

Privatization of Life: a Case From The Industrial Labor World in Brazil

Leonardo Mello e Silva

Dept. of Sociology, University of São Paulo

Av. Prof. Luciano Gualberto 315 – Cidade Universitária – 05508-010

São Paulo – SP – Brazil

Tel: 55-11-3091 3788 E-mail: leogmsilva@hotmail.com

Abstract

The theoretical assumption of this paper is that social, political and economical dimensions should be tackled in one single frame in order to grasp the simultaneous effect of both the idea of the deconstruction of class-homogeneity and the overture to the private field in late modernity.

The example chosen to explore these interconnections is picked from case studies carried out in São Paulo, Brazil, at different times throughout the last two decades. What these cases share in common is the use of new methods of work organization and quality-programs stemming from *Just-in-time* techniques and ‘Lean Production’. Global companies and business discourse today are profiting from the discarding of public commitments (including unions and their appeal to collective action) to undertake an actual colonization of the private world at work. From this perspective, the role of the female labour force is critical because much of the content those managerial policies propagated seem to ‘fit’ their domestic attributes and social dispositions. It is assumed that the historical context of national industrial relations is also a key variable in explaining the actual pervasiveness of privatization of life in industrial organizations.

The structure of the paper is built as follows: the first section will briefly address the privatization of life’s topic within the public space debate in Brazil. Then, a comprehensive account of the country’s recent political history is provided. The subsequent section explores industrial work reorganization. The final section summarizes the main findings and points to a theoretical balance of the discussion developed.

Keywords: Work Organization, Private Sphere, Modern Brazil, Feminization of tasks.

1. Introduction

The predominant political culture in societies such as Brazil - and, in general in all Latin America - has been characterized by commentators as an oscillation between authoritarianism and populism (Paoli, 1992). In this sense, a culture of rights through which the demands of the social groups could be articulated in a democratic format is lacking, as the latter was defined in classic liberal theory. At the heart of this theory are claims to the freedom of the individual and her/his autonomy, as well as the possibility of the organization and collective or public expressions of such atomised individuals. Historically, the workers - and the working-class movement in particular - have played an important role in the extension of the rights of citizenship in the social sphere. This was no different in Brazil, but special circumstances, which have to do with its formation and the political culture derived from it, have made the passage from the traditional to the modern a particular case, influencing the way the typical values of the bourgeois civilization associated with urban-industrial society are conceived. Among these values are the issues of the public versus the private, which unfold in many other corresponding antinomies - as, for example, collective rights versus individual ones, politics versus intimacy, work versus family, etc. What is crucial in the consideration of these values is the fact that, among other outcomes, they presuppose an ideal distinction between one sphere and the other - that is, between the spheres of the public and the private. These were originally conceived as a means of protecting the individual against the improper invasion of a hostile (and violent) order, but at the same time they acknowledge the necessity of participating in a wider community where all manner of subjects can be debated, regardless of who is making the argument. The concept of 'public space' in the influential work of Habermas (1989) makes clear the distinction between the two spheres, whilst simultaneously distancing itself from the current thinking about the opposition between state and society, as Habermas (1989) does not immediately identify the public sphere with the state.

2. Historical Background

In Brazil, the incorporation of the workforce into industry coexisted with a decaying slavery regime as well as an economy heavily dependent upon raw material exports from the large estates. Therefore, the formation of the Brazilian working class has had distinctive characteristics. It is important to underline this historical aspect in order to be able to assess the significance of today's changes at the beginnings of the twenty-first century, when normal industrial production is moving towards a post-Fordist paradigm. The general idea of the present paper is to question the level of rupture that has taken place over the last few decades in terms of the prevalent patterns of sociability in the Brazilian work relations' field, and these are the issues that will guide the following presentation.

