

Brazil

The Swinging Pendulum Between Labor Sociology and Labor Movement

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In this article, the authors analyze the relationship between labor sociology and trade unionism in Brazil by focusing on its three key phases. Against the backdrop of successive political and economical scenarios, the authors go from the first generation of labor sociologists to the most recent period, trying to identify the transition points in this trajectory. This study develops the hypothesis that labor sociology in Brazil was first characterized by a search for affirmation and professionalization (1950-1960). Later, it developed a strong political-social engagement, and assumed a public character, by claiming particular social identities (1970-1980). Finally, it flowed toward policy sociology (1990-2000).

Keywords: *public sociology; labor sociology; trade unions; labor movement; Brazil*

In this article, we trace the pendular relationship between labor sociology and trade unionism in Brazil. Sociologists subjected the “communist inspired” social engagement of labor studies during the 1950s to theoretical and methodological criticism, leading to the first cycle of professionalization in the 1960s. A new wave of labor struggles and social engagement during the 1970s and 1980s prompted a new cycle of professionalization cycle in the 1990s that continues to this day. This second round of professionalism, however, is very different from the first round, which is where we begin.

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Labor Sociology in Times of Professionalization

Leôncio Martins Rodrigues, in his introduction to Juarez Rubens Brandão Lopes' book, *The Crisis of Archaic Brazil* (1967), a remarkable Weber-inspired study on the practice of Brazilian labor relations during the late 1950s based on textile factories in two municipalities of the State of Minas Gerais, observed thus:

We think that the greater merit of this publication, which takes advantage of the best contributions of modern Industrial Sociology, consists in putting aside the normative and ideological considerations that we usually find have infiltrated writings about the working class. (p. 4)

During the professionalization of social sciences in Brazil, particularly since the early 1960s, totalizing theories of our social reality were, up to a certain point, kept in subsidiary focus by studies that gave priority to a systematic clarification of our historical formation, until then insufficiently studied. Representative of that period Leôncio Martins Rodrigues's observation represents the concern of labor sociology to detach itself from "ideological" studies of Brazilian workers, particularly those originating from the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), and to consolidate a deliberate and self-conscious commitment to academic professional sociology.

Within the context of professionalization, labor sociology, as practiced during the 1960s, was mostly focused on understanding the formation of the "new" working class emerging from urbanization, industrialization, and the accelerated modernization of Brazilian society. The industrialization process driven by the "populist"¹ State of the 1950s reshaped the class-structure of the country, restructuring the oligarchic political institutions monopolized by old rural aristocracies and consolidating the advent of a new proletariat of rural origin: An urban mass recently arrived from the countryside, living in the peripheries of industrial urban centers and without any symbolic, political, or organizational link to the old working class formed in the early 20th century.

Therefore, it was to be expected that the relationship between the laboring population and the "populist" State would provide a focus for the new professional labor sociology. At least two interpretative threads were consolidated during that period. First, studies that attempted to investigate the workers' relationship with the unions as influenced by the cultural and regional origins of the working class (see Lopes, 1964; Rodrigues, 1970). Soon afterward, there appeared investigations of the relationship between trade unionism and the "populist" State as it affected the formation of class consciousness (see Simão, 1966; Rodrigues, 1968).

According to Vianna (1986), those studies, which initiated professional labor sociology in Brazil, already included the observation that before 1930 the industrial proletariat, composed largely of immigrants with anarchist tendencies, had successfully asserted its autonomy, spontaneity, and willingness to fight. However, after the 1930s and the constitution of a new rural proletariat, which had a certain political passivity and no contact with anticapitalist ideologies, the working class became easy prey for the “populist” State.

From Professional Sociology to the “New Trade Unionism”

Accompanying the professionalization of the social sciences in Brazil, there emerged attachments to different interpretations of the modern industrial capitalist society: the American school of industrial relations (Elton Mayo) and the French labor sociology, particularly Georges Friedmann, Pierre Naville, Alain Touraine (see Lopes, 1964; Rodrigues, 1970). There is a clear contrast between these studies and the previous generation of analyses conducted by intellectuals who were organically linked to different working-class parties, and above all to the PCB (see, for instance, Miglioli, 1963).

