1960s, José Albertino engaged in an extra-academic peculiarity that was perhaps his greatest work in a wider sense: his contribution to the invention of technical consulting on labor for the union movement. (Albertino was technical-director of DIEESE – the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies – between 1955-1962 and again between 1965-1966 and continued to influence the institution in the 1970s). Through this particular path, this sociologist enjoyed a close and empathetic relationship with “really existing” workers that made him particularly original within his generation.⁸

In the case of other world centers of social science such as France and England, a long wait for a “return home” for anthropology (*Anthropology at Home* is the title of a collection of essays published by the Association of Social Anthropologists in England) appeared to be necessary for anthropologists to interest themselves in the workers in their own industrial cities. There were precedents in England such as the study of Raymond Firth on families in the proletarian neighborhoods of East London

(*Two Studies of Kinship in London*), or the families and social networks studied by Elisabeth Bott, which included workers’ families. There were community studies systematized by Ronald Frankenburg, the study of coal miners by Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter (*Coal is Our Life*) – strongly influenced by the supervision of Meyer Fortes and Max Gluckman – or the work of Young and Wilmott (*Family and Kinship in East London*). There were also studies of mining cities in the Copperbelt of Northern Rhodesia (currently Zambia) by anthropologists of the Manchester school, attracted by transformations in tribal

⁸For an analysis of this generation, see Leite Lopes, Pessanha e Ramalho, 2012.

behavior in the cities. As in the textile factory in the interior of Guatemala, anthropologists studying Africa found themselves in small and medium-sized industrial cities.

The trajectory of the American anthropologist Hortence Powdermaker is also interesting since she circulated among the traditions of academic discipline in her own country and Great Britain as well as moving between classical and heterodoxical themes. Her thesis, supervised by Malinkowski at the London School of Economics, dealt with the Lesu in Melanesia, and, associated with Edward Sapir, she went on to study racial relations in Mississippi. Later she undertook ethnographic studies of Hollywood after having observed the role of cinema in the southern United States and finally studied African miners in the Copperbelt in Northern Rhodesia. All of this occurred after she completed an undergraduate degree in the history of labor and worked as a union organizer in the textile sector in her country.

Yet these are *a posteriori* considerations that I did not know at the moment I began my second research project on textile workers in Pernambuco, searching for a type of plantation extended to the city and to the suburbs of working-class housing complexes. What I actually was reading between field trips and in the preparation for the project "Employment and Social Change in the Northeast", was the book of E.P.Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, published in 1963, but available in the middle of the 1970s through the importation by Brazilian booksellers of Penguin Books, editor of pocketbooks who published this book in their catalogue in 1968. Based on the experience of the English industrial revolution, Thompson's hypothesis of the importance of the past, of memory, of the incorporation of history for the possibility of creating the new, appeared in a very clear form. Contrary to seeing the new industrial proletariat as the creator of the workers' movement, Thompson shows through ample documentation the importance of artisans, putting-out workers and rural workers destroyed by capitalist transformations as the active motors of the new movement. It was these workers, who drew on past references and who had constructed traditions of work, life and culture, who had the conditions to confront the new incipient modes of social domination. It was something similar to what my colleague Rosilene Alvim and I found in the city of Paulista in Greater Recife: the predominance of history in the present life of a group of factory workers was clear in the spontaneous remarks of the workers interviewed. They showed the ambiguity between the accomplishments of the bosses' greatness, which was reflected in the life conditions and experiences of the workers, and, at the same time, pride in their participation in protests against the illegitimacy of the domination of the bosses.

