

ON SHAME, FEAR AND OTHER PERVASIVE FEELINGS. ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE EXPERIENCE OF ECONOMIC ‘CRISIS’ IN A PORTUGUESE INDUSTRIAL TOWN

by

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Abstract: The drastic processes of economic “reconversion” occurring in a Portuguese industrial town have profound consequences in the lived experience and sense of reality of workers. Through an ethnographic research conducted during two years, it was possible to understand the personal mediations of economic “crisis”. In this sense, this article aims to explore, first, the embodied forms that translate, viscerally, the durable exposition to economic fragility. Then, it aims to illuminate the ways the restructuring of social relations load the frames of interactional actualisation and, also, shape the implicit tactics to cope with it.

Keywords: Ethnography; embodiment; economic crisis.

Resumo: Os drásticos processos de reconversão económica que estão a ocorrer numa comunidade industrial portuguesa têm profundas consequências na experiência vivida e no sentido de realidade dos trabalhadores. Através de uma pesquisa etnográfica conduzida durante dois anos, foi possível compreender as mediações pessoais da “crise” económica. Neste sentido, este artigo procura explorar, primeiro, as formas incorporadas que revelam as consequências da exposição prolongada à incerteza e fragilidade económicas. Depois, ele procura iluminar os modos como a reestruturação das relações sociais actua nos quadros de interacção e molda as tácticas usadas no quotidiano.

Palavras-chave: Etnografia; incorporação; crise económica.

An ethnography of the lived experience of class: structural rearrangements and existential manner

Recent years have bring into play new social trends to a local economy ordinarily characterized by the prevalence of market informality, steady labour relationships of a paternalistic kind and enduring patterns of familiar and craft transmission. Unified under

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the designation of «crisis» is a vast array of social, economic and cultural processes that are reconstituting the morphology and the experience of working class. Rising unemployment and work flexibility, changes in the work organization and in the power configurations of the shopfloor, indebtedness occurring as a result of propriety access, displacement through the intermittent emigration to Spain, combination between the maintenance of education handicaps and the first effects of the devaluation of academic degrees: these are some of the most evident changes produced by the transformations occurring both inside and outside the factories, houses, schools, cafes.

In order to overcome some of the biases about the dominated classes enmeshed in the academic “collective unconsciousness”, I try to enact an ethnographic approach to the working class existence that combines long-term permanence in the lived world of this agents and in-depth interviews. After having worked for 14 weeks as machine operator in a furniture shop in Rebordosa (Portugal), in 2007, I’ve spent 16 more weeks living there, this year, in a rented apartment (with two other persons, a night club security and a female school teacher). In place myself, in a regular and progressively “natural” way, in most of the sociability places which constitute the everyday routines of this industrial workers. For example, I’ve played in an amateur football team (named “Os Herois”, the heroes) during half of the local championship season and have travelled with a team of masons to Galiza, where I’ve stayed for 10 days. It will be annoying enumerating all the social occasions I’ve been invited or place myself (football matches, weddings, parties, concerts, etc.). The field-notes compose several volumes (about 1500 manuscript pages) and are complemented by hundreds of photos. I’ve interviewed 22 workers, with different ages and occupational roles, in 2007. This year I’ve interviewed more 27 workers, plus the “revisite” to some of my anterior interviewees. Normally, I do two sessions with each one, with a semi-structured script, and each interviews as length from 2 to 6 hours.

«We know how the things are». Embodiment, effects of place, and the hidden marks of class

“Calluses”, “routine” and “prison” all define a corporal and relational experience and a sensorial horizon. This reiterated experience of the world implicitly defines that which cognitively and emotionally is allowed or forbidden, praiseworthy or blameworthy, good or bad, that which should be repressed or flaunted. Through the diffuse inculcation of dispositions whose specificity and effectiveness is tied to the objective conditions associated with a specific social place, we acquire a long-lasting way of seeing, of feeling and thinking. The enduring immersion in circumstances of spatial and economic confinement, the reiterated and proximal submission to the redundancy of social situations and to the tacit demands that every physical and social space demands of its occupants, explains the acquisition, throughout individual history, of postures, practices and preferences able to work in a practical state and through practice as “posture”, “manner” or “taste”.

This mutual understanding between the (re)socialised lived body and the objectified space naturalises the social distances and limits, infra-consciously recording them as postures of deference, a sense of one’s proper place and own value, and a sensibility adjusted to the practices and goods plausible and suitable for “people of our kind”. The order of things is engraved in the flesh and bones of agents in the form of preferences and rejec-

tions, likings and aversions. This practical involvement in everyday life corresponds to a relationship of circumspection structured by the specificity of the relationships maintained with our immediate surroundings. Something like a sense of class that is revealed in the form of “premonitions” and “knowing how to be”.

