

# Labour/Le Travailleur



## Brazil

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### Article abstract

In the last two decades, Brazilian unionism and the left have experienced an unprecedented development, posing for the first time in history, a real challenge to the ruling classes. The effects of this new political reality on labour history took a while to be felt, but in recent years a whole new historiography has emerged, leading to the constitution of the Mundos do Trabalho (Worlds of Labour) work group, an official branch of the National History Association.

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# Brazil

Alexandre Fortes

THROUGHOUT THE LAST DECADE, research on Brazilian labour history has been expanded, diversified, and renewed. Its methodological and theoretical approaches and advances insure that today it can be considered one of the most fertile research fields within the Brazilian human sciences. We still face great difficulties regarding the diffusion of this production and many important and innovative works remain little known, not just to the international scholarly community, but even among Brazilian colleagues who live in the different regions of our almost continental country.

A central issue in Brazil is the contrast between an expanding production and a still low visibility. I will begin by focusing on the historical conditions that contributed to the peculiar developments undergone in Brazilian labour history. I will then point to some of the structural, and hopefully transitory, difficulties that a recent workgroup — an official branch of the National Association of History known as “Worlds of Labour” — is trying to overcome in order to provide a better circulation of works and interchange among researchers and between them and the public in general.

As an academic discipline, labour history is a recent phenomenon in Brazil. That is not to say that we do not have a long tradition of labour studies. The country went through a late, but highly accelerated industrialization process, particularly from 1930 to 1980, which stimulated and demanded different kinds of intellectual reflections about a wide variety of labour-related issues in different historical periods.<sup>1</sup>

Literature came probably first in the search to address the experiences of the new class of wage-earning workers in the early 20th century, its conflicts and social

<sup>1</sup>For a general overview on the bibliography see Alexandre Fortes and John D. French, *Urban Labor History in Twentieth Century Brazil* (Albuquerque 1998).

relations still framed by recently-abolished slavery. The rise of unionism, particularly after the 1917 general strike, generated a wide array of works written by activists. Anarchists, such as Edgar Leuenroth, whose records form the basis for today's most important social history archive in Latin America, and communist historians, despite sometimes confusing the working class with their party, provided some of the first collections of documents and general narratives about the unionization process and the political debates inside the Brazilian labour movement at its early stages.

State intervention in labour relations after the 1930 revolution, and the corporatist system gradually constructed up to 1943, turned labour into a major subject of juridical debate and resulted in another important branch of studies: those related to the complexities of Brazilian labour law and its impact on workers' living and working conditions, especially the construction of their organizations and the defence of their rights as citizens.

But the most influential theses regarding the Brazilian working class and its role in Brazilian society were those produced by a nucleus of sociologists at the country's industrial heart of São Paulo, from the late 1950s to the early 1960s. Their analyses became a powerful paradigm, still dominant in certain circles. This sociological enquiry examined the influence of urban-industrial growth in Brazil. The huge masses of internal migrants recently relocated from the countryside have proven a main object of study given prejudices against the arise of "populist" leaders, and the ability of certain academics to typecast "backwardness." Social and political structures, in conjunction with the existence of this urban peasantry, have often been involved as explanations for proletarian "backwardness" in Brazil.<sup>2</sup>

After the 1964 military coup, the lack of any organized working-class resistance was taken as an indication of these limitations. A different emphasis, however, was adopted by some political scientists who considered the strategic errors of the Brazilian Communist Party — its search for an alliance with the national bourgeoisie and its refusal to accept the autonomy of the labour movement — as the decisive factor leading to the "failure" of 1964.<sup>3</sup> For mainstream industrial sociology, however, leftist political programmatic issues were a mere detail and structural factors supposedly explained how workers were passively integrated into the urban-industrial world. The suppression of working-class participation in populist politics by the military dictatorship was considered to have been compensated by their integration into consumer society in the early 1970s, a period designated the "Brazilian Miracle." The automobile industry concentrated in the Santo André-São Bernardo-São Caetano (ABC) region, on the outskirts of São Paulo, was often de-

<sup>2</sup>See for example Leôncio M. Rodrigues, *Industrialização e atitudes operárias* (São Paulo 1970).

<sup>3</sup>Francisco Weffort, "Origens do Sindicalismo Populista" *Estudos Cebap*, 4 (1973).

picted as the best example of this accommodation, and some predicted that it would become the cradle of an American-style “business unionism.”<sup>4</sup>

When, in 1978 and 1979, the ABC metalworkers demonstrated their strong class organization and eagerness to defend collective interests in unprecedented strikes that faced fierce state repression, it came as something of a surprise to many academics. What is more, in 1980, the same supposedly well-integrated skilled workers took the lead in the creation of a national socialist party — the Worker’s Party (PT) — which congregated activists coming from the 1960s New Left, the Catholic Grassroots Communities (Comunidades Eclesiais de Base), the peasants’ and students’ movements, and many other social sectors engaged in resistance against the state. In 1983, the same unionists established the United Workers Confederation (CUT). These newly created national organizations, together with an explosion of new social movements, most dramatically the landless movement, became a decisive factor in the huge popular mobilizations that marked the 1980s. The 1984 campaign for free and direct elections, which toppled the military regime, was perhaps the highpoint of this struggle.