In the “preface-manifesto” of *The Making of the English Working Class*,

Thompson wrote: “The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born-or enter involuntarily. [but what interests us most here] it “is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value systems, ideas, and institutional forms.” Thompson inverted common sense, even in the academy, by emphasizing as the protagonist not the modern centers of capitalist transformation, the factory and its workers, but those who were facing dislocation and destruction by such transformation: artisans, rural workers, peasants and putting-out workers. He reinforced the recuperation of historical processes whose explanation combined well at the time with what was happening with the expropriation in peasant societies and artisanal groups in the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, the micro-resistance that occurred on the shop floor, with workers being constantly deprived of older forms of producing, customs and kinds of work, resulting in a growing increase in their underpaid efforts, could be appreciated by researchers.

Thompson’s insights confirmed what we had observed in the sugar plantation areas of the Northeast, as the memory of the traditional figure of the *resident* was reinforced at the very moment in which it was disappearing. This was outlined in the retrospective construction of the ideal type in the article “Work and Home” by Moacir Palmeira or in the apparently paradoxical addition by the sugar mill workers of older personalized and “paternalist” customs of the traditional relationship of the company housing arrangements to the new labor rights won in 1963, which were then threatened during the military regime, as analyzed by Lygia Sigaud. This was also confirmed by the tradition of “industrial arts” by *artists* from the maintenance sections of the sugar plants who furnished a legitimate language for demanding rights for all workers, which I perceived in my book *The Devil’s Steam*. There was also the ambiguity of the textile workers in the positive facts that they emphasized in their relations with bosses in the industrial city from 1930-1940 with the greatness of the struggle for the enforcement of new social rights by these factory workers at the same time and their later criticism of the contemporaneous relationship between workers and companies, which we found in the second half of the 1970s in Paulista. Indeed, more than an apparently incoherent logic in the heterogeneous total of “traditional” and “modern rational” practices, the workers followed a logic with a continual flux and tenuous limits of the appropriations of the uses of concessions and of rights. As Thompson formulated for the diverse context of workers who initiated the English Industrial Revolution, in the book *Customs in Common*:

It is my thesis that customary consciousness and customary usages were especially robust in the eighteenth century: indeed, some "customs" were of recent invention, and were in truth claims to new "rights". (...) custom was the rhetoric of legitimation for almost any usage, practice, or demanded right. Hence uncodified custom - and even codified - was in continual flux. So far from having the steady permanence suggested by the word "tradition", custom was a field of change and of contest, an arena in which opposing interests made conflicting claims.

As such, despite the fact that the great part of the textile work force of Paulista held positive memories of the times in which the bosses' personalized postures were exercised locally, since social rights became available in the post-1945 period, the practice of raising grievances and demands in the labor courts through their unions, was widely disseminated. Even though Brazilian workers may be considered as "drowned in laws", in the expression of the labor historian John D. French in reference to the incredibly wide reach and size of the state labor laws, the laws served as an instrument of negotiation for workers confronted with the authoritarian customs of employers in treating their workers. The appropriation of new laws by the workers was inserted within the context of their understanding of their past relations with the employers.

The Thompsonian argument stressing the weight of the past in the present dispositions of workers, of the importance of experience, combines well with the concepts involving the actualization of the *habitus* of a group (or of an incorporated history) as Bourdieu formulates it. The hypothesis of Thompson originates in the very origins of the industrial revolution, which gives his argument a wider applicability since he paradoxically presents it as the very event that is associated to capitalist economic modernity. A similar argument is made in the German case examined by Barrington Moore Jr. in his book *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*. The author shows that, compared to the metalworkers who arose in the region of the Ruhr Valley at the beginning of the twentieth century, miners in the same region, whose traditions were reworked from the period before the industrial revolution, possessed standards of legitimation constituted in the past from the work process established in the artisanal corporations in which they were inserted. These were used to condemn the intensification of work in the present. Yet the metalworkers in the new plants of the region lacked such standards of legitimation rooted in the past to give them an instrument of resistance to exploitation. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the miners of the Ruhr Valley obtained their greatest success in their

demands and struggle.

