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Public Sociology and the Rights of Citizenship in Brazil: Critical Assessment and Historical Perspectives

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Public Sociology and the Rights of Citizenship in Brazil: Critical Assessment and Historical Perspectives

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Abstract

Public sociology is at the origin of the formation of the modern Brazilian sociological field. Between 1960 and 1970, at least two important institutions of sociological research (the Center for Labor and Industrial Sociology at the University of São Paulo, CESIT, and the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning, CEBRAP) developed the praxis characteristic of public sociology building up links with extra-academic audiences, in particular, radical trade unions and progressive social movements. The purpose of this article will be to reconstruct the theoretical and political links between these experiences in public sociology and the current engagement of the Center for the Study of Citizenship Rights (Cenedic), public sociology institute founded at the University of São Paulo in the 1990s by sociologist Francisco de Oliveira. Thus, we intend to debate some tensions between the academic research and social movements fighting for the rights of citizenship which resurfaced with unprecedented strength in Brazil in June 2013.

Keywords: public sociology, ethnography, social conflict, Brazil, social movement



Sociología Pública y los Derechos Ciudadanos en Brasil: Evaluación Crítica y Perspectivas Históricas

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Resumen

La sociología pública se encuentra en el origen de la formación del campo de la moderna sociología brasileña. Entre el 1960 y 1970, al menos dos importantes instituciones de investigación sociológica (Centro de Sociologia Industrial e do Trabalho, CESIT, y el Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento, CEBRAP) desarrollaron la praxis característica de la sociología pública construyendo vínculos con audiencias extra-académicas, en particular, sindicatos radicales y movimientos sociales progresivos. El propósito de este artículo será reconstruir los vínculos teóricos y políticos entre estas experiencias de sociología pública y la actual implicación del Centro de Estudos dos Direitos da Cidadania (Cenedic), el instituto de sociología pública fundado en la Universidad de São Paulo el 1990 por el sociólogo Francisco de Oliveira. Así pretendemos debatir algunas tensiones entre la investigación académica y los movimientos sociales luchando por los derechos de ciudadanía los cuales resurgieron con una fuerza sin precedentes en junio de 2013 en Brasil.

Palabras clave: sociología pública, etnografía, conflicto social, Brasil, movimiento social



Introduction

In mid-June 2013, a survey conducted by the Ibope institute revealed that the popularity of Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff had reached a historic level of approval: 63% of respondents considered her administration excellent or good, and 79% approved her personal performance (Costa, 2013). Even in comparison with the popular approval of 59% achieved by former President Lula da Silva in the end of his second term, Dilma Rousseff's figures were really spectacular.

However, only two months after the publication of that survey, something unprecedented in the history of our country, the popularity of the government plummeted to 30% of respondents (Toledo, 2013). Throughout the month of June 2013, in little more than two weeks of street demonstrations, a true social earthquake shook the Brazilian political scene, leaving a trail of destruction of popularity of numerous local and state governments, as well as the federal government.

Firstly, we will introduce in this article the main interpretations of the recent resumption of popular uprisings in the country and try and elaborate an alternative hypothesis. In turn, this hypothesis draws on the critical, reflexive and militant sociological style, targeting non-academic audiences, developed by the Centre for the Study of Citizenship Rights [Centro de Estudos dos Direitos da Cidadania] (Cenedic) of the University of Sao Paulo (USP). Finally, we will maintain that the protagonists of the protests were young, educated, and underpaid workers, under precarious working and living conditions, who have been surveyed by Cenedic for nearly two decades.

The June Enigma

Supported by 75% of the people, according to Ibope [the Brazilian Public Opinion and Statistics Institute], the “June Days,” as became known the wave of protests initially triggered by the increase in public transport fares, brought to the streets, at its peak, that is, on June 17th, more than two million people (IBOPE, 2013). Still according to Ibope, protests took place in 407 municipalities across all regions of the country.

It is needless to say that the mass media were totally overwhelmed by the gigantic dimension of the spontaneous movement. Most political analysts

focused only on opinion polls, neglecting important undercurrents that were surfacing since 2008 in the form of small seismic events.