For the pioneers of professional Brazilian labor sociology, a symbolic struggle took place in the academic world against political-programmatic ideologies guided by party tenets. Thus, the desire for a clear demarcation from political perspectives can be found in some of the most important studies of that time. In Guimarães’s (2004) words,

The study of the social reality of labor was a field where a crucial battle was being fought: the battle for the construction of a field of *sociological* investigation into labor and workers. In other words, at that moment, a challenge was being issued—the legitimation of Sociology as a discipline capable of creating a new approach to social reality. (p. 43)

During the mid-1970s, however, the notions of “political passivity” and the absence of “class consciousness” in the new industrial proletariat, found in sociological analyses of the previous decade, would be quickly replaced by a diametrically opposed notion: the “radicalization” and the “militancy” of the “new trade unionism.” On May 12, 1978, the workers of the Saab-Scania truck factory, in the São Paulo ABCD region, the industrial belt of the city of São Paulo, decided to stop their machines and fold their arms. Demanding a salary increase, the metalworkers of the company started what would become the fuse for an intense strike movement that spread to the whole area and beyond, inspiring political developments that even fed into the struggle against the civil-military dictatorship implanted in Brazil in 1964.

The movements that took place in the São Paulo ABCD region during the late 1970s inaugurated a broad fight against the overexploration of labor and repressive political legislation, which harnessed the trade union movement to the State and restricted all forms of workers' representation. Marked by spontaneity and radicalization, these strikes inaugurated what would be a "new" union and political practice, rejecting "cooperation" and "conciliation" that, in their understanding, had characterized the greater part of the Brazilian leftist movements.

After the great strike cycle of the late 1970s, especially, with the strikes of 1978 and 1979, the 1980s began with a clear ebbing of trade union class action. The combination of the defeat of the "41 days" great strike in the São Paulo ABCD region in early 1980 and economic recession threw trade unionism into the hands of the corporate economic world. Trace unions became concerned with the preservation of jobs and the retention of the purchasing power of wages.

The trend toward strike decline was only reversed in 1983 with the resurgence of trade union activism deeply engaged in politics and, to a certain extent, sustained by the success of the movement in favor of direct elections for president—the movement called "Direct Now." That movement united several segments of Brazilian society, with the participation of different political parties that opposed the civil–military system. It drew on leaders from trade unions, the academic world, student movements, and the media, including Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

With the growth of such a movement, which coincided with the aggravation of the economic crisis, with hyperinflation and deep recession, a new cycle of union mobilization took place. The year, 1984, presented the right conditions for the trade union movement to mobilize openly. The first great rally for "Direct Now" took place in São Paulo, with great success. From there, the movement spread to the streets and the media. However, the campaign for a constitutional amendment that would reestablish direct elections was defeated in the House of Representatives, although it bore fruit in the struggle against dictatorship.

Even with this setback, in the second half of the 1980s, Brazilian trade unionism experienced a resurgence, which translated into a renewed willingness to go on strike. The 1980s also saw a succession of general strikes, in 1983, 1986, 1987, and 1989, projecting the movement onto a national plane (see Noronha, 1992). That last great strike demanded the replacement of salary losses resulting from anti-inflation policies and pushed for an economic policy favorable to Brazil's almost 35 million workers. It was the

largest strike movement in the country's history and the most militant general strike of the 1980s (see Antunes, 1995).

In addition to general strikes, the 1980s also witnessed the appearance of several strikes that included the occupation of factories. One of the most outstanding of those strikes happened in November 1988, when the metalworkers of Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional, from Volta Redonda, Rio de Janeiro, occupied the facility for 16 days, resulting in an invasion by army troops that left three workers dead.