The American historian William Sewell Jr., a student of Geertz's, also reinforces this argument by focusing on the weight that the corporative artisanal idiom had among French workers during the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, despite the anathema of the great revolution of 1789 regarding the institutions of the old monarchical regime. This is also a strategic case for a Thompsonian argument in the sense that Sewell's arguments are also verified in the French case of the Revolution of 1789. Here a non-French historian has the advantage of freeing himself/herself from the divisions between consecrated periods in which professional historians specialize by studying at the same time the end of the ancient regime and the post-revolutionary period and thus observing the continuity in the corporative idiom in the constitution of a socialist discourse that begins to oppose the new capitalist classes. Posterior to these revolutions, the republican Durkheim highlighted the necessity to reinforce this idiom and the professional-corporative-union practice faced with the potential anomie provoked by the modern division of labor. And if the artisans and peasants are seen by E.P. Thompson as persons active in the capitalist industrial revolution which they confronted at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, it is also in this period in which Captain Cook was killed in the drama between the English and the Hawaiians in Polynesia. Through the explanation of his death, Marshall Sahlins shows, against the academic current, just how active the victims of the so-called world capitalist system were, using their traditions and initiating their habitus to creatively reappropriate themselves from the exchanges offered by their future conquerors.

Not only social and cultural historians have contributed to problematizing the apparently paradoxical relationship between work, memory, tradition and social transformation; so have other specialists who studied the social reception of literary production. Richard Hoggart, a professor English literature, explored the popular uses of literacy (*The Uses of Literacy*) at the end of the 1950s through the transformations and repercussions of mass market publications such as magazines on the reading public among the popular classes. To accomplish this, Hoggart first characterized what marked the culture of the English working classes in the first half of the twentieth century in which he himself lived. In this way, he conducted an ethnography, utilizing direct observation of the moment that anteceded the writing of his text. However, he also did it through the systematic recuperation of his own memory as a child and youth in a working-class family in the industrial region of Leeds. Hoggart's retrospective ethnography opens space for another

form of direct observation of the working classes. It is less than the direct observation of the researcher, academic or not, who puts themselves in the shoes of workers within a factory for a certain time such as Simone Weil, Robert Linhart, Donald Roy or Michael Burawoy. Yet it is a valuable observation of daily life and the internal codes of a group in which a university graduate who came from the working classes may, in certain conditions, undertake a cognitive reevaluation of his family experience. Confronted by the overwhelming production of mass entertainment directed at the popular classes, who transferred their low quality to what they considered the low quality of their public, the author is able to chart the less known resistance of this same public, reemphasizing their daily traditions that were not affected by the industry of mass culture.

Oblique consumption (that is, the attitude of not taking seriously such production), appropriation according to its *habitus*, the existence of a resistant minority and the resilience in the search for other access to cultural goods within the popular classes: all these are phenomena that were opposed to mass production for quick profits. And these university students – who worked for a part of their careers in adult education for the popular classes, in workers' educational associations or in the English Open University – is what inspired the so-called “cultural studies” which later spread to the English-speaking world as a whole and beyond. E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart were linked to these university institutions of adult learning for a considerable time. And much of their academic formation was influenced by the renewed contact with this resistant minority of the English popular classes. Some cultural historians such as Roger Chartier were directly inspired by Hoggart by developing a notion of cultural appropriation in the circulation of ideas between groups and social classes. It is not by chance, moreover, that since the 1970s Bourdieu and Passeron had promoted a French translation of *The Uses of Literacy* as an inspiring work for research in the sociology of education and culture. Moreover, as both considered themselves class defectors like Hoggart, they supported the systematic sincerity he used as a method to develop their own theories. (And Bourdieu at the end of his life practiced the systematic sincerity of Hoggart in his posthumous book, *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*).

