

# REFLECTING ABOUT “THE PRECARIAT POLICY” FROM RUY BRAGA

Braga, **The Precariat policy: from populism to Lula’s hegemony**. São Paulo: Publisher, Boitempo, 2012

Daniel Lage<sup>1\*</sup>

Summarizing multiplicity of dialogues is not an easy task in Braga’s book: “The Precariat policy: from populism to Lula’s hegemony”. The work is part of recent productions regarding current Brazilian society *state of the art*, marked by Workers’ Party in National Executive Power. Without delay, the author follows path of at least three big goals: 1) set within Brazilian analysis reality, from 1950, roots of the concept of *precariat*; 2) to elaborate a sociology showing experience of part of a class in its historical development – in words of the author: “a workers’ experience science” (page 88); 3) to build a narration relating Lula’s State policy with trade union practices engendered in strikes at the end of the 1970’s.

From a broader point of view, this work will defend tooth and nail only one hypothesis; that **Lulism** is the dialectical overcoming of dialectical populism – both concepts understood by the author as hegemonic ways of social regulation; it is ways of mediating hegemonic social relations of production conducted by the State. To go from populism to **Lulism** with due qualitative leap, Ruy Braga has a long way to go: getting back to the 50’s and from there narrating transformations of precariat and trade unions.

In an intense dialogue with André Singer and Francisco de Oliveira – co-workers at CENEDIC - Center of Studies of Rights and Citizenship -, Braga introduces precariat as privileged actor of this narrative. Braga considers precariat most explored working class fraction, since it is in the heart of capitalist method of production. According to Karl Marx ideas, precariat is the proletarian fraction composed by relative over-population, less lumpen proletariat and

REVISTA CIÊNCIAS DO TRABALHO - Nº 2  
MAIO A OUTUBRO DE 2014

---

1\*. Social scientist and professor at Escola DIEESE de Ciências do Trabalho.

pauperized population. In other words, it is an active proletariat that became precarious through its own way of production – most of the workers being at the edge of system. That is to say that *professional workers*, such as engineers, toolmakers, at last low-skilled workers and exactly because of this not precarized, are also excluded from precariat. In the words of the author, precarious workers are telemarketing operators, auto-parts, foundries and food industry workers, in one word subordinates with an intense working relationship.

In a large comparative table (pg. 28), Braga distinguishes one concept from other two currently in discussion: Singer's *sub-proletariat* (2012) and Souza's *real-fighters* (2010). Regarding the first one, this includes pauperized population and excludes most employable part of the class. Regarding the second, Jessé de Souza includes professional workers and micro-entrepreneurs in his book "Brazilian real-fighters" (Batalhadores Brasileiros) Braga does not spare from criticism this work, especially when identifying methodological weakness and a skewed view in its historical construction, because he confessedly ignores workers' organizations – tendency rendering to Souza the accusation of symbolic violence and joining with people that "agree in considering precarized proletariat satisfied with modest relief of their conditions of existence, provided by current way of development" (pg. 130).

Braga considers that André Singer and his current interpretation of **Lu-lism** may also be included in the group of optimistic thinkers, but in a critical way. According to the author, Singer's interpretation results in serious problems. Starting by definition of sub-proletariat, where it is assumed that this less qualified parcel of proletariat does not have conditions for claiming or organizing collective mobilizations. Braga thinks that Singer only apprehends its object, without seeing transformations inherent to it. From that point of view, Singer is accused of standing next of those legitimating Workers Party conversion to financial orthodoxy (pg. 22), in spite of a critical point of view.

Once highlighted these differences and defined the actor of his research, Braga goes into a deep ethnographic review of authors interested in working class sociology of decades of 1950, 60, 70 and 80. Used methodology is *ethnographic review*, consisting in "searching others in its space and time, taking into account a comparison of their field with same studied in some past point" (pg. 63) – or review material collected by authors of other time – now with a different theoretical approach, to give new meaning to object of study and theory used at that time. Following Michael Burawoy footsteps – to whom Braga is eternally grateful, he intends shine a light on modifications to *knowledge of object* (the moment of theory approaching the object) and to *object of knowledge* (the moment of object that theory seeks to approach). Throughout Braga's book this will show need of establishing proletarian experience sociology, putting relationships of this fraction of class in the center of political reality comprehension. And this will be precariat policy theoretical foundation.

Then Braga dives into working class professional sociology papers of decade of 1950 (Leôncio Rodrigues and Juarez Brandão Lopes) and of authors

revisiting these works (Antônio Luigi Negro and Paulo Fontes) to do double movement above explained. It is a long way, ending in the reverse of populism when Braga defends that reviewing ethnography clearly shows there was not an active consent of precariat during populist period. As a matter of fact there was an intense unease under leadership of a *precarious hegemony*, revealed by the military coup d'état. Therefore, Braga gives new meaning to the own concept of populism:

Instead of adopting a passive and permeable behavior regarding political manipulation (...) main feature of populist hegemony was a *permanent state of social concern* among workers, especially in its most precarized fraction, expressed in continuous mismatches among activism in metallurgical bases and moderation of trade union leaders (p. 66).