In that sense, the 1980s may be considered the golden years for the workers' movement in Brazil. At the same time that mobilization levels increased, the movement also acquired a political-institutional framework. This was the decade when Brazilian trade unionism created national institutions, which would give backbone to the more general struggles, such as the foundation and growth of a political party with strong unionist origins, the Workers Party (PT) founded in 1980, and the Unified Workers' Confederation (CUT—Central Única dos Trabalhadores), founded in 1983. Furthermore, these elements would also serve to support the development of the "new trade unionism."

Therefore, the period saw the political ascendancy of trade unionism with broad powers of mobilization and that was accountable to its working-class roots. Labor sociology could not traverse such a period unchanged, and it started to privilege the observation of daily life in the factories and the subjective construction of the experience of industrial work.

Throughout whole decade, we find the dominant presence of Marxism as an instrument of theoretical analysis, inspired by the reception of the classic works of Harry Braverman and E. P. Thompson. As expected, the study of the strikes and social conflicts shifted its focus from the performance of union leadership during the 1960s and 1970s to the analysis of the relations among workers' claims, the conditions of the work process, and innovative social practices emerging from the shop floor.

Not surprisingly, this new investigative style was marked by a strong opposition to the previous analyses that considered the Brazilian working class to be "passive" and without "class consciousness." When observing workers' social practices on the shop floor, researchers showed how groups of heterogeneous workers developed complex strategies of resistance toward industrial dominance and discipline (see, for instance, Le Ven, 1983). According to Sader and Paoli (1986): "Social science researchers during the 1980s found themselves in a political moment marked by multiple struggles against different forms of oppression, in which the attributes of 'alienation' and heteronomy, traditionally attributed to workers, quickly faded" (p. 60).

As a result of the experience of the “new trade unionism,” Brazilian labor sociologists took up the challenge of rebuilding a scientific interpretation of workers’ social practices, from the perspective of the subjects that built it. The dialogue between labor sociology and the “new political subjects” gave new meaning to the relation between industrial and extra-industrial life (see Lobo & Soares, 1985; Cabanes, 2002).

The Advent of Public Labor Sociology

As expected, Brazilian sociologists were deeply attracted to the innovative demands of the great struggles of the late 1970s and early 1980s, in a period marked by the success of popular movements against the authoritarian regime they helped to build an identity for the new political entity, the “new trade unionism.” The “organic” bond forged between scholars and trade unionists legitimated the new trade unionism as the leading edge in contesting authoritarianism in the workplace. Thus, during the 1970s and 1980s, an “organic” public labor sociology was created in Brazil, according to the definition offered by Michael Burawoy (2005). In fact, let us not forget that the Gramscian notion of “organic intellectual,” as well as the concept of “hegemony” became commonplace during that period within the ranks of the “combative” trade union movement, while Antonio Gramsci himself was raised to the peculiar status of PT’s (Partido dos Trabalhadores) and CUT’s² (Central Única dos Trabalhadores) “semi-official” intellectual. Therefore, Brazilian labor sociology, now “public and organic,” was essential in promoting the “new trade unionism,” which, having faced both management and the military, represented an authentic workers’ alternative to the challenges of the Brazilian democratic transition.

Furthermore, another outstanding contribution of sociology in that period was the notion of a *radical rupture with the past*. For Francisco Weffort (1973), one of the main exponents of this new theoretical trend, the 1964 coup had opened the perspective of theoretically and politically rethinking the participation of the working class in the Brazilian political scenario:

The post-64 period represents a rupture, or in other words, it offers the basis for a rupture, for the intellectual and political elites, against the elitist image of the working class which prevailed until then. Elitism surfaced, and thereby created the possibility of formulating a new point of view about the participation of the working class in our politics. (p. 82).

The vision of a history marked by a radical rupture with the past, however, did not merely mean a distinction between periods, but it added value

to one of the two periods in which the history had been split, while the other period was immediately thrown to the negative side. *Typically, both the old professional labor sociology and the new organic labor sociology determined that the 1930-1964 period was one of working class error.* Therefore, analyses accomplished under this perspective not only missed possible continuities and similarities between both periods in which history was divided, but also overlooked their specificities.