However, it was not just English academics involved with the popular classes that became professors of the Open Universities. Intellectual exiles of Nazism such as Karl Polanyi and Norbert Elias also passed through such instable professional situations on their way to more stable careers. And it was with this acute thinking for the experience of the “serpent's egg” that he had passed through in Germany, that Elias offered a caveat to the

possible generalization of the hypothesis of Thompson about the transformative force anchored in traditions. It was not by accident that Elias was interested in the field research of one of his students, John Scotson, in his studies of the small industrial city that they called Winston Parva. In this place, a group of workers with longstanding ties to the small city and its associative life, began to spread rumors and gossip, stigmatizing the residents of the new housing projects who had been transferred from London as a result of the bombing of their old houses. Despite having no other differences of ethnicity or class beyond their long residence in the city, Elias shows how in certain instances antiquity or tradition may give way not to the construction of instruments of resistance which serves to liberate many, but to the contrary, allowing for the closed aristocratization of a small group. This was Elias' warning to the implicit optimism in community studies of the working class where class solidarity is never absent. And it is a self-warning contained in the very evolutionary analyses of the process of civilization.

In fact, it is worthwhile being attentive to the historical specificities of each social group, each trajectory of individuals who are representatives of their social groups. There are differences in the sugar mill operatives and the textile workers, both of whom are from Pernambuco.

3. The legacies of working-class experience in transformation

Returning to the comparison of the two groups of workers that I have studied, the case of the textile workers of Paulista has all the formative characteristics of what Elias, extending Max Weber, called group charisma. Indeed, the cohesion of workers' groups, generally presupposed in the theory-effect of possible class-consciousness, is something that has to be constructed and demonstrated. It is always worth asking how some of these groups are able to achieve cohesion and a state of mobilization faced with so many adverse conditions. Thus, for example, Maurice Halbwachs considers the working class, in its version as alienated proletariat, as a materialist-minded class isolated from society. Yet we may also consider the very secret laboratory of the factory as a micro-society with its own hierarchies, divisions and solidarities. The sugar mill workers with their differentiations and internal self-classifications polarized by the categories *art* and *artist*, the characteristics of the maintenance workers, ended up constructing an internal code of *art* that extended to all the plant's workers. This code of art reinforced the workers' cohesion in the face of the bosses' internal hierarchy, delegitimizing the latter for not being direct producers. It is like the two-

faced truth of the argument proposed by Bourdieu in which the pleasure for a job well done and professional pride figuratively preaches to the other face, the reality of exploitation of work, thus delegitimizing it. However, if the sugar plant workers lacked an active historicity which compelled their mobilization for a reduction in this exploration, this was not absent in the trajectory of the textile workers in Paulista.⁹ This lasted until the end of the 1970s. From the 1980s onwards, a series of economic processes led to the severe deindustrialization of the region, culminating in the neoliberal politics of the 1990s.

While the textile factory that originated in the city of Paulista definitively closed its doors in the middle of the 1990s, the sugar mill that I studied, continues functioning well, one of the most solid in the state of Pernambuco, surviving the failure of many similar plants since the 1990s. However, while we could construct a long-lasting relationship with the textile workers of Paulista that began in 1976 and continues to this day, our communication with the mill workers lasted little time. The territory of the mill and its housing estate are the monopoly of the company. In the city of Paulista, however, the textile workers had already left the original company housing estate when the company lost its monopoly status in the city territory in the second half of the 1960s.¹⁰ When we went there for the first time in 1976, the majority of houses in the old company estate were owned by workers' families who had won them through compensation agreements, so we could visit them without interference by the company administration.

It was in the context of the process of deindustrialization which struck in the 1990s that our area of research received strong demands by significant agents of local public power for the recuperation and systematization of the social memory of the city. The significance of the return of researchers who had produced theses and books about the city was not lost on these public agents; the very conditions of the research and collection of data was seen in a different form and the research was transformed into a historical testimony that systematized

⁹ The force of the historicity of this group of workers led us to initially be oriented by the interpretation of the reports and interpretations of workers as to their history, spontaneously emphasized. But the facts for those who pointed out such a confluence of individual and historical memories, despite being told orally among the workers in the form of a subterranean memory, to use the term of Michael Pollock, should also have left marks in the written records. This corpus of reports oriented us subsequently to search in the documentation for information and social representations contained in the memory of the workers as well as in collections of newspapers, annual reports of the stockholders of the company published in the press, and in government and union documents, with each source of information undergoing a process of pertinent interpretation.