Shortly after the beginning of the great demonstrations, some journalists aligned to the federal government were quick to affirm that the June Days were nothing more than an attempted coup planned by the conservative media (Amorim, 2013). The repositioning of media coverage in support of the protests and the presence of traditional middle classes disgruntled with the Workers Party government would confirm the suspicion.

However, this hypothesis failed to explain both the massive nature of the protests and the defence of investments for public education and health. Finally, the protests were not specifically against the federal government, but included practically the entire Brazilian political mainstream.

Aware of the fragility of this elaboration, Workers Party's leadership became less accusatory, moving from "far right coup" to "success of the current development model". According to the Workers Party's re-elaboration, the federal government's public policies have allegedly redistributed so much income, raising the popular expectations to such an extent in relation to the quality of public services, that the "new middle class" created during the 2000s took to the streets to demand even more federal government initiatives (Pinheiro, 2013).

Without getting into the issue of the existence or not of a "new middle class" in the country (Pochmann, 2014), the truth is that this hypothesis does not really explain the timing of the protests. After all, what happened specifically in June to trigger the largest popular revolt in Brazilian history? Why would increased popular expectations result in a wave of more than two million outraged people on the streets?

The third hypothesis sought to place the June Days under the same category as the cycle of protests that have swept across Spain (2011), Portugal (2012), and Turkey (2013). In short, a stiff hierarchical political system, fundamentally unresponsive to popular participation, was clashing against a vibrant and democratic political culture fermented from below by online social networks (Nobre, 2013).

Largely convincing in its generality, the excessive heuristic dependency of this hypothesis regarding the metamorphoses of the political culture left in the shadows both the trigger event and the national reach of the June Days. After all, could a sudden large-scale demonstration be understood as something related to the ripening of an alternative political culture?

In our view, all these hypotheses contain a grain of truth: no doubt, many took to the streets summoned by the conservative media, expectations regarding public services increased in the wake of income redistribution among those who live from labour income, and a new democratic political culture developed in Brazil over the last decade.

However, the main problem of these explanations is their excessive emphasis on the political dimension of the protests. Without getting into the social dialectics existing between the form taken on by the June political struggle and the transformation of the country's class structure over the last decade, such theses end up doing wrong from certain one-sidedness in addressing the demonstrations, obnubilating the understanding of their current developments.

To overcome these limitations, we need to rely on a sociology demarcated by the axiological centrality of the knowledge of the subaltern classes, that is, a critical, reflexive, and militant sociology able to grasp the mediation between the conflicts typical of the different social forces present and the reproduction of the current Brazilian development model (Oliveria, 2013; Singer, 2014; Braga, 2013; Antunes & Braga, 2013). We argue that this sociological style able to explain how the loss of effectiveness of former president Lula's mode of regulation associated with the obstacles faced by the accumulation regime in Brazil in times of international crisis fostered the current cycle of democratic mobilization is represented in the country by the Cenedic.

Cenedic's Combat Sociology

Since 2008, Cenedic has published books and articles arguing, through ethnographies of workers who live in low-income suburbs, of analyses of the recent changes in the Brazilian social and occupational structure and of case studies of workers in poor conditions, who, instead of consolidating the hegemony of the Workers Party (PT), the reproduction of the current development model stimulated a more or less permanent state of social unrest able to turn into popular outrage (Cabanes, Georges, Rizek & Telles, 2011).

Heir to an investigative tradition guided by critical dialogue with urban social movements, especially the labour movement, Cenedic was created in 1995 by sociologist Francisco de Oliveira to study the economic, political, and ideological effects of the “neoliberal dismantling” promoted by the

Fernando Henrique Cardoso administration on Brazil's subaltern classes (Oliveira & Rizek, 2007; Telles, 2001).

