

**DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL POLICY SERIES**

**Working Paper #10 – Spring 1995**

**ON THE BRAZILIAN URBAN POOR  
An Anthropological Report**

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## Introduction

It is quite common to study the poor and poverty from a practical point of view, with the purpose of devising solutions to one of the most telling 'social problems' of the contemporary world, especially in developing countries. Much of what has been written about the poor consists of denunciations or policy studies oriented toward resolving the problem of misery. I have nothing against this position. On the contrary, I believe that it is essential as an instrument for heightening our awareness and opening our hearts to the moral and political importance of the issue. To be sure, in modern societies, which speak so much of equity and yet are so preoccupied with the rapid accumulation of wealth, there is nothing more unjust than the permanent and uncomfortable existence of poor and indigent people.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I reiterate the importance of scholarly reflections focused on policies meant to resolve or alleviate misery.

In this essay, however, my purpose is to study poverty as a structural question; as an element that is intrinsic to a particular way of constructing the world. Because I do not regard the poor as a segment apart from the rest of society, I study the poor as dynamic actors in the perpetuation of a certain set of values and as an essential part of a social system that cannot function without them.

Basically, I want to discern the relationships established within a triangle consisting of the poor, the state, and society. To this end, I will study the position of the poor in Brazilian society and culture: how society classifies and controls them, the nature of their relationships with other social sectors and, finally, the role of the state in this process.

I will focus my discussion on the study of opinions and dramas produced by the urban poor about themselves. I examine not only how the poor interpret the world that defines them but also how they construct it. Being members of Brazilian society, they obviously share expectations that are fundamentally similar to those of the rich and of the state that governs them. In this sense, I sought to portray the 'view from below,' which is typical of this type of study, but I also incorporated the 'view from above,' and more importantly, the reciprocal relationships between the two. Thus, I reflect on the opinions of the poor regarding their homes, neighborhoods, and urban settings, seeking to discern the principles that orient and give meaning to their lives. At the same time I attempt to understand how they regard the state, politicians, power, and governing administrators who implement social policies. Within this general context, in the final sections I

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<sup>1</sup> Witness the discomfort with which the *New York Times* (17 February 1994) reported the fact that homelessness in the United States is "a vast problem," reaching the formidable estimate of seven million persons which, according to Henry G. Cisneros, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, constitutes "a structural problem in America: chronic, continuous, large scale and complex."

will analyze the relationship between the poor and the government, the state, and social policies, the actors that, in Brazil, comprise the 'world of the street.'

The point of view I have adopted is that of Social Anthropology. It is fundamentally qualitative, comparative, and sensitized by the weight of values and customs (styles of thinking and doing) of the society under study.

At the risk of putting the cart before the ox, I want to mention that in studying the urban poor of São Paulo from this perspective, I was struck by two aspects. The first was their hierarchical and relational world view. This view is founded on reciprocity, on the awareness of social position, and on the acceptance of inequality as a fact of life in which a profound disillusionment with the state occupies a central place. The second aspect was how these poor people were economically different from but socially similar to me. To be sure, our lives could not be more divergent in terms of economic and educational levels. Yet it was surprising to note that we shared the same disenchantment regarding the role of the state and its social policies and had similar strategies of social navigation, since we both orient ourselves by a familistic, clientelistic, and personal moral code.

In Brazilian society, as I observed elsewhere (DaMatta 1991a [1979], 1991b [1985]), this code is manifested in the complementary opposition between the social spheres of the house and street. The sphere of the house is founded on the hierarchies of gender and age and on a set of attitudes regarding the importance of protection, obedience, and personal loyalties. The sphere of the street, by contrast, is ordered by impersonal and universal rules, founded on the notions of individualism and of equality. One of the consequences of such a world view is that the moral codes of the house are projected onto the work place, filtering out the universalistic ethic of the domain of the street. By the same token, the familistic ideal of the house helps to resolve problems relative to the public space; for example, one first seeks a friend or relative when in need of a service offered by the state. Within this cultural perspective, the poor as well as the rich seldom regard the state as neutral or passive; rather, they always attempt to place it at their service by means of a personal reference. In other words, when both the urban poor and I myself go to a public school, visit a health center, obtain an identification card, or verify a telephone bill, we first calculate which 'friends,' 'relatives' or 'acquaintances' we have in that particular government department. It is only after exhausting these possibilities that we can resign ourselves to confronting the impersonality of these places which inevitably render us inferior and disregard our rights, interests, and tribulations.