We acquire our sensibilities as a part of the systems of practical intentionality, of the ways of doing and being acquired through our specific situationality. These marks, which so specifically reflect the inequalities, the social positionings, embedded in people themselves, are the result of a life style and act as marks of class inscribed on the body as an existential manner and style (Charlesworth and Monteiro, 2011). The sense of their own selves is fundamental for social agents. This sense, acquired socially and interpersonally, incorporates a cultural history made up of relationships of inequality. It is this propensity to be, to see and to do that guides social agents, giving the body an objectivity, a perceptibility and a significance for others, that constitutes the basis of social experience. The effects of the differential form of being of manual workers, due to their differential relationship concerning the resources, affect the most intimate processes of subjectivity formation. It is the intersubjective structure of behaviour that, in turn, concretises and actualises this specific social experience. Precisely because of that, the reference dimension of practices and representations, of experiences and significances, that is, the universe of the significant distinctions of social agents, is absolutely twinned with their properties of position.

An agent's smallest and most trivial acts and words reveal the agent's social position as it was insensitively internalised, be it in the way that people are perceived and appreciated in terms of personal significance, or in the tacit way as people feel, act or speak, they constitute the personal level of the class. Existence as a “class-object” is coincident with a personal and interpersonal experience of objectification. The reproduction of social patterns of subalternity, of retraction, of reactiveness and self-negation due to cultural shame that characterise the working class condition, thus involves the translation, in living flesh, of class differences, both through the inculcation structured in terms of the naturalisation of arbitrary cultural factors and through the diffuse and implicit assimilation of social personalities. The places of class are always especially effective places of socialisation.

The symbolical-ideological effectiveness of the domination objectively experienced by the working classes emerges precisely in the discourses used to bestow intelligibility on everyday experiences. It is these discourses that immediately allude to that silent assimilation of a social experience of impotence and objectification. However, “the doxic attitude does not mean happiness; it means bodily submission, unconscious submission, which may indicate a significant level of internalised tension, a lot of physical suffering” (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1994: 269). The silent imputations and the urgent injunctions that result from the compulsoriness of everyday life are physiologically transmuted and actualized in the contexts of co-presence.

In Rebordosa, the processes of economic recomposition underway, chiefly due to what they represent in terms of the insecurity of social existence, generate a potential for frustration and affliction, unequal but transversal to all fractions of the working class. For those who live in social conditions of subordination, the diffuse injustice, malice or bad luck, in the face of which we are impotent, constitute indirect means of bestowing coherence on the “crisis”. Because they are repressed, subterraneously contrived, (self-)denied and incorporated, these are dimensions of a “hidden transcript” (Scott, 1990: 32) of a process of social insecurity.

**«Since we got this new house, I've lost 26 pounds in my weight»
Portrait of the worker with a bank loan to pay.**

«I feel tired... I, in this moment, feel tired... really, really tired! I dunno it it's from my head, if it's because how much I think in life... Sometimes, I get up from my bed, in the morning, more tired than when I lay down... I dunno why... If it's because I think a lot in my life, "will I have enough money to pay my house this month?", "to pay all my little things?"... I am very paranoid [cismento], I like everything being the right way, and I try to maintain my life bearable... I have to spare a lot, we have to think about every cent we spend. I don't even go more to the coffee...

If I get sick, we are doomed! We are doomed! We don't have anything more, don't have even a penny! We don't have a penny! Nothing! If some illness appears, I, I don't even want to... I think but I don't wanna to think, but I think a lot in this things, and it's because I've lost 25 pounds or more! Since we got this new house, I've lost 26 pounds in y weight! We're not starving, thanks God, but... It's from the constant mistrust [cismas]... And the head always working! Look! [he holds a tuft of white hair in his hand] White hair... It's because of my endless preoccupations [cismas]... I am always suspicious, I am always prudent [pé atrás], always full of fear... As the world goes, I don't know the day tomorrow... We cannot know how it will be, the day tomorrow... Today the life is this way, but tomorrow we cannot know, it can be worst. And then? We lost everything? All we've paid, we lost? Without the house, the... It's true! We lost really everything! And... And as I said, my had is always thinking about these things... It's difficult, the life is really difficult... It's not like some years ago, when we could say "oh, I want this pants, I'm gonna buy it". Now? Not anymore... Now, to buy a pair of pants we have to think how we'll gonna buy them, we have to see how much they'll cost... The money is not the same...