However, unlike the studies conducted by professional labor sociology, some studies of public labor sociology had a strong influence on the trade union movement, supplying and adding new dimensions to it, especially in moments of flux and contestation. The divergence of positions in the unionist and political fields led to the establishment of a two-way street between unions and scholars. Therefore, if trade unions exhibited sympathies toward certain political tendencies, then through their analyses scholars could contribute to an elaboration and deepening of political positions and identities. It was out of this relationship that the key elements of the views concerning the past and the present were established, mapping the split between “old” and “new.” In academic studies, the consolidation of a critical view toward the role played by PCB militants and by the trade union movement in the 1945-1964 period was to be found mostly in Weffort’s essays (1973, 1978a). His reading of the past was not separate from present practices. During the 1970s, Weffort was an active participant in political debates about the formation of a party of a popular and socialist nature in Brazil, resulting in his engagement in building PT, and becoming its general secretary.

Weffort’s (1978b) academic analysis of the period prior to 1964, according to his own account, has a clear link to his insertion and orientation in the political field. For him,

A critical review of the past does not merely refer to the past . . . the problem which inevitably faces a perplexed left wing totally separated from the working classes and confronting present issues is the critical appraisal of the legacy received. (pp. 17-18).

In his reflections on the orientations of the working class before 1964, Weffort (1973, 1978a) focuses on the PCB’s union practice, which he holds responsible for “populist trade unionism.” In Weffort’s view, under this orientation trade unionism during 1945-1964 was clearly unable to represent the working class in modern private companies, the sectors potentially decisive for the workers’ movement. Furthermore, this practice as a whole resulted in the dependence of the trade union movement on the State, and

its estrangement from its working class base. Thus, the communist stance toward trade unions set limits on the “reorganization of the workers’ movement in a democratic and independent direction” (Weffort, 1978a, p. 3). One of the main limitations was the absence of commitment, on the part of the communists, to change the effective union structure.

In spite of attempts to criticize Weffort’s (1973, 1978a) position, by authors both linked and not linked to the communist party (see Santana, 1999), alternative readings of the past failed to develop or assumed a subordinate position in the analytical field. As in politics, where CUT, PT, and the “new trade unionism” became the hegemonic currents with the PCB increasingly losing ground, so in the world of analyses, Weffort’s interpretations (1973, 1978a) became the hegemonic reading of the past, thus preparing the terrain for future investigations, criticizing PCB’s present and past practices.

Public Sociology and the “New Trade Unionism”

The importance and the centrality assumed by Weffort’s (1973, 1978a) formulations are confirmed by the many researches that used them. Even in subsequent studies that sought to limit their relevance Weffort’s ideas continued to serve as an analytical counterpoint. In the speeches of the new trade unionists, we see that they also had a similar critical posture toward the past. As an example let us take their view on the practice of trade unionism before 1964.

According to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, then president of the Metalworkers Union of São Bernardo do Campo,

We have to divide the trade union movement into two periods, before and after 64. . . . I believe that the trade union movement before 1964 was extensively used in a political way, in which ‘dirty politics’ substituted for really defending the workers. (Núcleo Ampliado De Professores Do PT/SP [NAP.PT.SP], 1981, p. 28)

Trade unionism before 1964 could not have been autonomous and independent because, according to Lula (1978), “many movements were controlled by political interests, often to benefit those in power and even to those who were not in power but who wanted to get there” (p. 54).

In short, the trade unionism of the past was seen by the “new unionists” as having no bases, conducted behind closed doors, remaining distant from the working class and driven by political interests. This view marked some of the

notions that initially informed the practices of the “new trade unionism” in which the negative representations of the past were a continual reminder that such practices must be overcome in the present. The radical denial of the past, or of its image, supported the search for a rupture between the “new” and the “old.” However, this was not its only foundation. The process received support from analyses that saw in the post-1964 conjuncture strong circumstantial evidence supporting these distinctions and ruptures. Thus, studies ended by presenting a mix of academic analysis and action program, proposing, from the standpoint of the “new”/“old” contrast, that a new orientation be adopted by unions.