¹⁰ The company-housing complex of Paulista was larger than in other factories of the period, concentrating a great number of workers. With a workers' villa of 6,000 houses in 1950 and a workforce that peaked at 15,000 workers, the Companhia de Tecidos Paulista was one of the largest factories of its kind on an international scale. The Amoskeag factory in Manchester, New Hampshire was considered the largest textile mill in the world and according to the historian Tamara Hareven had 17,000 workers in 1915. The fact that the textile factory equally utilized male and female workers brought important repercussions to the formation of a more stable working-class community.

and collaborated in the dissemination of local history.¹¹ In inspiring the making of a documentary about the memory of ex-textile workers, their trajectories and daily life during the “company period”, they were accumulating visual material, new characters and events related to the objectification of this social memory.

The film *Memory Fabric* thus registers through another language and with much visual research this new period of field research after an interval of thirty years through the instrument of visual anthropology that specialist colleagues in the area have been developing. This ethnography of long duration now constitutes a historical document in itself, constructed by the explicit participation of those studied, edited and shown publicly in blood, flesh and words; a document to be appropriated in the most favorable form by the very group portrayed and their descendants.¹²

What remains is the challenge of establishing a growing archive that gathers and systematizes the material collected in ethnographic research that has through the passing of time become historiographical in itself – but such material was not collected for the purpose of composing a public archive. The transformation of the data of individual researchers or collective projects into accessible material for public consultation by specialists or the by the very descendants of the groups studied has become more and more necessary. If the passion and interest that has moved many scholars engaged in ethnographic and historiographical endeavors about the world of workers had the implicit motivation of surpassing the very difficulties of the preservation of the experience of past struggles and their transmission from

¹¹ In 1954, Raymond Firth, after restudying in the two previous years the project on Tikopia that he had studied in 1928 and 1929, aimed to reflect on the bi-synchronic studies done by some anthropologists in a sequenced space of visits to the same field work site with the aim of capturing social change. In the case of his revisit with the Canadian anthropologist, James Spillius, they ended up playing a mediating role between the group studied and the authorities due to a period of hunger and shortage. In our case, there was a hunger for the reconstitution of the collective memory of the group, threatened to be relegated to silence and forgetting.

¹²The anthropologist may feel enthusiasm for participant observation, for his/her communion with those studied, for being there; such enthusiasm may be reinforced by participant objectification that in addition to analysis returns to the group studied the instruments of emotion and reflection. The practices of a long-term ethnology with a group of workers, such as those conducted by Huw Beynon, Michel Pialoux, Abdelmalek Sayad, Robert Cabannes, and William Wilson among others, was accomplished through their writings. The desire among my colleagues to see the consequences of practical anthropology is also evident through their support for indigenous and traditional populations, stigmatized minorities, and threatened peasant populations as well as for movements that defend cultural, environmental, historical, material and immaterial patrimony. Something of this same desire may also be evident in the devolution of an artifact that helps stage the collective words of a theatrical scene, but with individuals appearing and recognizing themselves in the product. The satisfaction of the exercise of power in translating the analysis made in previous studies into the esthetic language of image and music, which may also transmit the emotion that accompanies the life of this group of workers, representative of many others, may accomplish a professional satisfaction for those who are able to unite during some years their knowledge to the construction of technical consulting for the democratic institutions of workers, such as the case of the José Albertino Rodrigues with DIEESE in the 1950s and 1960s or of Moacir Palmeira and Afrânio Garcia Jr., respectively with CONTAG – the National Federation of Agricultural Workers - and FETAG-RJ - the Federation of Agricultural Workers in Rio de Janeiro – in the 1970s and 1980s or with Alfredo Wagner and the Social Cartography of the Amazon in the 2000s.

one generation of workers to the next, given the forms of domination to which they were subjugated, such passion also persists now. It exists at the moment when the very existence of a collective identity of workers has become fragmented and threatened with extinction. On the other hand, the existence of material and immaterial goods, information and collective representations accumulated through research and through the archives of the very worker, need to be preserved and organized for public presentation and for the learning of the lessons and legacies of these workers.