To begin with, it is necessary to point out the more accepted and current explanations or versions about labouring behaviour in Brazil. The more widespread version - even though it is subject to ongoing criticism - is the one that relates to attitudes of resistance to modernisation, weak adhesion to the principles and ideals of liberalism (democracy, representation, rights) and the consequent affection for populist appeals. State-corporatism

would have found fertile ground in this country, with relative support within the world of work, thanks mostly to the political culture which was averse to these aforementioned principles and ideals. In accordance with the sociological functional explanation, structural characteristics of the working social class (value orientation mirroring rural lifestyle, links to small peasant property, support for the role of the small business owner instead of the idea of a collective of workers sharing the same condition in the cities, the absence of artisan and craftsmanship traditions) and political behaviour (support of undemocratic or non-liberal options in the political spectrum) would have had a positive correspondence. Apart from the sociological scope, the Marxist interpretation also made a similar diagnosis when attributing an incomplete class consciousness to the industrial workers due to the absence of an authentic bourgeois revolution in Brazil. Both explanations are indebted to a modernisation theory approach, either explicitly (in the sociological literature case) or implicitly (in the orthodox Marxism case). In this sense, the social movements that emerged at the end of the military dictatorship (1964-1984) conveyed a very important meaning and this demonstrated an enormous capacity to make use of the language concerning citizens' rights, democracy and justice (Paoli and Telles, 1998), which until then had been considered 'right wing'. The positive evaluation of the judiciary procedures, as well as the importance of ideas such as representation and citizen participation – even with all the material inequality for the most dispossessed - opened a new phase in the country's political life, then known as 'the Age of Rights', whose corollary was the Constitution of 1988.

The social movements, therefore, functioned as agent operators on the road to an independent public sphere of the state, which up to that time had been identified with the military dictatorship. Being an expression of different experiences of struggle (movements for housing rights, movements against prices rises, movements supporting the public services of transport, health, education, the right to strike etc.), what connects all of these movements is the way in which they presented their demands, that is, through the language of rights, which in turn allows us to think about a form of generalization for these experiences, up until then unknown in the country's political life. For the first time then it was possible to conceive of a form of minimum equality among subjects. This did not, however, mean the absolute suppression of inequalities, but rather a basic platform to thematize them: common ground that did not exclude due to a pre-social attribute (income, colour, sex, education, job etc.). In short, we left the state of nature to move to a condition of citizenship. This was proof that the Third World, despite its endemic poverty, was not condemned to traditional forms of political relations, such as patronage, corporatism, clientelism, or Populism.

The anti-functionalist formula (politics) of the conversion to citizenship - contrary to all the 'forecasts' of the great and available narratives from the *intelligentsia* - did not mean, on the other hand, a simplification of social relations in the post-authoritarian period. Rather, it made the social relations more complex since the modern social classes could then make their presence felt in a transparent way. Such people were: industrial and wage-earning workers, agricultural landlords, industrial capitalists, small business owners, civil servants, professionals, tradesmen, shopkeepers, casual workers...

If the generalisation notion is pertinent, in the work sphere the contract – which involves publicly assumed compensations, rules, agreement between the parts and so on – took the place of factory despotism. In the authoritarian period (1964-1984), the existence of such absolutism was self-evident, but tracking back in time, one can see that it was the rule rather than the exception. The rule was, therefore, to blur the frontiers between the public and the private. Nevertheless, the establishment of these frontiers is exactly one of the achievements of both liberalism and the rule of law.

In the pioneering capitalist societies, social rights - historically posterior to the rights of the citizen – were actually what made it possible to apply and to extend the valid general individual principles to workers as well. The latter were no longer seen as mere ‘production factors’ and began to be seen as ‘citizens’. In Brazil, and until Getúlio Vargas took power (1930), the social rights had been absent in the regulation of the basic human rights at work. These were obtained during the so-called *Estado Novo* (1930-1945), even though they fell within the limits related to the corporative shape, that is to say, with neither autonomy nor free political formation of the will (for example, the workers did not choose their leaders and their demands were channelled through the union, which was controlled by the state). Hence, the well-known saying from the time of the end of the military dictatorship - that the working movement in Brazil behaved as a social movement - indicates the fact that it put its demands in place by means of a ‘language of the rights’, just as the social movements did at that time, that is, by means of agreements, pacts, norms and so on, all of which had bolstered the public sphere more than the state. The movements had strengthened democracy as a political system of intermediation of demands and needs: the importance of the representation (already mentioned), the refusal of direct access to power, the negation of charisma as source of power, etc.). From one point of view, such demands had been *normalized*, as a result of being converted into facts, that is to say, into ‘law’.