We've to work very much hours to hold the life as it is... Otherwise... it's very difficult. I work to hold the life [lever a vida]. But now we start to see [dá fé], because it falls down everything in my body [cai tudo em cima do corpo]... I feel tired, I feel really tired... Sometimes in my bed, I stop looking at the roof... I cannot sleep... And then, sometimes, I dream... bad dreams... I don't know if it's because the life I have... I dunno...»

(Manuel, joiner, 42-years-old).

Understanding the social conditions implies keeping in mind the personal and intersubjective terms through which these social conditions are realised. The forms of subjectivity through which we realise and display the "biologisation of culture" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 90) and class are related to the forms of sociability through which, intuitively, we understand the value that is publicly bestowed on these distinct and distinctive marks inscribed in the flesh. The personal inflections of these particular economic conditions constitute points of expression that effectively reveal the processes of impersonalisation and anonymous violence that, in the course of processes of recomposition of the social space, befall those who occupy economically and symbolically marginal and marginalised positions. To be "downcast" and "unmotivated" is the physiological repercussion of situations interpersonally generated and consequential ("a bad environment", "lack of respect", "distress").

A relationship of "mistrust" in relation to the world, to the future and to others, the sleepless nights and nightmares induced by "worries", a feeling of permanent exhaustion, "nerves troubles", an experience of spatial and corporal oppression and of objectification ("suffocation", "we are pushed from on side to the other") are all part of those bodily idioms of anxiety and of the culturally mediated somatic experiences. The "heartburn" and "indigestion", the "hot head" and "burning up" silently reveal the

incarnation of class as it is interpersonally constituted in situations progressively understood and experienced as representing a “lack of respect” or “offence”. These corporal metaphors make it possible to articulate and clarify experiences that would otherwise remain unarticulated, repressed or censured by the local power system or would be realised in accordance with socially prearranged and recognised modes of expression. What stands out in the working class discourse, generally in an intermittent and fragmented way, is a kind of visceral evocation that, in a figurative and literal sense, leads to lending substance, *to give a body*, to the attempts to confer coherence on the social transformations.

The devaluation of “art” implies the negation of the “artist”. The processes that foster social precarity of the working classes, especially of the segments which have in the meantime been subjected to a greater level of depreciation of corporal capital and confronted with the devaluation, inadequacy or impossible reconversion of the schemes of action, perception and appreciation of the workshop universe, inhibit, impede or make the activation of the subjective forms that are recognised as confirming virile and craft dignity harder. The objective devaluation of the “value” of manual workers is interiorised and experienced in terms of the ongoing social inferiorisation, the loss of possibilities of self-assertion and the gradual deterioration of interpersonal relations. Personal and collective identity and self-esteem are irredeemably affected insofar as situations that deny and vilipend the “value” of their holders are faced (“we, the people, feel drained”).

People are “all going for one another”. They are like “dogs”. This war of all against all, physical but above all moral (“badmouthing”, “cursing”, “nauseated”, “evil eye”, “irritate”, “envy”), illustrates the relative dismemberment of local social networks and the weakening of the moral economy of “respect” and “friendship”. This dehumanisation of interpersonal forms makes personal existence vulnerable, precisely because manual workers, because of that double ineptitude, tend to adjust to the image that is sent back in every situation in which they face the depreciation or denial of the value and relevance of their practices and their discourse. “Shame” and “embarrassment” are the most frequent manifestations of situations in which the sense of place and, concomitantly, the authorized limits in the words and in the actions of each social agent are overstepped. The feeling of outrage acts, in Thomas Merton words, as a “self-fulfilling prophecy” through which the fear becomes a reality.

These collective feelings of inferiority are converted into processes of social self-exclusion and retraction consigned to the logic of things and which are evidence of the work of an effect of destiny. «The perceived bodily difference along class lines serves to justify or naturalize inequalities, making them appear purely or primarily natural and not also social in origin» (Holmes, 2006: 1787). Thus, each kind of body is understood to deserve its relative social position and present condition. People internalize their position through their pride or shame in perceptual significances that irradiate from the most intimate manners, attitudes and conducts. Because of these perceptions, the workers bodies are seen as belonging in its position in the very system which imputations of inferiority lead to its inferiorization. By the inertia of the incorporated structures, through corporal postures and discourses of deference, social agents contribute to reconstitute the power asymmetries present in the social conditions that are at the heart of their dispositions on a daily basis.