The crucial difference in such interaction is that the poor have no alternative while members of the upper social segments are able to buy these services. What characterizes the status of social superiority is, among other factors, semi-independence from the state or, better yet, the private appropriation of the state by certain segments of society. Besides this, people

with cosmopolitan manners, good information, formal schooling, family name, and what Brazilians call 'good appearance' are entitled to receive special and differentiated treatment in governmental departments. Such similarities in the use of public services was an important discovery of our research, for it showed that the segment under study, although needy and insufficiently educated, subscribed to generalized opinions regarding the ambiguous and unabashed incompetence of the state in relationship to society and to the poor.

These facts helped me to characterize the specificity of the Brazilian case which, as the reader will see by the end of the study, has much to do with the links that the several social segments of Brazilian society have with the state. One of the dimensions of subordination which this research revealed was an inevitable dependence on the state. To be poor is to have a very limited array of choices in relation to the codes that order society and the state, and consequently, to be entirely at the mercy of state social policies. Being in total dependence of the state, poor people cannot count (or count very little) on their personal resources to escape from it. The poor, as Brazilians say, 'have no resources...'

This relationship with the state emerged repeatedly. Such a link of subordination accentuates how the question of poverty in Brazil, and perhaps in the rest of Latin America surpasses mere economic issues. It can be characterized as a case in which the exploitation of labor is compounded by 'political exploitation' through a dependency on a state that is unable to complete its most simple tasks. This engenders frustration and political disorientation which is one of the most important dimensions of the subordination of the masses in Brazil.

This failure of the state is the central point of various dramas that lay the foundation for our informants' discourses and indicate that political institutions—whether new or old, foreign or familiar, egalitarian or authoritarian—are not introduced into social spheres devoid of cultural values.

### **A Methodological Note**

This essay provides a study of the urban poor within this general context. I will illustrate my thesis with material collected from March to June 1992 in 60 lengthy interviews with poor workers and city dwellers. Although my focus was the poor of the city of São Paulo and its periphery, I have also incorporated data collected in Campinas (State of São Paulo), Niterói (State of Rio de Janeiro), and in the city of Rio de Janeiro, as well as personal reflections on the deep and often painful and disconcerting experiences with the poor that have been part of my existence as a native Brazilian.

Our work was oriented by the anthropological technique of the participant-observer. The technical instrument most often used to gather data was the open interview, in which the



informant and the researcher interact with frankness, in accordance with the context, available time, and personal affinities.<sup>2</sup>

With this in mind, we assembled a six-part questionnaire. In the first part, we gathered data about the informant (name, place of residence, date of interview, place of birth, gender, age, summary of his/her residential history, level of education, marital status, family position, economic activity, income, and religion). In the second, we solicited an overview of his/her city, neighborhood, and home. Third, we asked about the informant's ideas on power and social change. Here, our interest was to know how the informants conceived the notion of power and in which ways they perceived the possibilities for social and political change. In the fourth part, the focus was on notions about poverty and wealth. The fifth and most important part inquired about poverty and public policies. In the final section, we asked the informants to narrate their adventures relating to experiences with public agencies, such as the police, hospitals, health centers, and schools.