However, one should not underestimate the progressive importance of the law for the world of work in the Brazilian First Republic (1898-1930). The rule of law at that time had an important significance and it made it possible for workers and their supporters to confront not only a private order inside the plant, where the capitalist boss was the ‘absolute Master’, but also in the labour market which lacked a proper rational-legal code. Instead, private agreements ‘by word of mouth’ without legal support were more commonly used, where the will of the master was exerted without mediating: a personal power that recalled the era of slavery.

Examples of this arbitrary pattern can be found when one looks at the absence of any counterbalance to the unilateral statement of the productivity rates and, as a result, to the intensification of work. They can be found as well in the prevalence of discipline by means of crude force, in the extension of the working day, in the lack of a transparent and rational measurement for the calculation of wages, leading to an overwhelming feeling of a capricious and unfair domain, and in the absence of constraining rules for resignations, which were completely at the discretion of the boss. Economically, the privately-led order in the treatment of employees meant an enormous amount of work exploitation. For the purposes of this paper, however, the most important aspect is the way the workers were treated when they

were considered as *people* instead of as a collective entity (a social class). This last point is clearly relevant because it is exactly what is at stake in the current period of productive reorganization. Today, due to both the changes in the labour market and in the methods of production, with the massive use of communication and information technology allied with the new methods of organization, the appeal to *people* more than to class is once again pertinent, although for different reasons than in the past.

If, in the first wave of the regulation of the private order, social rights have helped to mould the image of a minimum idea of a ‘common world’ and of ‘equality’ (which, in Brazil’s case, was biased by the state-corporatist regulations), in the wave of the deregulation of rights which corresponds to the decline of Fordism, workers have become orphans whatever the collective reference, once the unions of the day invest their organizational capacity increasingly in the flexible format taken from the business world, and even for them the enterprise has become a reference at odds with the state or any notion of the ‘public’.

In the first attempt to industrialize the country, the private pattern of work relations together with the hard and neat arguments of economic liberalism left the workers (many of them immigrants) without any social support, that is, any institution to which they could address their demands. Firstly, the ‘market forces’ dismantled the traditional sources of sociability, namely the social spaces where the labouring groups protected themselves from the disruptive effects of ‘the satanic mill’, and then the working conditions strengthened the feeling of disconnectedness because the workers did not know who to appeal to. The unions, suffering state repression, could only with great difficulty succeed in coming closer to the masses in order to offer an alternative to collective organization. The measures available at that time as a counterbalance to the conditions of deprivation, violence – it should not be forgotten that the terminology then referred to working people as the ‘dangerous classes’ - and repression were mutual aid and philanthropy (mostly of a religious vein). Speaking in terms of ‘rights’ meant treating people (the workers) on ‘equal’ terms as those for whom the minimum liberal rights of speaking, meeting and public debate seemed more appropriate ...

On the other hand, in every confrontation with ‘the forces of order’, in petitions, demonstrations, strikes and acts of revolt, the workers continued to gain power, perceiving themselves as able to do battle with the class enemy, provided that they were organized. In this way, they began to understand that that enemy was not unassailable or invulnerable. This process could well be called a class struggle. The fight for rights - even though not thematized in such a way at the time, but more of a reflex reaction to the total domination of the boss, and a generalization of the dispersed experiences of complaints and claims - prepared the ground for the weakest people to start being conscious of their collective force.

Given this backdrop, therefore, of the inheritance of a private matrix of authority (Paoli, 1992) plus the corporatist solution for working rights later, the agreements based on contracts between independent collective agents in the world of labour have a special and important meaning.