By remembering major strikes mentioned in analyzed papers: Strike of 300,000 in 1953, Strike of 400,000 in 1957, Strike of 700,000 in November of 1963, besides another major strikes at Contagem, in the state of Minas Gerais and Osasco, in the state of Sao Paulo in 1968, Braga turns the bases, identifying high uneasiness in based organizations and moderation of trade union leaders.

Then Braga analyzes works of Weffort, Francisco de Oliveira, Luiz Pereira and José Albertino Rodrigues to elaborate worker uneasiness sociology. Rodrigues, foreseen as a pioneer in the analysis of a "*pelego*" – a sellout, a person who betrays a cause - and limits of trade union bureaucracy, was one of first technical directors of Dieese, an institution that marked his intellectual life. It is very good rescuing this concept, particularly within the context of Dieese School of Labor Sciences, where this review is inserted.

Therefore, after a critique of these authors, Braga finishes first part of the book "Formation of inside out" giving relevance to workers' experience analysis from Gramsci's idea that "**fatalism** is nothing other than the *clothing worn* by real and active will when in a **weak position**", or in other words a state of social uneasiness prior to the transformation of subordinates in leading roles of its own history" (pg. 130). Braga states that authors talking about proletarian satisfaction notion arising from achievements in both Lula's and populist period, do not have conditions to see the explosion of subordinates.

Second part of the book "Transformation of inside out" will try to prove how relationships engendered in the *new trade unionism* exceed populism, and take it into a higher level: the **Lulism**. Using same methodology Braga will redo the course of Lula da Silva and Brazilian ABC Metalworkers Trade Union, emphasizing three aspects of this trajectory: 1) Lula, a leading worker when acting in mobilizations, is invited by trade union inspector Paulo Vidal to be part of the management; 2) This position allows Lula learning process how to detect "natural" leaders within the workers and neutralize them taking to the "bureaucratic machine"; 3) strikes of 1978-9 were conducted against the bureaucracy apparatus, only mobilized by the circumstances, concluding in a

much bigger movement than expected. However this was slowed down and conducted giving priority to resumption of union's structure. According to the author, previous facts lead to **Lulism**:

When identifying the origin of Lula's hegemony in the agreement of union power and based activism, we must stress the reformist nature of that praxis. It is a hegemony based in combination of more prominent activists within union structure (active consent), or capitalist state, with achievement of little material concessions to workers (passive consent) (p. 36).

In this way, Braga considers that "Lulist" hegemony roots are in the relationships of working class organization. And when this way of relating includes the State, it becomes a "passive revolution in Brazilian style". The *passive consent* of population is attracted by public policies that increase income, together with the *active consent* of union leaders "seduced by positions in state bodies, besides countless material advantages provided by controlling pension funds" (pg. 181). Following Gramsci's concept will qualify this conversion of union leaders into speculators and capital managers: it is *transformism* – a phenomenon of moving to the other side of the counter, by using all previous acquired knowledge.

To finish long theoretical-analytical trajectory of precariat, Ruy Braga brings in contemporary telemarketing operators as example of a group synthesizing most relevant features of post-Fordist regime of flexible accumulation under **Lulism** hegemony. Braga is known because of his studies regarding these workers and has made a long compilation of works and field reports of its own research about telemarketing operators. Classified as example of Chico de Oliveira's reverse of the reverse, Braga sees in workers of this category – from one side, full operation of "Lulist" precariat policy – since sector is heavily affected by minimum wage policy (passive consent) with union leaders being obediently incorporated to the bureaucratic apparatus (active consent) –, and on the other side, potential uneasiness, expressed in some "spontaneous" strikes, from *fatalism of weak*. It is worth remembering that one year after the book was published, great demonstrations were held by people fitting into the profile of young telemarketing operators that exploded with deep indignation against precarious living conditions all over Brazil.

Last but not least, Ruy Braga tries to explain the sense of "Lulist" hegemony, with two tough conclusions regarding the future. First, from the point of view of old /modern dilemma, once again following Francisco de Oliveira our author does not hesitate in pointing "Lulist" hegemony as going backwards since this measure reproduces a perverse class domination attitude. Second is indicating – like Singer (2012), in spite of not being rescued in that moment – the harmful consequence of mobilization in favor of consumption promoted by Lula's government in search of passive population's consent. Braga thinks that integration for consumption generated a depoliticizing of the working

class, going back to the 1980's. But it is also worth remembering that in demonstrations of June de 2013 it was possible to see precisely that depoliticized attitude in the crowd, where many young workers participated.

As an end, it is worth mentioning that Braga is in a bigger project, shared with Alvaro Bianchi. They want to explain "Gramsci to Trotskists and Trotski to Gramsci's followers". This is why concepts as hegemony, unequal and combined, passive revolution and a fierce critique to bureaucratism are marks of the work. The book also includes two surprises. First one is an extremely inspiring set of pictures from all the studied period, plus a rich historical material; second is a group of texts published virtually and in print newspapers, selected to compose a collection.

### **Bibliographical References:**

Singer, André. **Os sentidos do lulismo**: reforma gradual e pacto conservador. São Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 2012.

Souza, Jessé de. **Batalhadores Brasileiros**: a nova classe média ou nova classe trabalhadora? Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 2010.