In accordance with this orientation, we assembled a small research team of well-trained social anthropologists. We knew conducting such in-depth interviews would be possible only if we chose an area where we could, in little time, obtain the maximum depth in the collection of data. One team member, Cynthia Sarti, directed us to focus on a neighborhood in the extreme northeastern zone of the São Paulo. Sarti has long been familiar with this neighborhood since she carried out field research there for her Master's thesis a decade ago. Within this area, we selected a smaller, more compact residential community called Vila Ideal,<sup>3</sup> bordered on one side by a *favela* (shantytown). Other team members included Dr. Marcos Lanna and my wife, Celeste DaMatta. Most interviews were conducted in people's homes, and the conversations took place with candor and relative intimacy.

In Vila Ideal we conducted 20 in-depth interviews, each lasting more than three hours. We also gathered data from roundtable discussions among groups of residents of different genders and ages. Additional interviews were carried out by postgraduate students from the Departments of Anthropology of the Universidade de São Paulo and the Universidade de Campinas.

With this material we compiled a body of opinions, which guided our interpretations. This corpus, together with studies and data gathered by other researchers and interpretative and qualitative studies of Brazilian society and historical works, served as the basis for this essay.

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<sup>2</sup> Recently, Robert Bellah and his associates used the same technique to examine American values and social structure. His primary focus, like mine, was, in his words: "Not psychological, or even primarily sociological, but rather cultural. We wanted to know what resources Americans have for making sense of their lives, how they think about themselves and their society, and how their ideas relate to their actions" (Bellah et al. 1986, ix).

<sup>3</sup> Fictional name. All of the names were altered in order to preserve the privacy of the informants.

## I. A Brief Cultural History of the Poor

The conception of the poor has a long history in Western mentality. Within a complex framework of representations, it is worth emphasizing from the outset three central problems relevant to what I will develop in this essay. The first problem refers to the contrast between medieval and modern conceptions of the poor and poverty. The second refers to the differences between modern conceptions of the poor developed in the reformed, capitalist West (particularly England and the United States) and those of the Iberian world, a differentiated social universe<sup>4</sup> that comprises Spain and Portugal as 'original societies, and the so-called Latin America where the Iberian world was reproduced as a cultural system, modifying and adapting itself to local vicissitudes. The third problem addresses the Brazilian case, namely the manner in which the categories of poor and of poverty are constructed by Brazil as a state aspiring for transformation and modernity and by Brazil as a society constituted by traditional and modern values.

Insofar as the object of my study is to detect this relationship from the angle of social policies—that bridge between state and society—I believe that it is important to begin with a brief cultural history of the poor and poverty. The great advantage of this discussion is that it not only emphasizes the differences between diverse cultural styles and historical processes but also helps us to discern the set of values linked to the hierarchical and relational view of the world that is present in the Brazilian case. Nevertheless, this ideology emerges in an extremely dynamic context shaped by the forces of modernity: capitalism, individualism, competitiveness, the market as a formal universal institution, and a state founded upon the citizen and equality before the law. Such modern elements, systematically and formally introduced into Brazilian society with the proclamation of the Republic in 1889, are a critical part of contemporary values in Brazil, shaping the development of national life. Yet this does not mean that traditional institutions based on strong personal ethics such as clientelism, populism, nepotism, etc., have been rendered inoperative. Quite to the contrary, what is surprising about the process of modernization in Brazil—or rather, of modernization Brazilian-style—is precisely the simultaneous, conflictive, and oscillating presence of these elements.

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<sup>4</sup> One well-known authority in Iberian social history refers to this world as a 'special case' where there exists a unique combination: a strong state which weakens the power of merchants, plays off the cities against the rural aristocracy through populist strategies, and creates a professional bourgeoisie to control them (Stuart B. Schwartz 1979, iii). See also the pioneering study by Raymundo Faoro, originally published in 1958 (Faoro 1975).