Therefore, what can be extracted from this brief account is that the trend to individualize the worker’s issues - that is, the lack of recognition of the fact that they constitute part of a

collective demand - is a salient indication of the standard relationship between the state and the working class, or, in other terms, of Brazilian political culture. The complaints of the republican elite at the beginning of the Twentieth Century in relation to the workers mentioned attributes such as 'aggressiveness', the 'incapacity to support a sense of order', and a lack of the 'capacity to judge, to choose and to decide' (Paoli, 1992). The argument of the liberals displays the huge social difference between the classes, with the assumption that the simple fact of offering a job to people was enough. (The assumed understanding underlying such thinking is roughly 'what more can they want?'). More in the form of benevolence, the work relation was not seen by the elite as a contractual relationship between citizens with equal rights; as a result, the refusal to proceduralize or to legalize the agreements between the bosses and wage-earners seemed quite logical. In the dominant representation of the ruling classes, such a refusal had nothing to do with a conscientiously presumed intention to just eliminate the class adversary (as could be the case in a fascist ideological version of this), but rather with generosity towards those who had nothing; in fact, they were doing as much – not as little - as they could for poor people. From this emerges a corresponding disillusionment concerning the supposed ungratefulness of people, who did not recognize the enormous 'effort' of the industrialists in advancing with the development of plants and the progress that, in the end, should result in wider opportunities, leading them away from the poor situation they found themselves in.

Denial of the formalisation of rights remained as a structural blueprint of the dominant speech. It arrived in the post-authoritarian scene and fitted conspicuously into the environment of productive reorganization. Entrepreneurs today refuse the so-called unfashionable labour law because it hinders the flexibility on the workforce. However, individualization is not a poor argument on the part of business people because, as already discussed, it was part of a bundle of social representations which the elite employed for decades when it referred to 'the people'.

3. The Work Reorganisation Today

It is well-known that much of the supply of management techniques for production nowadays derives from the so-called 'Japanese model'. These techniques are associated with the quest for quality and all together are considered 'tools' to be applied by managers in company reorganization processes, this being a requirement of the competitiveness associated with the capitalism of today. The more widespread instruments and tools are the *Kanban*, the Quality Circles, the *Just in Time*, the *Kaizen* and the *Total Quality Maintenance*. It is not the intention here to expand on their meaning, since there is a vast literature covering these topics at great length, including comprehensive research cases, comparative analyses and empirical evaluations (for a good overview, see Nichols and Beynon, 2006). The use of such instruments follows certain principles identified as 5S, each 'S' referring to the first letter of five words in Japanese, which in turn denote the values to be observed in the workstation: *Shitsuke* (discipline); *Seiso* (cleanliness); *Seivi* (organisation); *Seiton* (order); *Seiketsu* (standardisation). The general meaning of the five 'S' principles is, doubtless, to rationalize the time devoted to work in the plant. As a result, strict measures to limit the waste of materials and time must be observed, as well as the prevention of the overlapping of tasks.

Concern with the cleanliness of work instruments and machines is also important, since it eases the task execution. To act preventively, locating possible reasons for problems, as well as the thorough planning and organization of the job are also part of a series of duties that the workers must undertake in their daily work. These measures bring about a greater rigidity in the simultaneous and complementary aspects of a single job (whereas in Taylorism, as only one task was to be executed, rigidity addressed only one point of the worker's job).

What is interesting here is that such 'principles' are close to the domestic sphere, in as much as they share similar concerns with household tasks, and it is possible to see a correspondence between the rationalisation of family expenses and the rationalisation of the workplace. In fact, such a correspondence is actively encouraged by the company, as it instigates analogous behaviour between the two domains: some management strategies overtly claim that workers must deal with their workplace as though they were their own homes. Therefore, while following the same procedures at home to restrict the waste of materials, to observe cleanliness and to carry out planning, the worker simultaneously and unconsciously adopts the same behaviour in the workplace. Interestingly, what could be seen as a dependence upon the company, is indeed faced naturally, and considered by both sides (capital and labour) as a kind of civility lesson: the company, ultimately, is reasonable, so, why should its role be challenged?

Nevertheless, one should not exaggerate the degree of subservience to the rationalizing appeals from the company. Moreover, it is unlikely that an overlapping between the two spheres - household and workplace - occurs, because usually the private space is the place of rest from the labours and pains of the working day, and the company is well aware of this. It is not exactly the degree of homology between the household and workplace that provides the reference to measure the extent of the company's dominance over the worker, but the fact that there is no other social counterbalance offered competing for either her/his support or interest. Alternative ways of thinking, manifest or latent (from other social and community-based commitments, for example), are out of reach and offer no arguments to challenge the company's discourse. The acceptance of the saying: 'do at work as you would at home' seems reasonable and in fact this is the problem.