“It’s the reality, it’s what we have, it’s what we are”, one 51 year-old machine operator tells me. Although amplified along the lines of the internal morphology of the working class as a whole, this seems to be a structural trait of the contemporary working class condition. Both the difficulty and inability to access the recognised forms of being and appearing, and the cumulative concentration of negatively perceived personal characteristics (especially linguistic traits, physical appearance, alimentary habits) are mutually related to the objective situation of deprivation in terms of material and symbolic resources and the occupation in the socio-professional structure of a position that makes the request for “respect” impossible or inhibits it. The rarefaction and fragility of objectively possessed resources correspond to personal experiences of inferiority and discredit and command an impoverished and limited relational and personal experience. In these conditions, not only do the possibilities of acquiring social recognition diminish, but the investment in interpersonal forms of distinction that can only be seen as acts of ostentation and of “going beyond the bounds” becomes superfluous.

The attempts to assert and maintain an honourable status within a framework of material constraint, competitive tension between peers and the absence of control over the conditions of work and existence (“things might be ok but they can change suddenly and the rug is snatched from under you”) involve tactics of conflictual uncommitment. These constitute “practices of personal integrity” (Moodie, 1991: 39) and disaffection in relation to experiences of negation or deprivation. Modalities that are tacit, and apparently insignificant, which make it possible to indirectly express dissatisfaction and protest, in spite of the absence of visible signs of challenge. The indelible definition of spaces of reparation and practices of restitution and self-assertion constitutes an attempt to subvert the experiences of exploration and domination experienced daily in the factory, in the home, in the cafes.

In other occasions, the maintenance of self-esteem involves practices of social differentiation and distancing from the holders of negative symbolic capital (the “rogues”, the “have-beens”, the “conceited”). This process of deflection of stigmas and “vices” defines boundaries within the working class group. Between those who refuse the factory culture and seek to conceal the marks of manufacturing work and all others who, risking proscription by the administrative apparatuses of companies and public institutions, adhere insensitively to an ethics, an aesthetics and a pragmatics that crystallise the masculine and artistic virtues once dominant among the working classes, there lies a frontier of reciprocal “avoidance” and “pollution” (vd. Douglas, 1996).

***«I arrive home, it’s my life, the factory falls behind me, I forgot it. I’m another person»
A worker facing intensification of work, new production rules and the degradation of «the
factory inner environment».***

«In the past [she works only after two and a half years and this still is first employ], we arrive there [factory] and works, we talked with each other but nobody stops, but now, if we open our mouth we’re beat up [lever em cima]. We have to work like machines, even the mouth we cannot open...

There, we find that kind of people that... to climb up inside are going to do that role “oh, I see someone talking” and goes complain [fazer queixinhas] to the boss, “I look so and so”, and sometimes they even say things that don’t happen at all. That’s because everything inside the factory are getting complicated, very, very complicated...

Lately, we get some new rules that are completely without logic [sem jeito], god save us! Things we are accustomed to do, like, for example, talk, we are accustomed to that, and we can't do it... We have to follow their rules and we cannot refuse that, otherwise they threaten sending us back home. (...)

One arrives home so tired, that I don't even have time to anything else, we don't have patience [cabeça] to anything more. One gets home, sometimes, and stresses our family, we come stressed by that environment and is the family that pays. Now, that I've seen I cannot hold it [não dava mesmo], I arrive home, it's my life, the factory ends for me. I arrive home, it's my life, my home is my life, the work falls behind me, I forgot it. I cannot think about work at home otherwise are the other who have to pay [tenho de descarregar nos outros]. I came super-stressed. So, when I arrive, the work day ends. I arrive home, take a bath, I'm another person. I didn't take anything. But I know people who feels tired and then goes running to the doctors. The doctors gives them medication to rest, to sleep. I don't do that. I arrive home, I try put myself normal [por-me normal], gain my person [ter a minha pessoa]. I care of my skin, I try to conceal the marks of that material we use in the factory. The last thing is going to sleep, I try to sleep without thinking in nothing.»

(Isabel, packing worker, 20-years-old)

“Thinking is what, sometimes, makes you tired, thinking about life” (Manuel, 42, joiner). The strength and firmness of reality in the face of intentions to endow it with significance must be diluted by the detachment and alienation, more or less provoked. Through exercises in oblivion (“we try to forget so we don't think too much”, “it's better to not even talk about it”, “don't remind me!”) an attempt is made to inhibit or reduce the dissonance born from the “awareness” or intuition of insignificance. “Ruminating is a disease, bugger!, if we ruminate too much, we go crazy!” (Sérgio, 29, packer). In these conditions, it is not only improbable but also unadvisable to insist on transporting the world to the plane of reflection and rationalisation, which can only insist on the damage caused by the perception of the closing and mutilation that existentially characterise their way of life. The more or less dramatized manifestations of disentanglement or deliberate indifference (“I don't give a shit”) are visible in workers' words and actions. The aim is to “forget” or “alleviate” through practices of decompression or mortification of sensibility, mainly by resorting to chemical solutions in order to diminish or invert the experience of heteronomy and negation (“get hammered”, “drink to forget”).