## 1. The Traditional Conception

During the medieval period, when the values of the Catholic Church hegemonically permeated the structure of society, the poor were seen as a moral category relative and complementary to the rich (Bloch 1961, Chap. VI). As historian Michel Mollat wrote, poverty denoted "above all the quality and condition of a person of any social status who was a victim of privation" (Mollat 1986, 10). In other words, the notion was not modeled according to socio-economic criteria which later came to dominate the topic. Rather, being poor was a relative, contextual condition that, in principle, could apply to any person. Thus, kings, nobles, and bishops could be classified as rich or poor in the same way as peasants, soldiers, and pilgrims. In this cultural world, the dichotomy rich/poor constituted a hierarchy and did sustain a rigid compartmentalization or individualization.<sup>5</sup> One did not speak, as we do today, of 'poverty lines' or 'absolute privation,' and the poor were not perceived as excluded from society, as marginal or an 'underclass.'

Having such amplitude, the idea of poverty fostered an ambivalence: it indicated negative circumstances yet also included what Mollat called 'positive evaluations' which bestowed on poverty an incontestable social value, loaded with ambiguity. These positive evaluations accompanied feelings of solidarity and compassion, which any person could enjoy, as well as admiration for the discretion of the 'humble poor' or of the rich and powerful filled with modesty. Furthermore, the poor inspired a special kind of respect, since they reflected the image of Christ (Mollat 1986). As Max Weber noted: "Medieval ethics not only tolerated begging, but actually glorified it in the mendicant orders. Even secular beggars, since they gave the person of means opportunity for good works through giving alms, were sometimes considered an estate and treated as such" (Weber 1958, 177).

Such glorification of poverty engendered compensatory processes of social classification. Indeed, if one follows its full sociological implications, one will be able to perceive that a person could be politically powerful or monetarily rich but poor in virtues while another might be poor in material goods and titles but spiritually rich. This allowed people to represent themselves as equal (or superior) to others when in fact they were socially and politically inferior. This system did not regard the individual as an autonomous social agent; it represented the rich and the poor, the noble and the plebeian, as interdependent and morally equivalent before the laws of God and the Church. This style of dealing with inequality emerged clearly among the urban poor of Brazil here studied.

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<sup>5</sup> When using the concept of hierarchy I am inspired by the work of Louis Dumont (1970).

But what were the causes for poverty and how was it dealt with?

In the Middle Ages, it was said that poverty was caused by war, aging, physical deformity, sickness, economic debility—by life's adversities—and lack of stability caused by errant ways (Coelho 1973, 233). For medieval society, poverty was a perennial human condition, impossible (even undesirable) to overcome. As Mollat remembers, just as "charity was beseeched, in accordance with the apostle Paul, to never subside, it was also admissible, listening to Christ, that there would always be poor people" (Mollat 1986, 9). In this hierarchical and relational world, the destitute were the Christ-like poor, to whom the rich would bestow value and honor. As Saint Eloy affirmed—and whose echoes are heard in the poor neighborhoods of Brazil—"God could have made all men rich, but he wanted the poor to exist in this world so that the rich would have the opportunity to redeem their sins" (Mollat 1986, 47).

These ideas stipulated the moral obligation to help the poor with whom the wealthy lived in a dynamic equilibrium and in full reciprocity. In his classical study of the social teachings of the Christian Churches, Ernst Troeltsch notes:

The charity of the Church, particularly that of the Religious Orders, was mainly needed for the service of the *déclassé*, the sick, and the abnormal. On the other hand, the presence of such needy folk was considered normal and desirable, since they provided an opportunity for the exercise of charity; far from being hindered and set aside by rational social policy, they formed a normal Christian 'class' of their own, which was regarded as necessary for the whole (1931, Vol. I, 253).

Until the advent of the modern world, therefore, the poor did not constitute a 'social issue' or a 'political problem.' In the medieval world they might be perceived as victims, but there was a religious obligation to protect them through donations. "Those who give to the poor, lend to God..." The Biblical adage (which, as we will see, is quite alive in Brazilian cultural values) expressed this traditional model of hierarchy, in which the rich were superior but were bound, as much as the poor were to them, by obligations of charity, interdependency, and *noblesse oblige*. This was, moreover, a traditional ethic diffused throughout most cultures and societies of the world.

