

# Brazilian Labour History

## Recent Trends and Perspectives: An Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, Brazilian labour and working-class history has made great strides. New generations of historians, both in Brazil and abroad, have extended the scope of the field to include new and little explored areas, such as gender, ethnicity, informal labour, and the connections between forced and free work.<sup>2</sup> This expanding scholarship has also shed new light on more standard topics, such as strikes, unionism, political participation, and the role of labour policies and labour law in redefining workers strategies of struggle for their rights, as well as in shaping new understandings on working-class citizenship.<sup>3</sup> They have also expanded the geographical scope of the studies, originally confined to the main industrial areas (particularly, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro), offering a much broader and complex picture of the regional diversity that characterises a semi continental country marked by huge inequalities and by coexistence or even integration between archaic and modern productive processes and labour relations.<sup>4</sup>

Many of these studies have analysed specific occupational and local communities, focusing on the different cultural, political and social aspects of the working class formation in the country. The use of new sources, such as the social and political police archives (opened to the public during the 1990s) as well as judiciary papers, alongside the extensive use of oral history interviews, has contributed tremendously to the expanded scope and depth that characterise this new scholarship.

There is no doubt that the political scenario of the country since the redemocratisation process of the 1970s and 1980s has impacted on the academic production and influenced to a great extent the labour historians' research agenda. From the labour his-

- 1 We would like to thank Bruno Groppo, Michael Hall, Stefan Berger and Christian Wicke. This special issue of *Moving the Social* on Brazilian labour history would not be possible without their suggestions and support.
- 2 On this last topic see for example: Sidney Chalhoub: *The Precariousness of Freedom in a Slave Society (Brazil in the Nineteenth Century)*, in: *International Review of Social History* 56:3 (2011), pp. 405–439.
- 3 A recent example on the labour law debate is Fernando Teixeira da Silva: *The Brazilian and Italian Labor Courts: Comparative Notes*, in: *International Review of Social History* 55:3 (2010), pp. 381–412. On strikes and unionism see Paulo Fontes/Francisco Barbosa de Macedo: *Strikes and pickets in Brazil. Working-class mobilization in the 1957 and 1980 strikes*, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History* 83 (2013), pp. 86–111.
- 4 For a recent overview, cf.: John D. French/Alexandre Fortes: *When the Plumber(s) Come to Fix a Country: Doing Labor History in Brazil*, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82 (2012), pp. 117–126.

torians' perspective, this conjuncture can be summarised as a chain of events that starts with the emergence of the powerful new unionism – which came to light with the 1978 metal workers strike in São Paulo industrial belt known as ABC region (comprising the cities of Santo André, São Bernardo and São Caetano and other smaller municipalities), following the leadership of Luis Inacio Lula da Silva – and in a few years gave birth to the Workers Party (PT) and the Workers United Confederation (CUT). In three decades of political engagement, Lula, a migrant from the impoverished Northeastern drylands, with only four years of formal education, who got the opportunity of becoming a highly skilled mechanic and a union leader after his family moved to the industrial heart of the country, became the most successful politician in Brazilian history. He was elected (2002) and re-elected (2006) President of the Republic, finishing his term with an 80 per cent approval rate. Lula's popularity and his government achievements were pivotal for the election of Dilma Rousseff, the first female President in Brazil in 2010. Rousseff, a former guerrilla member, had been an important member of Lula's cabinet and had no previous electoral experience.<sup>5</sup>

As these changes began to unfold, it became increasingly clear that Brazilian labour history could not continue to be written in the same way. The victorious military coup of 1964 had seemed to confirm the criticism present in the debates about the post-war Populist Republic that blamed the recent rural migrants that composed the rapidly expanding industrial force for their supposed lack of class consciousness. A curious combination of orthodox Marxism, modernisation theory and functionalism, known as the São Paulo sociological school, turned these political perceptions in what became for some decades the dominant paradigm in labour studies. That approach, it is important to stress, although successfully challenged from many angles by empirical research in more recent years, is still hegemonic in shaping common sense understandings of the topic. Yet, after two decades of harsh repression and resistance under very difficult conditions, the rise of new unionism created the conditions for a late but enthusiastic reception of E. P. Thompson's work.<sup>6</sup> Thompson's strong emphasis on workers agency resonated in the

5 On the political context of the last decades, Lula's administration and Rousseff's election, see: Alexandre Fortes/John D. French: Another World Is Possible: The Rise of the Brazilian Workers' Party and the Prospects for Lula's Government, in: *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas* 2:3 (2005), pp. 13–31; Alexandre Fortes: In Search of a Post-Neoliberal Paradigm: The Brazilian Left and Lula's Government, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History* 75:1 (2009), pp. 109–125; John D. French/Alexandre Fortes: Nurturing Hope, Deepening Democracy, and Combating Inequalities in Brazil: Lula, the Workers' Party, and Dilma Rousseff's 2010 Election as President, in: *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas* 9:1 (2012), pp. 7–28.