These social agents exist within a restricted circle of interpersonal forms of acquisition of recognition, they are highly restrained in the possibilities of projection and realisation and affectionately experience a generalised state of finitude and impotence. Frequently dominated by affliction and a feeling of estrangement, they are susceptible to suffering a distortion of temporal structures in the sense of their circumscription in the immediate environment. It is the virtual impossibility of suspending the urgency and hostility of the conditions of existence that stimulates a realistic vision of reality, a description not symbolically euphemised of the suffering generated by the “crisis”.

The objective insecurity subjectively experienced explains the opacity and prudence in the perception of the future. The feeling of being immobilised in a reality which itself is “stopped” or subject to the perversities of a higher power and also the tendency to convert “money” into a universal principle for regulating social life are expressions of that logic of impersonality. On the other hand, the impossibility of avoiding and controlling the

personal vicissitudes beyond the sphere of the incidental and the perspective of an “dimmed future”, closed around a single point of escape – paid work – reflect and delimit the pessimistic nature of the experience of the world and the apprehensive and timorous forms of interpersonal behaviour that are characteristic of these segments of the working classes. “To understand the same and to feel the same emerges from being situated, established, in the same world, and sharing the same “interests”, both in the colloquial and in the political sense” (Charlesworth, 2008: 4n8). The “fear of the future” means the best one can do is to try to skirt around it lightly, “without taking any risks”, and to focus above all on “today”.

Social precariousness, spiritual insecurity and epistemic anxiety

When the world apparently refuses and is indifferent to our efforts to interact with it on social and reciprocal terms it becomes, in our imaginations and sensed intuitions, a locus of minatory power and translates into a sense that one is worthless or doomed. «One readily falls prey to fears that forces, named or unknown, are conspiring against one when, in reality, it is simply one’s powerlessness and estrangement that produces this erosion of self-confidence, and the pervasive sense of shame, degradation, exclusion or smallness» (Jackson, 2008: 71). Listening to Zé Manel, we accede to the unused but excruciating life dimensions of someone who is, in its own words, a “haunted man”.

«We’re dying slowly... I see the others dying with 45, 50 years, and I know I’m dying too...»
Body usury, management abuses and loss of love.

«A man don’t sees this to happen [não dá fé], we don’t see it, but we are working unacquainted in a bad air. Um gajo até não dá fé, não dá fé e está a andar nos vapores sem dar por isso. For now, I don’t feel nothing, but I see around me others polishers with 45, 50 years, and they are all finished... I think the bosses should pay much better our art, because this art will damage our health [dar cabo da saúde] in a few years. Sooner or later, the problems will show up, they could show in a year or two, even three four or five, but they’ll show up, that’s for sure! By the experience I have, and because of what I see, with 45, 50, 55 years, they are all sick! They are all sick! And it is caused by the art!

I have to earn money, I’ve the bills to pay, I’ve the car, the house, so I cannot change of place [mudar de ares]. I cannot risk lost my earnings...

The bosses take advantage in time of crisis. They use the crisis in their interest. Here, all the people earn 600, 700 or 800 euros per month, but they only pay the taxes correspondent to 500 or less. We got the crisis and then a lot of employees were reduced to their legal payment, a lot of them lost 150 or 200 euros in that cut. The boss says, “you’ll start receiving by the account [pela folha], you’ll earn only the minimum wage [427 euros], and if you’re not alright, you could go [se não estiveres bem, põe-te]” A lot of factories do that, a lot of them! And that costs a lot! That is heavy... They have to accept! If they don’t accept they are unemployed or start looking for another Job... If that is the value that is in the account, the official account, what can they say? For if they demand, the boss says “ok, go then look for another place to stay”... If the people demand, the bosses ordain us to get lost...

I earn better 10 years ago than now Ten years ago I earned much more than now! And, here, it’s everybody this way... They want to pay small wages, they says the situation is bad, that this is the crisis, the crisis, and because it’s the crisis they don’t want to pay wages, they take that advantage over people... And you could see a lot of people earning less money today than they earn 8 or 10 years ago...