In the twelfth century greater mobility caused poor people to be seen as "children of the road and of the city" (Mello e Souza 1982; Mollat 1986). By the fourteenth century the poor confronted a basic ambiguity: while still representing the humiliated Christ, they simultaneously constituted a threat to the social order which had become increasingly individualist, competitive, market-based, and consequently, founded to a greater degree on economic difference.



## 2. The Modern Conception

Following the fourteenth century there emerged the unemployed. This situation compelled society to redefine poverty, associating the poor with vagrancy, idleness, and crime; later the poor were viewed as victims of circumstance and as a 'social problem.' This conceptual shift became most pronounced after the Protestant Reformation and the Puritan movement. Protestants condemned alms-giving and believed that hard discipline was capable of delivering people from idleness, inertia, laziness, and poverty (Davis 1975, 23).

In studying sixteenth century England, R. H. Tawney related this new world view to the large-scale commercialization of agriculture and to the growth of industrial capitalism. Social historian Gertrude Himmelfarb has summarized what she calls "the Tawney thesis":

Derived from Puritanism, that ethic had the effect of sanctifying riches, degrading poverty, subverting the traditional system of social obligations, and providing a rationale for an individualistic, competitive, acquisitive capitalist society. It was the ethic Adam Smith was to promulgate in the *Wealth of Nations* and Marx was to criticize in a memorable passage of the *Communist Manifesto*: "The bourgeoisie, wherever it got the upper hand, put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations, and pitilessly tore asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors,' and left remaining no other bond between man and man than naked self-interest and callous cash payment." According to Tawney, that ethic had become the informal, spontaneous "rule of English public life" a century before Smith. It was this ethic which outlined a new attitude toward the poor—an extremely harsh attitude, only comparable, as Tawney notes, to the "behavior of the less reputable of white colonists toward colored labor." It was a "new medicine for poverty, a medicine designed not to cure poverty, but to punish it" (Himmelfarb 1984, 24).

This new mentality incited an important discussion to distinguished between the 'true' poor and the vagabonds who should be put to work. A relational and retributive morality was replaced by a distributive morality in which the 'system' and/or the state—not the rich—were responsible for the survival and control of those who lived on the margins of society.

Furthermore, since social and political life are defined through individualist parameters and founded on interests, individual choices, and the institutionalization of the market, it becomes imperative to comprehend poverty as a social occurrence. How then is it possible to resolve the paradox of the increase in productivity with the simultaneous and shameful growth of poverty that accompanied the Industrial Revolution?

For Karl Polanyi, such a 'social catastrophe' is explained by the liberation of economic forces which expanded to the point of becoming independent from society. Thus, land, labor, and money were no longer subordinated to the dictates of social obligation but became instead 'commodities' in a market that encompassed society's moral rules.

A blind faith in spontaneous progress had taken hold of people's minds, and with the fanaticism of sectarians the most enlightened pressed forward for boundless and unregulated change in society. The effects on the lives of the people were awful and beyond description. Indeed, human society would have been annihilated but for protective countermoves which blunted the action of the self-destructive mechanism (Polanyi 1967, 76).

What is involved here is a historical shift propelled by an intriguing dialectic. As market forces were liberated, creating a level of wealth never seen before, their destructive impact in society engendered uncontrollable poverty. This was so palpable that, according to Polanyi, it was "generally agreed among eighteenth-century thinkers that pauperism and progress were inseparable." What perturbed scholars was the fact that the poor emerged precisely in the most 'fertile' and 'civilized' nations and not in the most backwards and 'barbaric' ones, as John McFarlane noted in 1782.<sup>6</sup> This led the Italian economist, Giammaria Ortes, to posit as a scientific axiom that "the wealth of a nation corresponds with its population; and its misery corresponds with its wealth." Even Adam Smith, one of the founding fathers of the market economy, agreed that the wealthiest countries did not pay their workers the best salaries. (Polanyi 1967, 103).