Welcoming researchers from different areas of knowledge, such as sociologists, political scientists, urban planners, film critics, anthropologists, and philosophers, Cenedic has structured its research agenda around the tensions and conflicts through which social rights (called “citizenship rights”) were permanently disputed over by the subalterns. In order to develop this agenda, the study centre had to get involved with (and sometimes against) social movements on at least three main fronts:

I. The front of the critique of sociological positivism, unable to grasp the process of permanent construction-deconstruction of the political praxis of subalterns in their transition from the fragmented policy of cultural identities towards the universalist policy of citizenship rights (Paoli, 1995).

II. The front of the critique of the corporatism of social movements, particularly the trade union movement, as well as the programmatic ambivalence of the main articulator of the political praxis of subalterns in Brazil until at least 2013, that is, the PT (Oliveira, 2003).

III. The front of the critique of the relationship between State and civil society as it is manifested in the material reproduction of subaltern groups, in the struggle of these groups for symbolic and social recognition and in systematic military violence raised to the status of main mechanism of regulation of urban territoriality (Telles & Cabanes, 2006; Rizek 2012).

The totalising articulation of these dimensions of social critique both gave a backbone to the different collective research projects of the study centre developed in these almost twenty years of existence –such as “Os sentidos da democracia” [“The Meanings of Democracy”] (1996), “A era da indeterminação” [“The Age of Indeterminacy”] (2001), “Hegemonia à avessas” [“Upside Down Hegemony”] (2005), and “Desigual e combinado” [“Unequal and Combined”] (2012)–, and influenced the politically explosive relationship between Francisco de Oliveira, one of PT's founders, and one of its most renowned intellectuals, with the party he helped to create (Paoli & Oliveira, 1999; Oliveria & Rizek, 2007; Oliveira, Braga & Rizek, 2010).

Besides, this critical project has also equally delimited the linkages between researchers and social movements, especially the Landless Rural

Workers Movement (MST), The Homeless Workers Movement (MTST) the Urban Homeless Movement (MUST), the Cultural Workers Movement (MTC), and the Trade and People's Union (CSP-Conlutas). Cenedic's critical dialogue with social movements is a constitutive feature not only of the identity of the study centre, but also of the kind of research conducted by its researchers.

Perhaps for this reason the June Days have emerged for Cenedic as a rather predictable result of the historical situation marked by the social unrest of subaltern groups regarding the limitations of the current development model. In 2006, inspired by the challenge proposed by Francisco de Oliveira, that is, in order to investigate PT's micro-foundations and macro-hegemony, Cenedic had already begun field research, above all in the São Paulo neighbourhood of Cidade Tiradentes (Cabanes et al., 2011). Located in the far eastern periphery of the city and with a population of approximately 300,000, besides a large favela, the region also includes one of the largest housing projects in Latin America.

In short, it is a neighbourhood that allows us to observe the way of life of those who know like very few the setbacks of the “other side” of PT's hegemony. In the words of Francisco de Oliveira, the ethnographies conducted by Cenedic researchers in the east of São Paulo reveal, in addition to electoral approval: “people's everyday life (Kafkianly) turned into insects in the capitalist order of the São Paulo metropolis” (Cabanes et al., 2011).

The vicissitudes of the daily lives of the working families of Cidade Tiradentes, a neighbourhood where 65% of the residents live with an individual average income of up to \$80.00 per month, revealed themselves abundantly in the ethnographies of informal labour, drug trafficking, subcontracting, the precarious nature of domestic work, illicit trade, police violence, illegal settlements, the homeless, and the lives of female heads of families in the neighbourhood. Thus, a myriad of private dramas was transformed into fertile material for public debate.

Through the ethnographic description of the everyday life of the families in the neighbourhood, the research captured the everyday dialectics between private space and public space, moving towards the resumption of collective action, no longer mediated by unions or traditional political parties, but by neo-Pentecostal churches.

In parallel, between 2005 and 2009 we conducted a case study on the São Paulo call centre industry in order to accompany the occupational move of the daughters of maids from informal work to formal telemarketing work

(Antunes & Braga, 2009). Thus, we observed that it was not only the dynamics of access to social rights that marked the 2000s, but also the attempt of these female workers to reach higher levels of professional qualification.