In the critical literature on *Lean production* and the 'Japanese model', this phase is described as the conquest of the workers' hearts and minds; the achievement of the settlement of the lifeworld by the instrumental reason or, in a more radical version, the more definite accomplishment of the worker's alienation under capitalism. However, it is interesting to address our analytical understanding in order to grasp the conflict between the different ways of evaluating and judging in different social groups - that is, by groups in different positions in the social structure. If these evaluations concur minimally, it indicates that the degree of friction between such evaluations is low, however the hierarchically differentiated positions - economic, political or cultural - the two groups maintain within society still hold. This also indicates that distinct traditions of socialisation are losing their power to offer resistance to one another (the dominated in relation to the dominant one), or, as Polanyi states, that the rhythm of change (in this case, the transformation in the way of thinking of the popular classes in relation to the ruling classes) is faster than it was thought.

Organization of work within modern factories today provides a good standpoint to verify such hypothesis raised here. In promoting the relative interchange between previously discrete tasks (by means of a rotation of different work operations), the *cells* or *production teams* devalue each task individually, since they dismiss them from the skill load to which they were formerly associated in a single apprenticeship. This is well-known within teamwork literature. However, this change only appears as a loss for the worker whose task was suppressed or mixed into another, and this causes resentment. Conversely, for those who do not have anything to lose, the newness does not carry any deleterious estimation. However, when the case is one of mixing adjacent or lateral tasks in the production process - generally sub-contracted and socially rejected ones (cleanliness, for example) - with those of some discrete or technician-based content, then the dividing line between those workers who do and those who do not accept the new principles based on 5S and their corollaries depends mainly on the criterion of whether or not the worker has a professional qualification. An example of this can be seen below.

In a large American-capital company from the cosmetics sector located in the south belt of São Paulo City, where cellular manufacturing was introduced in the mid-1990s, the combining of tasks such as cleaning and the superficial maintenance of machines with the usual operations of the industrial filling of bottles and packing did not cause major complaints among the workers. On the other hand, the combining of the former with more sophisticated tasks such as weighing, quality control and producing an elementary technical report brought about more thorny problems because these were not tasks they were used to. They identified these newly added tasks as 'difficult' ones and compensated for the lack of technical knowledge with the prompt acceptance of the tasks of cleaning and superficial maintenance. The difficulty in fact came from the lower educational standard which had been required from workers to enter the industrial labour market up to then. Consequently, the inferior tasks of cleaning and looking after machines, for example, suddenly became desirable within the workforce because employees were able to channel their frustration derived from the difficulties mentioned above. In short, the former devalued tasks fulfilled a two-fold function in the plant at the time of its productive reorganisation. Firstly, they justified symbolically the importance of the workers themselves, and secondly they linked the need to organize, maintain and keep the workplace clean with attributes traditionally considered to belong to women. Most of the workforce in the sections where cellularization was introduced was female.

In this sense, the cellularization and the model of total quality that accompanies it have both meant a gateway to reiterate sexual roles, and this emphasizes the family and the domestic sphere, instead of society as a whole. The female worker was dedicated to and engaged in the new attributions of 'polyvalence', as her few skills were (not) enough to validate a distinctive professional qualification on the labour market. On the company side, however, both the representatives of Human Resources and the leaders of the cells made every effort to demonstrate that such female workers were an exemplary case of the successful achievement and promising perspectives of implanting a new philosophy of work and the 'good practices' associated with it.

Before the cell-system had started to value positively such tasks (taking care and paying attention to the work, trying to accomplish it correctly the first time round, preventing waste, cleaning the tools or machines and being committed to the job) the diligent and over-worried worker was the object of mockery and disdain from the section's colleagues. Cellularization, in this in case, corroborated the conservative division between the private and public spheres, insisting on all the social stereotypes commonly related to women as natural inhabitants of the household, as well as all the personal and subjective dispositions developed there, such as patience, devotion, concern for neatness, order and the 'aesthetic' aspects of the environment. Needless to say, all these supposed 'dispositions' suited the purposes of the plant organisation very well: the tools had to be returned to their proper place after use, and the machines had to always be clean and free of the accumulation of unnecessary material – no dirt or indifference would be tolerated.