The result of this complex set of forces was threefold. First, it brought about the recognition of poverty as a distinct social problem caused by a set of radical social transformations. Poverty ceased to be a constituent element of society, as was supposed during the Middle Ages, and became a problem apparently localized and dependent on certain social and political practices.

The second result was the institutionalization of mechanisms, such as the Poor Laws, meant to aid the poor and eventually to suppress and correct poverty. This necessity to correct the unbridled operation of the market had the unforeseen effect of promoting a radical critique of the moral responsibility of the ruling classes and, above all, the economic system in relation to the laboring class.

The third result was, as Polanyi notes, the inevitable "discovery of society": the discovery that society could be represented as an entity constituted through individual autonomous agents, whose interests are in conflict and whose object is to obtain maximum wealth. With this concept the idea of society as a hierarchical entity, interdependent and governed by the laws of God and the Roman Catholic Church according to a holistic medieval morality, was deeply repressed if not discarded.

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<sup>6</sup> At least two centuries afterward, two former political activists and specialists in urban poverty in the United States, 'discovered' that "economic and political forces no longer combat poverty—they generate poverty!" They write about "poverty as a structure" and organize their ideas around 'separation,' a significant concept in Anglo-American ideology. I am referring to the work of Goldsmith and Blakely (1992).

This new conception of labor as a commodity caused poverty to be regarded as a vice, a result of idleness, and led to the establishment of successive mechanisms of juridical and political control of the poor. It was supposed that forced labor, imprisonment, flogging, and other drastic disciplinary measure would put an end to 'debauchery' and 'sloth' (Himmelfarb 1984, 25). Similarly, the old and virtuous mendicancy was no longer tolerated and was severely punished; recurrent vagrancy met with capital punishment. The Poor Law of 1601, according to Polanyi, was a "decree that the able-bodied poor should be put to work so as to earn their keep" (Polanyi 1967, 87).

At this point, the poor either became workers (and citizens) or outcasts, members of the dangerous classes or the 'underclass.' Thus, just as the market fomented poverty, political equality (which legitimated labor as a commodity and universalized citizenship) also gave rise to a new undesirable and distorted set of social differences.

Thus, in the modern world poverty is a social problem and a stigma. Or, as people say redundantly in Brazil: 'poverty is a misery!'

## II. The Idea of Poverty in the Iberian World and in Brazil

How did things develop in the Iberian world, which did not experience the drastic efflorescence of Reformism nor the 'great transformation' that instituted the market economy and the Industrial Revolution? What happened in these societies which, at first contact with modernity, forged the Counter-Reformation and reinforced the traditional system, now with the endorsement and the repressive, sacrosanct power of the Church?

What occurred in the Iberian world and in Brazil was modernization in a 'revisionist' mode. The Iberian system also transformed the state and society, but this modification aimed to contain the advances of bourgeois ideology, especially liberalism. While in England the state was contiguous to the interests of the bourgeoisie, in the Iberian world it became a relatively autonomous sphere<sup>7</sup> with its own functionaries and motivations. In the Iberian world the state has its own goals and is often interested in reforming, not serving, the ruling classes and society as a whole.

In Portugal, Spain, and, by extension, Brazil and Latin America, a 'Counter-Reformed' state began to exercise a redistributive and compensatory function, thus becoming the great patron of all social sectors. To this end, the administrative system and the judicial apparatus

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<sup>7</sup> The expression is from Schmitter (1971) who identified the self-sufficiency of the state as a central aspect of the Brazilian system. While he failed to perceive the historical depth of bureaucratization of the Luso-Brazilian state, he nevertheless emphasized the "early bureaucratization and the absence of any major confrontation leading to a redefinition and restructuring of its role" as a unique aspect of the Brazilian case.