I have to work, because I've to, I need to work. But I'll work without falling in love [ganhar amor] by the work. In this moment I see it this way. I'm not going to be lovelorn by the work. I'm going to do my job, do my job, I'll try to do it but without affect. I'm going to accomplish my obligations, but you cannot give love to the work. If you fall in love by the work, you'll be kicked in the ass [lever um pontapé no cu] and you'll go take a turn...

A lot of enterprises want a friendship, a friendship they say [with a accent of irony], but they don't humanize nothing! They are giving a shit [estou-se lixando] for the workers. When we're not alright, you could go, they sign the letter [the document signalling the end of the contract] and you could go, you've to change the job. Today it's like that. They don't respect anyone, they only think in numbers... Even the job contracts, for example, today it's a lot more of paper contracts than before. And, you know, when you've to sign a contract, it will end some months later... Te work, today, is precarious, much more precarious than some years ago...»

**«My life is going backwards... I'm thinking going to the witch...»
Consumption styles, social visibility and frustration.**

«I've a lot of charges [“encargos” meaning debts or responsibilities] now. In this moment I've a lot of charges... And my life starts to walk backwards [andar ao para trás] since I buy the Mercedes [an used C class model from 91]... Exactly from that moment! Always backward, ever, ever, ever! Until today it was all the time walking backwards. Since I buy the Mercedes – I don't know what the mother fucker has – but my life only walks backwards. Nothing more! My bills fall uncontrolled, completely, and know I'm going to have a lot of troubles to put them alright again... Since we buy it, my life is getting worst... Everything seems then perfect, we had a good life, but then... I have to go the witch, honestly, I've to go... There something bad here, something bad, some people... [“Some people cannot see you happy”, says his wife from the kitchen]

Man, look: since then I lost my job, and my bills are always rising, all the thing I've to pay started to be delayed, and all my debts start to rise, that's it! I got problems at home, it's everything! Lost my job brings me a lot of problems here in my house... All the things together, I got fucked...

And now it's painful, because you gets habituated to a certain level of life, a certain way of do this or that... Then, starts everything walking backwards! It's fucked! Gaining things it's good, you feel nice, but then... When you get habituated to have the things, you don't... When you have to leave them... You know, we get habituated to have things, to have some comfort [comodidades]... My house, my car... Man, mobile phones, and other stuff, you know... Now, you open the letters, and all you find is bills, bills to pay, a lot of them... I don't know where to find a solution [nem sei para onde me hei-de virar]...»

(Zé Manel, 36 years-old, polisher, works since 15)

The dissolution of affinities continuously instituted and restored by the “favours”, “graces” and “friendship” between manual workers, the intensification of the work rhythm and hierarchical pressure (the “obsession with pushing people to the limit” brought by the “new bosses”) and the insecurity of labour relations (in spite of the generalised persistence of economic informality) favour the emergence of “greed” and selfish conniving, the loss of “love” and “enjoyment” for work and the feeling of wickedness created amidst the competition between workers. The “bad atmosphere” and the climate of insecurity repeatedly experienced cannot but reinforce social experiences lived in the realm of injustice, injury or shame.

The “envy”, which arises “from one man having a better car than the other, from one man building a house while the other one doesn't”, is “the poison” appointed to explain the contamination of a community convulsed by a deep process of social recomposition.

These tendencies of social restructuring brought unwonted situations and symptoms of social inequality and bestowed on “money” a centrality that makes the maintenance of the principles of gratitude and disinterest characteristic of symbolic exchanges infeasible. The acquisition of social visibility, hence, of socially recognised value, depends, namely, on the possession and flaunting of guarantees – socially recognised – that secure “social esteem”. The possibility of accessing these forms of recognition seem to be exclusively conditioned by access to “money”, understood as an omnipotent social force.

«They are like dogs one to each other».

Greed, «nerves» and delusional mood.

«It is maybe the environment... I dunno... The greed... That greed, that bad environment everywhere... The people is now always like that, nervous. In the factories, in the cafes, everywhere, everybody is nervous, because of that system where everything is expensive. The life is very difficult, everything is expensive now! And we are startled, afraid of everything, without confidence... And then no one forgives the other, if we have problems at home we take them to the coffees, if we have problem at home we take it also to the factories... And we take the problems of the workplace back home again... Even he, when arrive home, I complain [desabafo] sometimes... All the people... They are like dogs to each other! This is the law of jungle, is what is!»

(Adelino, machine operator, ancient joiner, 62-years-old).