Another feature of this process of the privatization or domestication of work relations under the cellular model can be found in the use of language, which draws on the affection and feelings in the interactions between superiors and subordinates, as well as between the factory employees and the world outside the plant. It is worth stressing here that the worldwide cosmetics company very much identifies with the feminine public, because of long exposure by the media as a representative of female attributes regarding beauty issues. The women are producers as well as customers and this strengthens the trend whereby everything seems to revolve around a world where the codes traded on each side are already well known by all. What is a manifest novelty, however, is the fact that until then the label 'from one woman to another' had not yet entered the workplace; previously it had passed directly from marketing departments to commercial offices and from there to the saleswomen (technically known as 'deputies' of the company), and then to the consumers. This commercialization of products is pioneering in Brazil, as the products are not sold through stores but door-to-door instead, for which – at the time when the research was carried out (mid-1990s) - more than 450 thousand door-to-door saleswomen were employed all over the country. Thus, the principles of 5S and the cellular organization ended up contaminating the workforce of both sexes with the feminine varnish ('make everything with love') which stemmed from the planning departments. Enmeshed with such thinking, female workers in the bottling and packing sections, where production cells were actually developed, would theoretically be more at ease with such managerial speech.

On the basis of what has previously been discussed, it does not seem entirely correct to state that changes in terms of skills and qualifications which have taken place over the last few years have been to promote merely shallow changes, mostly 'attitudinal' or behaviour-oriented (instead of a genuine change in terms of technical and professional content) – in other words, that such changes are actually 'fake' More than that, what the direction of the *Lean Production's* managerial trend is promoting is a sort of accommodation of the dominant views about the roles of the sexes in public and private spaces.

In a similar way, commitment, adhesion and involvement as indications of the new managerial methods are not extracted 'en masse' but rather as the result of an action of splintering off definite forms of sociability and an exploitation of ambiguities and breaking

points within certain forms of life, as the case of the family values utilized by the cosmetics company illustrates very convincingly. In such cases, the research should be directed towards the vulnerabilities that comprise the populations involved, as a way to try to understand why they 'assent', 'adhere' or are 'involved'.

The hypothesis raised here since the historical overview sketched on the political culture in which the world of work was socialized in Brazil, passing through the way it was imposed in the populist period, was intended as a way of explaining the persuasive force behind the bundle of initiatives from the companies, as much as the response of the workers to them. The function of a professional skill as an asset to bargain with, which large companies use towards their employees, for example, is more accurately understood when one is able to appreciate how this has always been a missing element of regulation and investment, by the state, the company and sometimes even the union itself, given the absence of a craft culture in the origins of the Brazilian working class. The familialist and affectionate appeal, in turn, poorly disguises the condescending attitude of the elite to the 'people', in relation to which any treatment in terms of equality - in this case, the formal equality before the law - seems barely possible.

However, if such a differentially and structurally hierarchical treatment between elite and subordinate people works well (as it does), then it is necessary to study how this has come about. The significance of an industrial job, whatever it may be, for an impoverished population seems to be an important issue, however traditional, self-evident, visible and almost commonplace this explanation appears. Nevertheless, this is by no means less pertinent, because such a viewpoint still seems sufficiently powerful to describe some of the appraisals workers carry out regarding *Lean-Production*, as well as to indicate why workers from the poorest countries agree to perform certain jobs that workers from the richest countries decline. It is necessary to go back to the very beginning and to question the actual meaning for an impoverished person of an industrial plant located in an area where the living conditions are very poor.

The workers from the cosmetics plant attribute a great deal of importance to the fact that they have made improvements in their lives thanks to the activity of work, in general, and to the job in the factory, in particular. Industrial work is, therefore, much valued (Hirata and Humphrey, 1985; Nichols and Sugur, 2004), and the fear of falling into the informal labour market operates as a powerful driving force to make them concur more generally with the politics from the offices in the plant.

Overtime, intensification, the burden of the pace of work, stress - all these hardships are outweighed by the fact that one is employed: 'Everything that I got in my life was thanks to work', states one worker from the filling and packing section at the cosmetics plant. Risk, accidents, unhealthy conditions leading to what could be termed a continuous and quiet 'slow death' in the workplace (the packing of talc, for instance, is a hazardous task) do not present obstacles as regards the workers' availability for work in the company.