Despite the perception of occupational progress, the reality of low wages, that is, salaries of up to \$450.00, harsh working conditions, high turnover rates practiced in the sector and consequent routine illness caused by intensification of the pace of work have caused telemarketers to approach unions. Unionists reacted by leading them towards the public policies of the federal government, in particular, access to consigned credit and the “University for All Programme” [Programa Universidade para Todos] (Prouni).

From 2008 onwards, these measures no longer sufficed to pacify the call centre industry and a strike wave motivated by dissatisfaction with the low wages and poor working conditions increased year after year in telemarketing. In field research, we observed the strike activism of this group, particularly prominent in the banking sector (Braga, 2012).

Cracking the Puzzle

This issue deserves be further clarified: attracted by inumerous formal work vacancies in the services sector in the 2000s, daughters of domestic workers were employed in the telemarketing sector in their thousands. The Brazilian Association of Telemarketing (ABT), an entity that represents major call centre and telemarketing companies, estimates that if we include outsourced telemarketing centres, more than 1.8 million people were employed in the telemarketing sector in 2014.

The extremely low wages paid by the telemarketing sector are accompanied by very low skills or qualifications: after basic training, the teleoperator is placed in a client service position, despite not yet being proficient, and needs to remain attentive to the procedures and tactics used by his more experienced colleagues, and apply them in order to attain his sales or service targets. In other words, he learns on the job. It is precisely because the telemarketing sector doesn't require a qualified labour force that these companies benefit from labour relations that are based on high staff turnover rates.

Evidently, high staff turnover has produced great dissatisfaction among the teleoperators that we interviewed, especially among the more

experienced ones: despite their significant individual efforts towards promotion - some have attended night classes at university (almost a third of all teleoperators in our sample indicated that they were attending a university course) –be it within the company or elsewhere, very few have managed to attain higher salaries or improve their working conditions.

In fact, for many of the teleoperators that were interviewed, the sense of job progression resides more in their transition from the informal to the formal labour markets. During our field research, we interviewed many young female teleoperators, daughters of domestic workers, who clearly contrasted their situation with that of the domestic service sector – an unqualified, underpaid sector devoid of status, incapable of providing a professional future –and cited this as the main reason why they had opted for working in the telemarketing sector instead of following their mother’s footsteps– even when salaries in the domestic services sector were more favourable.

However, the accumulation of experience in infotaylorism and the permanent mobilization of labour have resulted in a group of workers who reveal critical attitudes toward their employers. Despite the difficulties imposed by the telemarketing sector on collective bargaining, there has been a progressive increase in unionist activities since 2005, especially.

In reality, the decade of 2000, especially after Lula da Silva’s election as President, marked a turning point in relations between the Brazilian unionist movement and the State apparatus. This turnaround allows us to better comprehend the transformation that occurred among trade union movements operating in the telemarketing sector in São Paulo.

The first term of Lula da Silva’s presidency filled approximately half of all senior positions in management and consultancy –around 1305 vacancies in total –with trade unionists who henceforth controlled an annual budget of 200 billion reais. In addition, strategic positions in state enterprise pension funds were occupied by trade unionists. Many of them occupied very prestigious positions in state enterprises –such as in Petrobras and Furnas Centrais Elétricas – besides also occupying posts in the National Bank for Economic and Social Development’s (BNDES) board of directors.

The federal government promoted a policy of trade union reform that officialized Brazil’s trade unions, increased the trade union levy and transferred almost 100 million reais to these movements annually. All in all, Brazilian trade unionism rose to become an important and strategic stakeholder in capitalist investment in the country.

One of the trade unions that has a strong presence in São Paulo's teleservices sector, Sindicato dos Bancários de São Paulo (Banking Trade Union of São Paulo) is a perfect example of the ascension to a position of influence. As was the case for many other trade unions that were members of CUT, the Banking Trade Union of São Paulo aligned itself with Lula da Silva's government right from the beginning. In addition, we can affirm that banking leaders in São Paulo served as the main link in the alliance between the trade unions and Lula da Silva's government, between the labour trade union bureaucracy and the financial capital.