In short, the rise of the new working class led to changes in the unions that, somehow, revealed the limitations of the corporatist union structure. If in the past the trade union movement could live more or less comfortably with the official structure, the new context demanded its transformation (Tavares de Almeida, 1975). These new class perspectives were also reflected in political space, although, at first, only in an indirect way.

As in the case of academic studies, the players most directly involved in the movement seemed to be committed to signaling the differences between the “new trade unionism” and previous workers’ struggles, while emphasizing they were building something new. The idea of “new” in terms of the composition of the working class and its political orientation is a key to Lula’s (NAP.PT.SP, 1981) unionism, as we see in this interview given in 1979:

What we find in the ABC, particularly in São Bernardo, is a young mass of workers, people that will not accept this kind of exploitation, people who want to take part in the political life of the country, people who did not live Getúlio Vargas’ populism. (p. 179)

One of the arguments often used by the “new trade unionists,” to distinguish themselves from past leaderships, was their criticism of the Brazilian corporatist union structure, seen as an impediment to the workers’ movement. According to Lula (NAP.PT.SP, 1981), the trade union movement had its “umbilical cord attached to the Labor Ministry” (p. 66).

The notions presented here, created by the confluence of sociological studies and the dynamics of the trade union movement, played a crucial role in conferring identity on the “new trade unionism.” Such conceptions attained importance amidst political struggles, highlighting the public and organic character of the new labor sociology that changed with the Brazilian trade union movement during the 1970s and 1980s.

Heading Toward a Policy Sociology

Baptized by Brazilian economists as “the lost decade,” the 1980s ended immersed in a deep recession, associated with a political change of direction. For the first time in Brazilian history, an emblematic labor candidate emerged from the “new trade unionism”: Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who had real chances of winning the presidency of the Republic. The election defeat in 1989 to Fernando Collor de Mello, however, was a hard blow to the hegemonic aspirations of PT and CUT. It was a flagrant defeat of the political project, created during the 1970s and 1980s that was considered “socialist” in a generic way and labeled “the workers’ alternative” and “political class independence.”

On the other hand, the economy of the 1990s was born amid a broad recession that affected the whole of the Brazilian productive structure—particularly the traditional industrial labor sections, inaugurating a period characterized by the reduction in the number of formal jobs, transformation of the business environment toward outsourcing and downsizing, and in general, a greater flexibility in work relations (Ramalho, 2000).

Taken by surprise, important segments of the Brazilian trade union movement attempted to retain control as the private sector underwent a process of “conservative modernization.” Typical was the experience of Sectoral Chambers and the so-called “Assemblers’ Agreement,” which created a split within the Brazilian trade union movement as well as a challenge to sociologists, particularly the ones linked to PT and CUT.

Thus, during the early 1990s there were intense debates within the Brazilian trade union movement, with the participation of several sociologists, about the experience of the Sectoral Chambers (see Arbix, 1995; Cardoso & Comin, 1993; Diniz, 1993; Oliveira & Comin, 1999; Rua, 1992). The Sectoral Chambers were an attempt to “modernize” the automotive industry, later expanded to other sectors, by organizing tripartite negotiations among private companies, the State, and the workers’ unions.

According to that model, the companies would insure the jobs for a given period of time while at the same time enlarging their productive capacity. The State would agree to reduce the tax burden in order to stimulate car purchase, and the workers would moderate their claims in exchange for maintaining the number of jobs and receiving a monthly wage inflation adjustment. The architecture of this institutional arrangement, in a country without a tradition of three-party negotiations, largely explains the support that the Sectoral Chambers obtained from social movements, intellectuals, and the media.

The essence of the offer, substantially discussed at the time inside PT and CUT, was the establishment of three-party mechanisms for negotiating prices,

wages, taxes, and subsidies, along the entire productive chain, aiming at the creation of a sort of "National Negotiation Forum" (see Singer, 1994).