6 The Brazilian version of *The Making of the English Working Class* was published in 1987, 24 years after the original.

novel excitement that Brazilian workers' struggles prompted among scholars, opening new paths for studies dealing with the historical experiences of the working class in much broader and fruitful ways.

From the 1980 onwards, facing the difficult times of neoliberalism and the post-1989 crisis of Marxist paradigms, labour historiography in Brazil enjoyed moments of expansion and retraction, optimism and pessimism, but slowly consolidated itself as a very productive field of studies progressively independent of sociology and political science, in spite of important interdisciplinary dialogues. At the same time, international connections and exchanges contributed to the theoretical and methodological renewal and for the diversification of the topics under research. This engagement with international debates and scholarship also resulted in an increasing interest in comparative research among Brazilian labour historians. It has also resulted in the relatively active role of Brazilian labour historians in the development of a global labour history, which has aimed at overcoming some of the inherent limitations of the North Atlantic perspectives that shaped the field in its origins.<sup>7</sup>

This push of the Brazilian labour history has led to the creation of a work group for the study of the working-class history (*Mundos do Trabalho*) at the National Historians' Association (ANPUH) in 2000. The *Mundos do Trabalho* work group is a network of labour historians from different universities from all over the country and acts as the Brazilian labour historians association. The members of the work group made the sensible decision to keep it open to researchers interested in all aspects of working class experience at any historical moment, going beyond the more traditional approach that reduced the idea of labour to wage earning industrial workers. As a result of this ecumenical perspective, in the last twelve years this workgroup has organised a series of national and international conferences on a yearly basis, in which hundreds of researchers, many of them graduate students or young professors, have taken part on a regular basis.

This dossier offers the readers of *Moving the Social* the opportunity to get in contact with a sample of the new findings resulting from historical research focusing on labour in Brazil. At the same time, it represents a very important opportunity to showcase the latest Brazilian scholarship abroad. This will help expand the dialogues with foreign specialists.

The common focus of the articles selected for this dossier is the impact of, and the connections between, multiple urban environments and the Brazilian working class during the 20th century. From different perspectives, and dealing with different parts of the country, they address how the urban space has simultaneously shaped and been shaped by workers in diverse historical contexts. In all articles, the relations between identity,

7 See the references to Brazil in Marcel van der Linden: *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*, Leiden/Boston 2008.

culture, community and the urban environment are under examination, as well as their influence on labour movements, the political arena, and the public sphere.

Brazil experienced an extraordinarily vast and fast process of urbanisation in the last century. From a working-class perspective, this process can be better understood and illuminated through the investigation of the social conflicts and the popular forms of organisation and sociability, as well as the study of correlated processes, such as the migratory flows. The works published here take advantage of the marked interdisciplinary approach that has characterised the Brazilian labour history field. In chronological terms, they cover the period from the early 20th century, when the urban labour market – as well as other dimensions of social life – was still strongly influenced by three centuries of slavery (only abolished in 1888), to contemporary processes with deep historical roots. They also examine a great diversity of urban industrial environments, from big metropolises to smaller towns, with quite diverse economic and social characteristics. By facilitating comparisons and dialogues between the different studies, these chronological and spatial varieties can offer the readers a richer and more complex vision of the Brazilian working-class history.

In *The Presence of Labour in the Urban Culture of Santos*, Fernando Teixeira da Silva and Maria Lucia Caira Gitahy present a panoramic view on some seven decades of working class history in a coastal town that the export-oriented coffee production in the state of São Paulo transformed in one of Brazil's most important ports since the end of the 19th century. Nicknamed “Brazilian Barcelona” at the time of strong anarchist influence and the “Brazilian Moscow” when the communists received as much as 30 per cent of the popular vote in 1945–47, Santos witnessed uncountable examples of working-class struggles that shaped local identities and affected all aspects of the town's social and cultural life.