Clearly, the lower skills demanded for jobs in the filling and packing areas enable the technical requirements related to cellularization to be relegated to a secondary position, since

the tasks to be aggregated are not actually of recognized technical or professional complexity, but instead, as mentioned earlier, are mostly lateral tasks, such as cleaning, trivial monitoring, the following-up of data shown in machine panels for automatic machines, and so on; in sum, anything that would take a long time to learn. Similar outcomes can be found within cell production in the garment industry, as a study carried out at the beginning of this century in São Paulo illustrates (Mello e Silva, 2006). Lower skills make it easier for the cellular system to be used in such environments: for the labour force, it was automatically understood as just a matter of recognition for hitherto despised, small, everyday concerns that were not taken into account by management, being considered ‘useless’ at that time.

What it is striking, however, is to come across to managers in their full capacity proclaiming the same version of *teamwork* in a similar tone, as if the latter reduced itself to merely add those lateral tasks to the workers’ (weak) professional abilities. In so doing, they put aside completely (if not consciously) the proper arguments from the apologetically-driven managerial literature on *Lean Production* or High Performance Work Systems (HPWS), while they strongly emphasize the empowerment of qualifications and skills. The managers see the sheer adding of unskilled or lateral tasks to the content of a single job in a work journey as the proof of the operator’s qualification process in action. In this sense, the management purchase a ‘bastard’ version of cellularization, quite spurious in relation to what is propagated in textbooks, for the simple reason that the mere adding of tasks such as cleaning and attention to automatic signs does not mean a higher qualification for workers who perform all the tasks, and they can even less be considered as sharing an analogous status or an correspondent position in the labour market as those that the valued skilled worker perform. Therefore, the involved worker of the cells is not necessarily the strategic worker targeted by management on whom the production process mostly relies. Although this can be a convincing understanding of how cellularization really evolves, the fact still remains that, despite everything discussed above, the productivity rates are always introduced with lively pride by managers, as confirmation of their correct choice in terms of the best organisation model available. If the attachment of workers to the more subordinate tasks makes up for the lack of a definite qualification, it is no less true that managers not only accept that fact but also value it while pointing to whoever could be interested in a handful of cases in which workers have been fiercely engaged in work since the cells have been set up, as well as the tenacity they have revealed in conquering their own shortcomings.

The importance of the worker’s qualification is assayed by the company much more in terms of the possibility of the integration of several different operations or tasks (no matter how simple they are), than in terms of a supposed weight of some critical type of knowledge, ‘key’ or strategic for the manufacturing process. This is as valid for the cosmetics plant (weighing of bottles filled up with creams and liquids; description of the results in reports) as for the garment one (the cutting of special kinds of cloth), even though both plants have dissimilar technology and labour processes.

More than just the specific importance of each one, it is the conjunction of all that counts in the cellular organisation. Instead of each line with its own responsible technician, and the production programmer being far from the shopfloor, the cell comprises only one technician,

who is responsible for the coordination of different operations in each cell, with the quality control having been incorporated in each single operation. The underlying idea is to push the supervisors of each section of the manufacturing process into the planning department, in order to make them participate more directly in the programming of the cells, thereby increasing their responsibility load.

Quality control and weighing mean both an attribution of importance for those who hitherto were allocated only to manual and repetitive tasks. Because of this, they would have been more 'motivated' now.

The idea that the methods of management such as TQM (*Total Quality Control*) are easily accepted by the population-target – sometimes even with enthusiasm – does not rely on the virtue of the methods themselves (be it *Lean-Production*, the Japanese model, or the HPWS), but on the way they are evaluated and processed by workers and employees who are under their leverage. It seems a trivial idea, but has not yet been sufficiently explored.

Perhaps the fact that researchers have given undue stress to the actors' initiatives can lead the analysis to lose the link with more supposedly objective causes (flexibilization, globalization, the crisis of Fordism etc.), while the most interesting aspect of a case study is, in truth, to establish as accurately as possible the connections between what is under way on the wider domain of both economic and the political issues, on the one side, and the practical experience by social classes and groups of ordinary people placed in a definite strata of the social world, on the other. Having said that, it is worth exploring and tracing how these classes and people understand the implantation of quality systems by industrial companies (Note 1). The historical background of the Brazilian working classes offered one point of reference to assess these issues.