4. The theme of labor today in social anthropology and its interdisciplinarity

After a period of strong interest in the theme of labor in the social sciences between the 1960s-1980s, there was a moment of an apparent cooling down. This was the period in which also on an international scale the question of workers had supposedly become a theme of the past as a result of transformations in the world of work with automation and the reduction of workers in factories. The precariousness of manual work and the tensions related to the universalization of school learning relocated social conflicts to new spaces beyond that of labor.

Yet in recent years, the attention to phenomena related to labor and employment has returned in the sense that different cycles of economic crises produced in “peripheral” countries and even in the very central countries of contemporary capitalism have social consequences which are impossible to ignore by the different members of the power establishment. Within the social sciences from the 1990s onwards, new generations of economic sociologists and anthropologists initially interested in the phenomena of markets, marketization and financialization, also began to explore the interrelated aspects of labor. Books such as the *Misery of the World* coordinated by Pierre Bourdieu and *The Metamorphoses of the Social Question* by Robert Castel in France; the work of William Julius Wilson in *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* in the United States or the questioning articles of Huw Beynon about the disappearance of the working class in England: throughout the 1990s there was a new centrality established for the place of labor that had been neglected in the previous decade. The book by Michel Pialoux and Stéphane Béaud, *The Return to the Factory Condition* or the books of Abdelmalek Sayadon north African immigrants in France, all published in the 2000s, reinforced the return of this thematic, first sparked in the 1960s and 1970s.

In that period whose epicenter was the last part of the 1960s, the problem of

working-class formation was strongly influenced by different disciplines such as social anthropology, sociology and social history as well as the introduction of concepts of culture and historical specificity of these processes of formation. In the period since 1990s when capitalism has been reinvigorated through social and economic transformations that dispersed the previous social configurations of workers, new studies of labor and its effects on the constitution of sociability could be interesting for the mapping of changes and permanences. Such transformations have led us to attempt to deconstruct categories so full of meaning such as the “working class” through the analysis of social, historical and intellectual constructions, giving importance to the analysis of mediators associated with these classes.

On the other hand, the very obfuscation of the public face of the workers, through renaming and reclassifications in companies, aiming to reach their anterior identities, could be an additional stimulus for the coming together of continuing studies. In a certain way, labor may be thus seen in a wider form, ranging from the frontiers of urban informality to the new forms of professionalization of activities previously seen as “leisure”. The whole diversity of the social processes involving labor, from transformations of the family work of peasants, artisans, miners and small merchants into industrial work becomes an area of interest for such a thematic grouping. The relations between family and work may be constructed in another axis, through research, for example, on “leisure”, which could include subsidiary work, do-it-yourself projects and domestic work and even religious, sporting or popular cultural activities. Another area may be the relation between work and the relatively new themes of the environment, industrial hazards and the health of workers. At a moment when agro-business assumes industrial characteristics and in which members of the reconstituted peasantry already recognize their proletarianization in all regions of Brazil even if they do not completely abandon self-production, the interactions between the traditions of peasantry studies and research on workers could be stimulating. Moreover, the different forms of the market, which have been stressed recently in economic anthropology and sociology, may be viewed in a related form to the forms assumed by labor in its most ample meanings. The pertinence of this coming together of diverse studies will be most significant when it succeeds in establishing a thematic diversity in social anthropology, in the poles of urban anthropology, of peasant studies, of social movements, of social memory, of family and generations, of popular culture, of environmental conflicts and education.

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