In *Looking Through the Window: Prostitutes and Their Neighbours*, Cristina Schettini contrasts the impacts of different approaches towards prostitution from the last quarter of the 19th to the first four decades of the 20th centuries in the two largest South American cities. While “regulationist” proposals became law in Buenos Aires, they were met with fierce resistance by Rio de Janeiro authorities. Schettini argues that, in spite of representing examples of opposing poles in a polarised international debate, the daily practice of policing prostitutes was not so different in Brazil's and Argentina's capitals. In Rio, the author shows, the late abolition of slavery, the subsequent conservative republic, and the urban renewal that changed the profile of the city centre, all led to evictions of prostitutes from particular neighbourhoods. Those changes, explains Schettini, transformed the nature of their relations with other workers and city dwellers, disarticulating the alternate public sphere they had built up together and increasing sex workers' vulnerability.

Adriano Luiz Duarte examines the peculiarities of the working class formation in the southern state of Santa Catarina from 1900 to 1960. As the author explains, its location in the borderland area, originally between the Portuguese and the Spanish empires and

later between Brazil and Argentina, shaped the immigration policies, which aimed at European settlements in different parts of the state (first Portuguese from Madeira and the Azores, later mainly Germans, Italians and Eastern Europeans). These policies had long-term impacts on the relationship between territories and ethnic identities in Santa Catarina. Duarte points out that the regional historiographies and self-perceptions have been strongly influenced by European immigration, and also that it has been wrongly assumed that slavery had played only a secondary role in the labour relations of the state during the 19th century. *Space, Culture, and Labour, and Labour* looks at the striking economic diversity at the micro and regional levels, and at the specific cultural configuration of the state, which both fundamentally shaped the articulation of class identities when industrialisation changed the structures of the families working the agricultural sector and mass politics developed.

*The Strength of Working-Class Social Memory in a Northeast-Brazilian Deindustrialised Town* results from José Sérgio Leite Lopes and Rosilene Alvim's return to the industrial town of Paulista, in Pernambuco state, twenty years after they finished their ethnographic research there. Both authors then contributed classic works to Brazilian labour history. The *Companhia de Tecidos Paulista* (CTP), which had been one of the biggest textile industries in Brazil in the late 1940s, was shut down in the 1990s. In the last two decades the population of Paulista experienced accelerated growth as it became a progressively integrated part of the Recife metropolitan area. This resulted in deep changes of the urban landscape and traditional local identities, which had been structured around the demands, opportunities and conflicts caused by the large industrial complex that gave birth to the town. Lopes and Alvim summarise the particularities of the CTP system of labour control and its workers' history of struggles. Their work reflects the current desire to preserve in order to contextualise the current desire to preserve social memory and the new field of socio-cultural struggles it entails.

The sociologists José Ricardo Ramalho and Marco Aurélio Santana analyse in *Workers of Flexible Factories: Region, Trade union and Class in Brazil's Automotive Industry* the changes that have taken place in the Brazilian vehicle assembly industry from the 1990s onwards. Particular reference is given to the assembly plants of Volkswagen and Peugeot Citroën in the southern region of Rio de Janeiro state. The arrival of the car companies in this region changed the profile of trade union actions. The authors argue that, despite the difficulties the local unions have faced with regard to their influences on wage bargaining and production management, there has been an unexpected and rapid process of mobilisation among the new industrial working class for trade union actions.

In *Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre*, Alexandre Fortes examines the successful experiences of democratic innovation created by the Workers' Party in four consecutive terms at the local government in the largest town in Southern Brazil. The Participatory Budgeting came to be praised, on the one hand, by the World Social Forum (held in Porto Alegre precisely for that reason) as an example of a counterhegemonic policy capable of challenging neoliberalism and, on the other hand, by the World Bank as

an example of a “good practice” proving that higher levels of transparency could lead to increasing efficiency in public management. Already the subject of a vast literature produced mostly by political scientists, activists, members of non-governmental organisations and public administrators, Porto Alegre’s Participatory Budgeting is placed here in a historical perspective, mostly through a critical examination of the hypothesis that past social and political struggles created a peculiar political culture that turned the Rio Grande do Sul state capital into an “ideal type” of participatory citizenship.

These articles result from research that has been conducted for many years, but they are all original works, written in dialogue with the topic chosen by the editors (*Space, Culture and Labour*). We hope they will meet the expectations of the *Moving the Social* readers interested in expanding their knowledge about the labour history of a country with one of the world’s largest populations and economies, and one which has experienced a promising political process for workers and their organisations over the last decades.

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