The need to guarantee “social honour” fundamentally involves modes of stylising life intermediated by the market and realised through the consumption and acquisition of goods deemed capable of bestowing relevance and confirming the dignity – and humanity – of the individuals. The contingency of persevering in the realisation of these modes against an economic background characterized by the emergence of processes of precariousness, which exacerbate the objective vulnerability of the whole of the working class, and to the development of unprecedented inequalities in the distribution of resources, opens up spaces of marginalisation. All these are prone to lead to, simultaneously, the emergence of a heavily individualised vocabulary to explain merit (that sees in the “total failures”, “vices” or personal adversities the reasons for many “misfortunes”) and the generalisation of feelings of injustice. The denouncing – or the refuting of eventual suspicions – of “envies”, resentments and avidity (“greed”), the prudence in relation to personal and other’s “desires” and “ambitions” and the (ridicule of the) suspicion regarding the presumed envy (the “big eye”) of “happiness” and material possessions, are aspects of a situation in which the cultural autochthony (respect, virility, artistic pride) of the working class seems threatened.

«Today, people cannot see you with a better car. They are jealous!»

Dinning with a working class couple under the influence of the «big eye»

«After the dinner in Pedro and Filipa’s house, we talked about the “true friends”, those who “are here in the chest [Pedro puts his hand over the heart]” and who we search “to disburden [desabafar]”. “We have few true friends”, says Pedro, a 24-years-old assembly worker. Filipa, his wife, a polisher with 23-years-old, agrees, balancing up and down her head. I ask them why.

Pedro.: I think people nowadays are very fake [falsas]...

Filipa: Sure! And then... friends, we could find friends, but we have to be very careful, isn’t

it?, we have to lay down limits... We cannot tell them everything... In former days, maybe we could tell them more things, but nowadays people are always trying to set you up...

Pedro: People now are more fake, in everything, believes me, they cannot see you with a good life, they start talking in your back... All you get is doubtful for them...

Filipa: They are also opportunistic.

Pedro: They're opportunistic, they live with more jealous, they are jealous about the other, they cannot see you, they start giving you bad look [mau olhado]... We... I couldn't complain too much, but I see that people now is like this: you got, and because he got too, you have to have also. And that we call envy. They cannot see you with a better car, a better house. That becomes jealousy, automatically. They are jealous!»

“Envy” is the malevolent emanation of people who “are not happy with themselves and try to ruin other people’s lives to be happy”, who “take pleasure in the misfortunes of others”. Although the feeling that life is continually exposed to harmful forces is palpable and the fear of falling under such a negative influence is real, in fact, it is extremely difficult to attribute directly responsibility for the malicious deed to someone and practically impossible to accurately determine the motives and means employed, given that these are generally kept secret. The “distrust”, the “demotivation”, the “saturation” are mutually related to the threats and annoyances that involve the working class and the emptying of “trust” and “sincerity” which made the “confidences”, the “friendship” and the “complicity” between colleagues possible. This situation helps worsen that experience of “spiritual insecurity” related to material dimensions of everyday insecurity, such as social precariousness, the fragility of capitals, violence and oppression, disease. “Envy”, “bad luck”, “evil-eye” are ways of interpreting and attempts at manoeuvring the invisible forces that act on the lives of these social agents and that, interiorised by them, are transfigured into those feelings of “life going backwards” or of being continually exposed to threats. A context marked by the progressive obsolescence of the forms of autochthonous enhancement, by the frequent impossibility of accessing alternative forms of public acknowledgement and by economic instability, makes the feeling of anxiety that looms even over the smallest possessions plausible.

The work of interpreting “misfortunes” such as unemployment or the “bad debts” becomes harder; therefore, people begin to suspect the spread of “wickedness” that incubates “out of sight”. They suspect that intrigue (“[people] really like to talk behind other peoples’ backs”) and the “evil eye” are directed, mainly, at those who “are doing well in life”. Efforts associated with the logic of social distinction, like that guaranteed by “conspicuous consumption” afforded and demanded by the social ascent of certain strata of the working classes, fundamentally by resorting to credit, are held as evidence of “vanity”. Therefore, they lend themselves to interests that deny the principles of austerity and equality, fuelling the suspicion that they are benefits acquired secretly.

This “mode of comprehension” that points to the presence of invisible dynamics and anonymous forces in the development of the “sense of spiritual injustice” constitutes a “structure of plausibility” that holds up the coherence possible in a situation of “spiritual insecurity” and “epistemic anxiety” (Ashforth, 2005: 19, 172). The vulnerability, marginalisation or even collapse of the ways of life and the principles for interpreting and acting on social reality correspond to a loss of common sense. Acute social transformations bring about precisely the modification of the altered sense of reality, of self-knowledge and of cultural justifications of the social order.