In reality, what cemented this pact were the various trade union leaders who became managers of pension and salary funds. The Banking Trade Union of São Paulo supplied the political staff for these activities. While defecting trade unionists from the ABCD metallurgical rank and file focussed on labour policies, and Luis Marinho was sworn in at the Ministry of Labour, trade unionist leaders in the banking sector such as Gilmar Carneiro, Luiz Gushiken, Ricardo Berzoini and Sérgio Rosa, rushed to the financial market, occupying leadership positions in pension funds belonging to employees of the Bank of Brazil, Previ, Petrobras, Petros, the Federal Treasury and Funcef.

In their capacity as institutional investors, this group of trade unionists' main focus is on ensuring the liquidity and profitability of the pension funds' financial assets. Many have postulated that besides creating jobs and income for workers, pension funds have an important role to play in the selection of sustainable green investments.

However, Brazilian pension funds have acted as a strategic front in merger and acquisitions processes in the country, and consequently have financed economic oligopolization, which has led to an intensifying of the work pace, a weakening of workers' collective bargaining powers, and the drying up of administrative components of enterprises. In addition, they have increasingly participated in dubious infrastructure projects, such as the construction of the Belo Monte plant, which has become one of the main sources of concern for Brazilian environmentalists.

This ancillary function to investment capital results from the peripheral nature of Brazil's economic structure: since private savings are historically low, the State is obliged to resort to linkages with foreign capital, or to debt, in an attempt to create equilibrium with investment capital in the country. As Gramsci states: "The State manufactures the manufacturer".

So pension funds have fulfilled this purpose, trying to solve the relative lack of capital for investments. What is interesting is that during the current period, workers' pension funds are being used by the trade union bureaucrats who manage them to finance the merger and acquisitions' cycle, as well as to boost investments in the energy production sector. In other words, pension funds have become key players in the reproduction of Brazil's current development model.

As was to be expected, this model changed the teleservices sector's trade unionist relationship with the State. During our interviews with trade union leaders, general opinion favoured Lula's government. To justify their support of labour government, trade unionists drew frequent comparisons between Lula's government and the FHC era. It must also be mentioned that many professional training projects – as well as agreements with particular faculties – implemented by the trade unions rely on funding from the Fundo de Amparo ao Trabalhador (FAT – Workers' Support Fund) as well as on support from federal programmes, such as the Programa Universidade para Todos (Prouni – University for All Programme), which provides partial or full scholarships to many students from low income families, so that these can study at private universities.

Although trade unions in the sector have acted as a complementary front to the federal policy, at least since 2005, we have nonetheless witnessed the frequent occurrence of strikes in São Paulo's teleservices sector. A small turnaround in the sector's policies and practices has occurred. In our opinion, the shared experiences of discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation and race have strengthened the solidarity among São Paulo teleoperators, thereby creating a certain propensity towards collective mobilization. The same can be said of their experiences of illness and sick leave, more frequently among women than men in the sector (Braga, Flores, Pimentel & Vaneti, 2011).

On the one hand, it is true that the recruitment of mainly young, female, non-white workers has a sobering effect on teleoperators as a whole. On the other hand though, certain issues are interpreted by these young, female, non-white workers as power abuse by coordinators or supervisors – who more often than not are white males – and reports of sexual harassment are normally explosive for enterprises, leading to latent dissatisfaction and protest strikes or go-slows.

The dynamics pertaining to gender don't end here. According to shop stewards of a trade union operating in the teleservices sector, an

underground informal business goes on especially among female teleoperators, at work. Many sell healthy lunches, cakes, salty snacks, as well as jewelry, cosmetics and clothing at their work place, in an attempt to augment their monthly income. However, through these activities they create horizontal communication networks, which can also be mobilized quickly during protests, suspension of work and even strike actions.

In reality, the issue of gender, as well as the race issue together with inadequate working conditions and manager despotism serve to temporarily level the playing field between workers and employers. It was not for nothing that the human resources manager of Enterprise B stated in an interview in 2004 that she preferred, whenever possible, to recruit gays, because according to her experience, it was becoming increasingly difficult to solve conflicts involving female teleoperators (especially non-whites).

