

Book Review

Roberto Véras de Oliveira (2019) *Crises and Social Regression in Brazil: A New Moment of the Social Question*. Springer Briefs in Sociology Series. Cham: Springer. ISBN: 9783319994017 (paperback), 9783319994024 (eBook). 73 pages. \$68 (paperback), \$74 (eBook)

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Crises and Social Regression in Brazil is an exemplary exercise in the interpretive synthesis of transformations; scrupulously sequenced, it reconstructs the socioeconomic and structural basis of the historical and current problem of social and economic development in Brazil, and of the neo-liberal logic that underlies its scheme of reproduction. Although not omitting the theoretical approaches that have traditionally inspired the debate on the “Latin American Problem”, such as for example development theory, the author makes a precise selection of the lines of analysis that allow him to successfully locate and delimit the singularities of the case of Brazil.

Placing the genesis of inequality in the legacy of slavery and other injustices, which we also find in other countries with a similar context, Véras de Oliveira establishes an unequivocal descriptive analytical target: the failure of successive attempts to consolidate a system of labour regulation that benefits the working class and, by derivation, its expansion to Brazilian society as a whole as a culmination of the development process.

However, the weight of the non-capitalist production relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contributed to industrial backwardness, strongly tied to the expansion of export agriculture. This constellation emerged as a centre of gravity which acted as a drag on development. From the beginning of industrialisation in the 1930s, this dynamic acted as a spur for the establishment of a segmented structure. This structure evolved throughout the twentieth century based on economic dynamics, but also had, and in a particularly decisive way, a social nature. The result of these constant obstacles and evasive turns with regard to the construction of a welfare state presents itself as a scenario of unparalleled inequalities.

The timid attempts to establish an entry point for the legal regulation of the labour market recognised the status of salaried workers and the access to welfare that is inherent in the formal labour relation. However, this went along with largely excluding a whole range of workers, including agricultural workers, from the protection of the state.

This imbalance has been widely observed and registered, as Véras de Oliveira points out, by dualist paradigms, strongly conditioned by a dichotomous interpretation of the social structure. By characterising the labour market based on opposite realities of different parts of the working class, these approaches place the problem of development in Brazil in a controversial perspective. This binary understanding of Brazilian reality facilitated a negative perception of the working class, since it has been attributed with individualistic behaviour with little inclination to enter into relations of waged work. This theoretical focus was inspired by the few empirical studies on the Brazilian social

structure, drawing attention towards the heterogeneous nature of the Brazilian “working class”. This fact has been identified as one of the fundamental causes of the failure to construct a working-class identity; specifically, the individuality that emerged from such heterogeneity is seen as a barrier to the consolidation of a collective will in relation to waged work in contrast to other types of work arrangements closer to non-regulated labour relations.

Thus, unregulated work is gaining prominence not only for its specific relevance within the Brazilian economy, but also for the role it plays in the consolidation of a singular production model. In this model unregulated work is a necessary factor that is being configured with its own internal logic, and at the same time it is endowing itself with its own mechanisms and processes of reproduction.

From this consolidation of the production model arises the analytical need, both in the academic world and in the trade union struggle, to operationalise the concept of the informal economy, in order to provide a set of categories that allow a better understanding of the nature of the process of capital accumulation. Criticism of the dualist perspective and theories of marginality place the informal economy in a subordinate position, dependent on capitalist production. Thus, from the logic derived from the system of relations of production, the informal economy is de facto an interstitial element of the capitalist sector.

With the burden of more than twenty years of dictatorship, in which demands for civil rights were considered subversive acts, trade union organisations were faced with the colossal challenge of trying to organise both formal and precarious workers. The analysis of this challenge is approached by way of three lines of explanation.