A change in the conditions that sustain “reality” itself of reality risks compromising the relationship of familiarity with the social world, making it more or less suddenly a strange or unfortunate space. Michel Pialoux, in this context, speaks of “existential unquietness” (1996: 14). The recognition bestowed by reality on the agent who recognises that reality and the realisation of what he is in the same reality that contributed to create him, is threatened. This tendency of divergence between two histories shows how the effects of the technological and economic change in the factory and of the global processes of social insecurity of the working class condition can constitute a deeper and inward experience for manual workers.

The schemes of perception and appreciation incarnated as a sense of evidence break off from reality. A reality that seems to resist henceforth to the workers’ forms of appropriation and that becomes hostile to the practices of shared sociability. “You don’t even know where to put your feet”, “you find [the world] strange”. Even in the most common acts and words, it is the tacit discernment of reality that yields. It is the dominant meanings and practices that mould the substance of daily experiences, that is, “our expectations, meanings and lived practices which are part of and form our sense of social relations and reality” (Ong, 1987: 3). Although assuming different modalities and consequences according to the sectors that internally make up the working class, especially the change in the materiality of cultural practices and of the fixed spaces (heavily supported by a bureaucratic redefinition of the “profiles” and the “participation” of workers), it means a change in the lived space. The relations of domination and subordination thus emerge transfigured as an (in)capacity to adapt or chronic and ingenerate resistance to “change”, especially by those workers who are more “tied” to and “rooted” in the “ways of working of the past”.

The transformation of the mutual implication between the incorporated history and the objectified history, which through repetition and routine defines the tacit and unquestioned relationship with reality, upsets the fluency and naturality of the corporal presence, replacing it with a solidity that interrupts the conative relationship and the affective resonance in relation to the surrounding world. The feelings of drowning, of “pressure” and “suffocation”, of stupor in the face of the rigidity of reality, of restriction or “burden”, are related to the objectification of the lived body. In this way, the body ceases to confer sensory and cognitive access to the world and appears deprived of the affective and sensorial harmony with reality (“not even food tastes good to me”, “I don’t pay attention to that anymore”, “I don’t care anymore”).

The loss of control over ourselves (“he got muddled”, “he got irritated”, “he froze”) and the feeling of estrangement from everyday life (“it’s all topsy-turvy”, “I am always mistrustful”) are correlative of the loss of the affective, pre-reflexive and intersubjective commitment with the present situation. However, it is important to highlight that this depressive incorporation, that arises in restrictive, aversive and apparently uncontrollable environments, constitutes not only a realistic response in the face of the changes, but also an adaptive response in relation to restricted possibilities of creative action, of fulfilling objectives or satisfying desires. The dampening of affection and action, through the consumption of substances that numb the consciousness or through involvement in practices of suspension and escape from everyday life, as well as learnt abandonment, replace a social experience of deprivation, discipline and weakness.

“Crisis” and affectedness

The decadent perception, the forms of self-punishment and self-aversion (the guilt, shame, disinterest, blameworthiness), the physical and emotional discomfort and distress (“fed up”, “irritated”, “stressed”, “demotivated”), the generalisation of malevolence, the impulsive physical and verbal aggressiveness in relation to the supposed inducers of the misfortunes and the selfish intentions they nourish, are part of the perception that many workers have of the evolution of the quality of interpersonal relations within factories, homes, cafes and the generality of spaces of working class sociability. The commonplace and tacit forms through which the “crisis” takes shape and is interactionally actualised constitute, still, crucial elements for the understanding of what the working class condition currently represents.

The fear and deception brought on by the difficulty in meeting the requirements made by “ambitions” (“house”, “car”, goods and forms of self-representation), in the meantime naturalised as conditions of condign access to social existence, produce an effect of closing the probable aspirations and futures, at the same time favouring the maintenance of bulimic familiar patterns of mobilization for work. The feelings of physical and psychological distress constitute somatised expressions associated with social contexts marked by growing disparities in the power relationships and with processes that foster social precarity. The feelings of inferiority and shame and the attitudes of self-repression are the result of the multiplication of the circumstances for workers to face institutional spaces of symbolic denial or depreciation of their cultural forms. The adoption of practices that induce numbness and obnubilation of perception and consciousness (so-called “high risk” behaviours, self-medication, consumption of narcotics) are ways of dealing with the “fear of the future” and the “grief of thinking about life”. The perverse feeling of the dissemination of malice and envy throughout the community accompanies the growing improbability in the maintenance of the forms of recognition accessible to the working classes, such as work or domestic sustainability. These are all crucial dimensions in the social experiences structured by and constituting the processes of practical, historical and everyday (re) production of the working class (vd. Pereira, 2005).

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