Notwithstanding the above, we do not want to create the impression that teleoperators mobilize as a trade unionist group. It would be more correct to say that they are workers who, despite the restrictions imposed by the teleservices sector on collective mobilization, are starting to develop a collective conscience –one that is sufficiently strong to ensure concrete steps are taken towards self-mobilization as a trade unionist movement.

We would add that the very characteristics that define the composition and continuous turnover of staff, such as low wages, gender discrimination and sexual orientation, subordinate insertion into the work place, quality of work processes, and lack of traditional political organization, do not constitute absolute constraints to collective action. To the contrary, in certain cases, these characteristics serve as catalysts for trade union actions.

It is possible to say the same about the relationship between teleoperators and the post-Fordist development model. After all, although recent expansion in credit access and increases in mass consumption have had positive effects on the President's popularity, such factors no longer impress journalists and economic researchers (Coimbra, 2007). Their inability to be impressed is not surprising, given Brazil's historic social inequality and the deficiencies that such a model breeds. However, the negative consequences of the post-Fordist development model have not been considered by Lula's analysts. In fact, by emphasising electoral results, public policies and trade union transformation, the current debate has shown a complete lack of interest in investigating the dilemmas and tribulations that are experienced by Brazil's precariat.

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In reality, a close analysis reveals the very limited nature of concessions made to workers by the post-Fordist development model. After all, the very policy that federal government has undertaken since 2006, with a view to increasing the minimum wage above the inflation rate, serves to illustrate the precariousness of the remunerated working class in the country.

The union activism observed in the call center industry by Cenedic’s fieldwork is part of a national trend: data collected by the Monitoring System of Strikes of the Inter-Trade Union Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies Department [Sistema de Acompanhamento de Greves do Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socioeconômicos] (SAG-DIEESE) revealed that, in 2012, the country experienced a record number of strikes, inferior only to the years 1989 and 1990.

Table 1.

June's protesters: Income range (in minimum wages, MW) in eight capitals, in Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte

Range-cities	Rio de Janeiro 20/06	Eight capital cities 20/06	Belo Horizonte 22/06
Lowest range	34% (Up to 1 MW)	15% (Up to 2 MW)	20% (Up to 2 MW)
Intermediate 1	54% (From 2 to 5 MW)	30% (From 2 to 5 MW)	36% (From 2 to 5 MW)
Intermediate 2	1% (From 6 to 10 MW)	26% (From 5 to 10 MW)	24% (From 5 to 10 MW)
Higher range	10% (Over 11 MW)	23% (Over 10 MW)	21% (Over 10 MW)
	100%	100%	100%

Source: Rio de Janeiro, Plus Marketing. Eight capital cities, Ibope. Belo Horizonte, Innovare (Singer, 2014).

We must not forget that, between 2003 and 2010, the country created 2.1 million formal jobs annually. However, 94% of those jobs pay very low wages (up to \$430.00). Not to mention the fact that between 2009 and 2012, the average duration of employment fell from 18 to 16 months, denoting an increased deterioration of working conditions (Pochmann, 2012). In

addition, the supply of formal jobs decreased continuously since 2010, a fact which tends to distress young people seeking their first job.

In short, since 2008, the country experiences a moment which combines economic slowdown, strike mobilisations, and erosion of the development model whose redistributive limitations become clearer.

According to data collected by André Singer, current Cenedic director, it was no surprise to discover that most of June's protesters were young and educated, but underpaid workers.

That is, the subaltern group with which the study centre engaged scientifically and strategically since its foundation:

“Those were, therefore, on the whole, protests of highly educated youth and young adults. But as noted by sociologist Gustavo Venturi, because of ‘the relatively steep schooling process over the last decade and a half,’ it is reasonable to think that the new proletariat has a high level of education. As a result, we must consider the possibility that a portion of young people whose education is higher than their income were present at the demonstrations. This is, incidentally, the characterisation of telemarketers, who tend to have completed secondary school, and, sometimes, university, with average wages below 1.5 minimum wage” (Singer, 2014)

Final Considerations

Unlike other theses about the current cycle of popular uprisings, Cenedic has analysed the “trigger event” of the June Days for a long time, that is, militarised police violence raised to the status of mechanism of regulation of urban conflicts.