This was the historical context in which labour history emerged as a significant force in Brazilian academic life. There had been some scholarly production in the field in the 1970s, including reference works about the First Republic (1889-1930), which focused on crucial issues such as the transition from bond to free labour, the characteristics of European immigration, workers’ labour and living conditions, the first strikes and workers’ congress, and debate among different political trends inside the labour movement.<sup>5</sup> But the political effervescence of the 1980s and the emergence, for the first time, of a nation-wide trade union movement and socialist party questioned and challenged the deterministic analytical framework established by the industrial sociology of the 1960s. The breakdown of a reading of the past only able to see failure and accommodation for most of the working-class historical experience triggered an interest in new empirical research and opened the way for renewed theoretical and methodological debates.<sup>6</sup>

This prepared the terrain for the reception of some of labour history’s classical works. The long delayed translation of E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, for example, finally appeared in 1987, 24 years after it was origi-

<sup>4</sup>Maria Hermínia Tavares de Almeida “O sindicato no Brasil: Novos problemas, velhas estruturas” *Debate e Crítica*, 6 (1975), 49-74.

<sup>5</sup>See for example Michael M. Hall and Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, *A classe operária no Brasil: Documentos (1889 a 1930)*. Vol. I: *O movimento operário*; Vol. II: *Condições de vida e de trabalho, relações com os empresários e o Estado* (São Paulo 1979); and Michael M. Hall, “Approaches to Immigration History,” in Richard Graham and Peter Smith, eds., *New Approaches to Latin American History* (Austin 1974).

<sup>6</sup>A seminal work is Eder Sader, *Quando novos personagens entraram em cena: Experiências e lutas dos trabalhadores da grande São Paulo, 1970-1980* (Rio de Janeiro 1988).

nally released in the United Kingdom.<sup>7</sup> Young historians empathized with Thompson's socialist humanistic orientation, and gravitated to his accent on the active role of the working class in making its own history. Many shared his resistance to all forms of determinism. His repudiation of intellectual élitism also found striking resonance in Brazil after the so-called "prince of the sociologists," Fernando Henrique Cardoso, became President of the Republic. His regime appeared to be governed by his efforts to prove his own theories about the weaknesses of the native working-class, and Cardoso proved the last alternative open to conservatives committed to defeat the metalworker, Luís Inácio "Lula" da Silva.

Most of the current Brazilian research on labour history matured through the 1990s, a decade in which, on the one hand, unions have lost their bargaining strength in the face of the effects of globalization and neoliberalism, but also one in which, on the other hand, the labour movement was able to consolidate its presence as a political actor. The Worker's Party became the head of the political opposition and, since 1989, has posed a concrete political alternative, attaining 25 to 40 per cent of the national vote in presidential elections and winning an increasing number of local and state governments.

But the academic production does not result merely and directly from this political context. It derives, rather, from the impact of particular features that marked the democratization process experienced by the country since the 1980s and, in particular, the expansion of research institutions which have taken the history of subordinate groups seriously.

Over the course of the last two decades, graduate programs have been expanded greatly. Many professors within them are veterans of the resistance carried on in the 1960s and 1970s; most students belong to the generation that came to political maturity in the years 1978-1984, when the struggle for democracy galvanized the entire country.

Both professors and students, then, are deeply aware of the important role that a renewed labour history can play as part of a wider effort toward a new understanding of the dilemmas faced by Brazilian society. Thus, even in the face of intellectual fads proclaiming the "end of class," and the "crisis of social history," a solid network of labour history researchers has been developing in the last decade, of which the creation of the Worlds of Labour workgroup is a new and decisive step.

There are nevertheless some structural and momentary difficulties that have limited the advance and publication of Brazilian labour history research. First, most Brazilian research centres, especially those in peripheral regions, face precarious infrastructure conditions. The activity of academic publishing houses, even if it has been expanded, did not follow the pace of actual research. Cuts in programs sustaining research and the diffusion of its products have also had adverse consequences, precisely at the time in which the expanding possibilities of working-class

<sup>7</sup>E. P. Thompson, *A formação da classe operária inglesa* (Rio de Janeiro 1987).

history were being grasped by many academics. From an international point of view, it is still worth noting that Brazilians also have to deal with a linguistic barrier, since Portuguese is a language spoken in just a few countries, all of them far smaller than Brazil; few people from other countries would chose Portuguese as a second language. Hence, Brazilian labour historians still have to translate themselves and be translated in languages of widespread international use, particularly English. Just to give an example, a search on the internet today will easily provide lots of information regarding the labour history of smaller English speaking countries, but few actual links to Brazilian web-pages, and those are associated only with the largest institutions, able to present their content both in Portuguese and in English.

The Worlds of Labour group aims to solve these problems, developing the necessary tools in order to facilitate the interchange of research at the national and international levels. One of our first priorities is the founding of a labour history journal. An inter-institutional group has been called to find the best ways to turn this so envisioned project into a feasible reality. At the same time, we are also studying the possibilities of setting up a web page using it as a means of providing reference information, and possibly electronic publishing, regarding Brazilian labour history.

Most researchers are young professionals, however, and some of them are still working to finish dissertations, while others, after accomplishing this initial stage in scholarly careers, are struggling to enter a very restricted academic labour market.

Fortunately, our sense of engagement and our regard for the importance of our collective work situate us well in our endeavours to overcome the present difficulties facing working-class history.



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