4. Concluding Remarks

Developing countries have been trying different production models since the 1990s, as a strategy to cope with economic crisis. Industrial plants based in Brazil but linked to global markets have definitely invested in HR strategies, which are employed in conjunction with *Lean Production* or Toyotism. Those strategies stress the involvement and commitment of the labour force. Although not a direct outcome of the implementation of such programs of quality and managerial restructuring, one can deduce them as a by-product an imbalance between the private and the public sphere of labour's experience of everyday life. Parts of the industry work routine is brought into the home and vice-versa, that is, traditional cares and concerns characteristic of women in domestic work are adopted productively into the labour process, in a way which mutually reinforce the other. Cleanliness, patience, devotion, attention to details and loyalty to the client are all valuable feminine traits firms benefit from.

This tendency has a stronger effect in countries where the industrial relations pattern is far less differentiated than in older and more developed economies. The persistent role of informal labour channeling a low-profile and unqualified workforce into the labour market, the lack of skilled jobs and the major significance of industrial placement to attain a

minimum level of subsistence, all contribute to workers having a strong positive assessment of the factory position, as well as a decisive aspiration to reach it.

Another strand comes from the national political culture. The populist and corporatist heritage was an important factor in explaining how entrenched the privatization of the labour relations is. In a country where public sphere is by no means long-lasting, new programs of management, for the reasons outlined above, contribute to emphasize the old, not the modern.

In the first section, the paper traced the historical settings that led to existing national difficulties in establishing a culture of rights among working people. The second section dealt with examples drawn from previous fieldwork within cosmetics and garment plants located in São Paulo, both diligent followers of *Lean Production* methods. Through teamwork and cellularization in the labour process, it was possible to connect a traditional attitude towards work with the new techniques in management: it came to be ‘natural’ for people to employ in the modern factories the same effort and subjective adherence at work that they used at home. This sort of ‘coherence’ between the old and the new in the labor relations field was unpredicted and surprising, from the company’s point of view. However, from their viewpoint, workers re-interpret the whole bunch of tools and purposes of the management ‘model’ in a very particular vein – for them, for example, the meaning of skill had much less to do with mental discretionary tasks and more to do with physical waste of effort.

Viewed from the perspective of the formation of a public sphere (Habermas, 1989) in a developing country as Brazil, the management drive to reach the level of globalized economies is paradoxically pointing to a privatization of working life, instead of promoting autonomous and independent social classes.

Acknowledgement

To Fapesp (Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo), for supporting the research which made this text possible.

References

- Habermas, J. (1989). *The Structural transformation on the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Hirata, H. & Humphrey, J. (1985). Economic Crisis and the Sexual Division of Labour: the case of Brazil. *Capital & Class*, 24, pp.45-58.
- Mello e Silva, L. (2006) Trabalho e sociabilidade privada: a exclusão do outro. Um olhar a partir das células de produção’. *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, 21 (61), pp.147-161.
- Nichols, T. & Sugur, N. (2004). *Global Management and Local Labour: Turkish Workers and Modern Industry*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nichols, T & Cam, S. (Eds.) (2005). *Labour in a Global World: Case Studies from the White Goods Industry in Africa, South America, East Asia and Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Nichols, T. & Beynon, H. (Eds.) (2006). *The Fordism of Ford and Modern Management: Fordism and Post-Fordism*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, two Vols.

Paoli, M.C. (1992) Citizenship, Inequalities, and Democracy: the making of the Public Space in Brazilian experience. *Social and Legal Studies 1* (2), pp.143 – 59.

Paoli, M.C. & Telles, V. S. (1998). Social Rights: conflicts and negotiations in contemporary Brazil. In S.E. Alvarez, E. Danigno & A. Escobar (Eds.) *Culture of Politics, Politics of Cultures: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements*, Boulder: Westview Press.

Note

1. Nichols and Sugur (2004) call this process as ‘TQM from below’. This study goes in the same direction.