Whether as an excuse for the infamous war on drugs, or as an eviction force at the service of great real estate developers in city areas occupied by the homeless, it is clear the Military Police brutalises and kills with impunity, above all black and poor young workers, on the outskirts of large urban centres in Brazil.

Of all institutions created by the civil-military dictatorship (1964-1986), the only which remained untouched by the democratic regime, the Military Police, repressed with extreme cruelty the Movimento Passe Livre [“Free Fare Movement”] (MPL) protest of June 13th against public transport fare

hikes in the city of São Paulo. Inadvertently, police violence helped turn a latent state of social unrest into a cascading wave of popular outrage.

For Cenedic, it was not hard to conclude that, by violently repressing MPL, the police behaved in Avenida Paulista as they do every day in poor neighbourhoods in the São Paulo suburbs. Laid bare by newspapers, the military brutality committed against a claim deemed fair by the people arose in the working youth the consciousness of “exploding the continuum of history” (Benjamin).

From protests against the urban transport fare hikes, the demonstrations began to change their target, such as the public spending on the Fifa World Cup, the quality of public education and, above all, the poor conditions of the public health system (SUS). Inadvertently, protesters rose up against the very structure of federal government spending that, on the one hand, reserves 42% of state budget for the payment of interest and repayments of public debt and, on the other hand, only 4% for health, 3% for education, and 1% for transport.

Extrapolating the limits of the current mode of regulation known as “Lulism” [“lulismo”] (Singer, 2012), the June Days rose up against the foundations of the regime of predominantly financial accumulation which dominates the social structure of the country. By doing so, they earned a special place in the history of popular resistance in Brazil, requiring an interpretation worthy of their legacy.

“To brush history against the grain,” as Walter Benjamin would say, the critical, reflexive, and militant sociology practiced by Cenedic took on this task, standing out from other theses which faced the June enigma by presenting a globalising explanation, supported by critical dialogue with the data. A sociology that is combatant and open to non-academic audiences, resistant to the seductions of public policies, refractory to the excesses of disciplinary specialization and, for this very reason, located at the point of convergence between scientific and strategic knowledge. Only a sociology that is aware that its own path is an indissociable part of the historical goal of the Brazilian subaltern classes can be scientifically objective and politically engaged.

Methodological Note

The field research that led to this article was guided by the extended case method. To this end, we combined over a period of approximately five years

research techniques based on a questionnaire with qualitative methods for ethnographic observation. Concerning the pre-tests, sample definition and systematization of data collected through the directive questionnaire, I received invaluable help from Natália Padovani and Gabriel Casoni. On the other hand, Mariana Riscali helped me with the research at the database of Ministério do Trabalho e Emprego [Ministry of Labour and Employment] (MTE). Regarding the in-depth interviews, I benefited from a formidable group of students formed by David Flores, Fábio Pimentel and Vitor Vaneti. In addition, the work made use of interviews conducted by another student, Maurício Rombaldi, in his dissertation about Sindicato dos Trabalhadores em Telecomunicações [Telecommunications Workers Union] in the State of São Paulo (Sinentel).

After an exploratory phase that lasted about three months, when the first group of non-directive interviews with teleoperators were conducted, as well as classification of responses and elaboration of a structured questionnaire, the field research itself began in the first half of 2003, lasting until the first half of 2006, in what concerned the in-depth interviews. From the viewpoint of the initial developments of the research, we proceeded as follows: 1) visits to two companies in order to observe the organization of work and industrial production process of the service relationship; 2) interviews with the main agents (managers, coordinators, quality monitors, supervisors, union leaders and teleoperators) involved in the process and in the organization of work; 3) a questionnaire among teleoperators aiming to collect information about the pace of work, career prospects, duration of operations, cooperation, supervising activities, corporate goals policy and duration of rest breaks; 4) in-depth interviews with teleoperators.