In the first place, the book examines the confrontation that develops transversally in both academic and political debates. This debate is presented as a confrontation in which, on the one hand, we find interpretations aligned with liberal thought, suggesting that informality is a result of excessive state intervention. On the other hand, we find the critical line that situates informality as an intrinsic aspect of a specific variant of the capitalist mode of production; this variant favours the simultaneous coordination of the formal and informal sectors in the same dynamic, which can only be transformed via an expansion of the state. In this way, the informal sector is not a derivative of state intervention but an element of functional value in the topology of the productive scenario, and therefore has emerged as a result of its interstitial nature.

Second, the text describes the insufficient scope of the transformations introduced by the Workers’ Party (PT) during the presidential mandates of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, and characterises them as incapable of altering the deep structures of the social organisation of work in Brazil. Despite acknowledging that the PT reinforced the role of the state in economy and society, and created spaces of influence for regional and global reorganisation and coordination, the shadow of corruption was used as a method of systematic stigmatisation of the left and abolished the transformation project of the PT. With the interim presidency of Michel Temer, which followed the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, rights that had been maintained throughout the period of dictatorship and PT rule were eroded and eliminated, ushering in increasing precariousness, particularity and temporality.

Finally, the globalisation scenario appears as the main threat to a productive model and a social organisation of work compatible with the periphery or semi-periphery. The main problem arises as a result of the effect that the expansion of global capitalism has on the solidarity organisation of workers. This is especially so in a context in which this solidarity among workers was built on the basis of significant heterogeneity, hindering the consolidation of an identity of the organised working-class identity and focusing on the wage as its cornerstone demand. Such a scenario is today presented as an ideal breeding ground for the spread of irregular and informal work, that comes

together with the expansion of global capitalism, particularly targeted at economies in the periphery and semi-periphery.

Roberto Véras de Oliveira raises the fundamental question and the great challenge of facing the threat of informality exercised by the dominant neo-liberal dynamics of expansion, necessarily starting from the discussion about the historical conditions that have determined the innate nature of informality in Brazil.

This text unquestionably familiarises the reader with two interpretative schemes that not only concern the recent crisis and the problems of development in Brazil, but also other contexts to which they can be easily applied.

On the one hand, the book provides an integrative and comprehensive view of various interpretive approaches in the field. The profound task of documentation is not only reflected in an enumeration and development of the different approaches, but more precisely in their skilful and successfully structured presentation, facilitating a holistic understanding of the social crisis in Brazil that is not available from other sources. Each approach is analysed both in its internal foundations and from critical perspectives, establishing a debate along the lines of the historical narrative that enables the reader to examine the Brazilian crisis both retrospectively and prospectively. This is possible due to the great organisational and synthetic capacity of the exposition.

On the other hand, the book introduces the question of the hefty volume of informal work in the Brazilian labour market, as well as the polysemic character of the concept of informal work. By establishing a connection between different forms of informality and distinct vulnerable groups, like women or young people, the analysis demonstrates the need to create a complete scheme of conceptual nuances in order to capture the complexity and the relevance of informality in the context of dynamics of globalisation and the new international division of labour. Therefore, such nuances provide a basis not only for understanding the social crisis in Brazil, but for the construction of an analysis which can be applied to any labour scenario in the globalised world.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

VÍCTOR F. CLIMENT is associate professor of Sociology at the University de Alicante. His research activity is focused on the dynamics of the legitimacy of labour deregulation, particularly inspired by Luhmann's systems theory and Bourdieusian capitals. His recent publications include: "Territorios inteligentes: El sector turístico de la Marina Alta", in Hermsilla (coord.), *La innovación territorial y el empleo en la Comunidad Valenciana* (Universitat de Valencia, 2020); "Seguimiento y evaluación de los proyectos experimentales en Alicante", in Hermsilla (coord.), *Proyectos experimentales y territorio valenciano. Evaluación de políticas públicas de LABORA* (Universitat de Valencia, 2019); and "Desigualdades en la precarización del mercado laboral español", RELET (19)31: 255–302. [Email: v.climent@ua.es]