In 1994, when the debate entered the PT, because of Lula's presidential campaign, a fragile consensus was reached concerning such negotiation mechanisms: According to the terms approved at the PT's 9th National Encounter, the Sectoral Chambers constituted a major instrument for the "democratization of economic life," that would "contribute to the social control of the oligopolies" and "assume a fundamental role in the implementation of industrial policies."³

Regardless of the controversies on the results of the Sectoral Chambers,⁴ we would like to point out that with this debate, the Brazilian trade unionism succeeded in building, or consolidating, particularly in nonacademic institutions (such as Dieese Trade Union Department for Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies and Desep, CUT Department of Social, Economical and Political Studies), an analytical speech capable of interacting with academic professional sociology in conditions of relative "equality." Naturally, the participation of sociologists and economists graduating from universities in Dieese and Desep, all of them familiar with "academic language," methods, and techniques of professional research, was essential in making feasible a situation of "equality" between the trade union movement and professional sociology (Desep, 1992).

No matter how many controversies about the recent transformations of the Brazilian trade union movement, it is incontrovertible that the passage from the 1980s to the 1990s was marked by the replacement of one style of trade union action, based on conflict, by another that privileged negotiation, or, as indicated by Rodrigues (1995), "conflictual cooperation." During the whole period, the relationship between a large segment of labor sociology and trade unionism developed in relative harmony. Because of all that it represented and because of the historical moment in which it developed, the debate over the Sectoral Chambers ended one major cycle in this relationship, at the same time that it inaugurated a new one.

At the height of one cycle we find a solidaristic link between scholars and trade union leadership, which was characterized by the critical, militant, and interdependent character of their dialogue. For a while it even succeeded in building a temporary consensus about the place and the historical task of the Brazilian "new trade unionism," but it became outdated and was superseded. The very locus of the dialogue changed from the academy to the research institutions built by the trade union movement. We might say that the debate about the Sectoral Chambers may have represented the beginning of a new "instrumentalism" of labor sociology, directing it toward the formulation of public policy.

Final Considerations

The relationship between labor sociology and trade unionism in Brazil has assumed a pendular movement. From theoretical–methodological criticism to the social engagement of labor studies during the 1950s, Brazilian labor sociology emerges in the 1960s marked by its first cycle of professionalization. After new social struggles that were accompanied by a new wave of social engagement during the 1970s and 1980s, Brazil started a new professionalization cycle in the 1990s, which continues to this day. This professionalization shares with the pioneering works of the 1960s, a respect for methods and research techniques as well as the instrumental importance of sociological knowledge. However, the coincidences end when we consider the different audiences addressed by sociologists.

If during the 1960s the first labor sociologists entered symbolic struggles to build a singular field and an academic audience, differentiating themselves from the Communist Party's political-programmatic knowledge of the working class during the 1990s, the direction shifted toward a more extra-academic audience, whose interests lie in public policy and whose connections are to the state. The electoral victory of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2002 seems to have crowned the new professionalization cycle by delivering the Ministry of Labor (MTE) to the control of CUT. Thereby, many scholars have been incorporated into government institutions, particularly MTE, which immediately embarked on the formulation, debate, and implementation of public policies. Has public sociology been definitively replaced by the policy sociology in Brazil? Or will the pendulum of sociological styles swing again, inaugurating a new period of publicly engaged sociology?

Notes

1. One of the main characteristics of the populist phenomenon is the type of “charismatic” bond established between the urban masses and the political leader. The bond supposes the use of a diversified system of political techniques to build consent among the working classes to the populist political project, in addition to insuring the adhesion of the urban-middle classes (please see Ianni, 1978). More recently, many have tried to revisit the notion of populism. See, among others, Ferreira (2001).

2. On the influence of Gramsci's thought in the Workers Party (PT), as well as in Brazilian sociology and political science, please see Bianchi (2007).

3. For more details, please see the PT's *National Directory* (Diretório Nacional Do PT, 1998).

4. In fact, to the assemblers the agreement was very advantageous, increasing their sales. However, the number of jobs in the sector decreased. Concerning wages, Dieese data show that wage levels were stabilized, without, however, recovery of the losses previously suffered (see Anderson, 1997).

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