To this end, we chose the two most important companies of the Brazilian call center market, here called “Company A” and “Company B.” Both of them have cornered the Brazilian market. To illustrate, in 2005 the number of employees from both companies –distributed as follows: Company A, 38,000; Company B, 37,926– was 75,926. In number of available operators (AOs), Company A had 14,500 and Company B, 17,507. All other thirteen largest companies had a total of 59,721 employees and 35,353 AOs.

This means that in total number of employees, Companies A and B together represented 56% of the sector. In number of AOs, Companies A and B together grabbed 47.5% of the market. As expected, both companies operate with the latest technology in the sector, as well as having a diverse array of institutional clients from different economic sectors –especially

telecommunications, banks, internet businesses, government, public administration, medical services, energy companies and industries. The services offered to clients were mostly directed at research, scheduling, billing and sales (active telemarketing); phone-banking, customer service, scheduling, help desk, research and sales (receptive telemarketing); in addition to services connected to the internet, such as email, chat, co-browsing, video conferencing; database, consulting and subscription services were also offered to a smaller extent.

We understand that because those companies even today define the parameters in the sector, all other Brazilian call-centers try to guide their competitive initiatives by the two leading companies. This tends to equalize working conditions and, to a large extent, the remuneration of teleoperators. Thus, these companies became a privileged field to study the behavior of workers in this sector. Moreover, it is worthy of note that our field observations were made in sites considered “reference” by the companies themselves. This is to say that, either because of their size – about 2,400 teleoperators each –or because of the diversity of operations, it was at that time a representative sample of the reality of the working processes of both companies.

The visits occurred during the months of March, April and May 2004 (Company B) and May 2004 (Company A). Interviews were conducted with an HR manager (Company B), with operation coordinators (Companies A and B) and with supervisors (Companies A and B); in addition, of course, to informal –untaped– conversations with teleoperators during snack breaks. In all, there were five visits to Company B and three to Company A. Unfortunately, the interviews with teleoperators could not be conducted in reserved spaces –far from the supervision of managers–, on the grounds of “company policy” and “work interference.”

Given these limitations, access to teleoperators was made possible by trade unions active in the sector –Sindicato dos Trabalhadores em Telecomunicações [Telecommunications Workers Union] in the state of São Paulo (Sintetel) and Sindicato dos Trabalhadores em Telemarketing [Union of Telemarketing Workers] (Sintratel). The contact with teleoperators happened through two main instruments, a questionnaire with eleven closed questions and in-depth structured interviews with open questions based on preliminary interpretation of data from the questionnaires. The questionnaire was administered in three different weekends in April and May 2004, during the presentation of union (Sinintel) activities to teleoperators from

Companies A and B, on a farm beside Rodovia dos Imigrantes in the city of Santo André. The in-depth interviews were conducted in July 2004, June-July 2005 and January and June 2006 in activities organized by Sinintel and Sinratel, held in the offices of the unions in the city of São Paulo.

Conducted with unionists from two of the major unions that operate in the city of São Paulo, the second stage of our field research was undertaken over three months of participant observation in 2009 (Burawoy, 2009). Eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted with union officers and grassroots activists. In addition, we conducted twenty-four interviews with teleoperators during their work breaks and while they appealed to the unions in order to submit labour demands.

In this stage we sought, through systematic observation, to distinguish the external forces –the relationship between unions and central unions, as well as with the state apparatus– from the internal processes –the relationship between unionists and teleoperators, tactics of approximation and mobilization of workers– that shape the collective action in the sector. Thus, it was possible to reflexively understand the scope and limits of union activity in relation to expectations, especially wage expectations, of teleoperators.

Moreover, the interviews offered key-information for us to analyze the intimate connection between despotic factory regime –high employee turnover rate, lack of domestic markets, strong job placement rate, autocratic management model...– and the strike mobilization observed after 2006 in the São Paulo call-center industry.

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