were reformulated, creating a new stratum of civil servants—the *letrado* class, which came to constitute a powerful and self-conscious social group.<sup>8</sup>

Analyzing the 'limits of liberalism in Brazil,' the historian Emília Viotti da Costa (1985) clearly explained this set of unique factors, highlighting: (a) an uneducated and illiterate population; (b) the absence of a dynamic bourgeoisie that could endow potentially important and revolutionary liberal ideas with a differentiated role; (c) dominant groups that did not want to renounce their privileges as landholders and slave masters (liberty and equality were tolerated, as long as they did not affect the hierarchy); and (d) the marriage of liberal ideas with the Church and religion. Thus, the Iberian world, and within it, Brazil, avoided the calamity of Polanyi's 'great transformation.'

Thus, the traditional conceptions of labor and worker and, consequently, the ideas of poverty and the poor changed very little. In Brazil, liberalism existed more as an instrument of national autonomy than as an instrument for a radical criticism of the economy, the political regime, and the labor structure. It was an elite liberalism purged of its radical features (Viotti da Costa 1985, 242). As it entered the universe of Brazilian values, it was filtered, reinterpreted, and transformed through the local ideology, producing surprising results.

The poor and poverty continued to occupy a profoundly hierarchical human landscape, founded on traditional Catholic ideals that saw poverty as an immutable fact. Worse still, now poverty was structurally linked to slaves, who were central to the country's economic life and constituted the largest part of the working masses.<sup>9</sup>

Liberal thought, which produced a radical awareness of equality and of the market, regarded the poor as scandalous. Meanwhile in the Iberian world and in Brazil, new ideas and old structures fused in a systematic and original way. Due to this peculiar mediation, the modern ideal of equality transformed slaves into legally free workers but left them poor and dependent. In this system, slaves and free workers became loyal and respectful clients of authoritarian patrons, of the church, and of an equally omniscient and patronal state. This state emerged fully conscious of its patronal role in society, not because it was worried about equity, but because it was always domineering and authoritarian.

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<sup>8</sup> Raymundo Faoro (1975) perceived the importance of this segment, whom he called the *donos do poder* (the power bosses or owners) in his pioneering study of 1958.

<sup>9</sup> Emília Viotti da Costa informs us that right after independence, in 1822, there were 2,813,351 free inhabitants and 1,147,515 slaves in Brazil, concentrated in Salvador, Bahia; Ouro Preto, Minas Gerais; the Paraíba Valley; and the city of Rio de Janeiro (Costa 1985, 128). Historian Sidney Chalhoub notes that in 1890, one year after the Proclamation of the Republic, among the 522,651 inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro, 180,000 (or 34%) were black or *mestiço*. It is significant that the 1906 census, seeking to modernize Brazilian society by force, did not include data on skin color (Chalhoub 1986, 25).



## 1. The Poor and the Worker in Brazil

During the Industrial Revolution in England the transformation of labor into a commodity engendered a process of domestication and repression of the links of patronage and personal dependency. This provided enormous liberty for workers but rendered them destitute. They were free and equal before the law but, in compensation, they could not rely on any patron in times of need. It was precisely this individualized and negative situation that raised the consciousness of society. Recognition of workers and the poor as autonomous beings, severed from the personal ties that governed the old mode of production, led to a struggle to assist them. No longer able to count on traditional patronage, the poor were assisted by associations of their own social class or by the state. This was the route that led to union movements, socialist parties, and the welfare state. In this process, extreme individualism and the consequent absence of personal dependency led to a new form of social organization. A positive view of labor, however, required a distinction between the worker and the poor. In a society that rapidly became wealthy through free labor sold in the market, the poor were perceived as lazy, vagrant, crooked, and shifty—those who avoided work.

In Brazil, by contrast, the absence of a transformation that effectively changed ties of dependency, as well as the long historical and structural experience with slavery, made it difficult, if not impossible, to separate the poor from the worker.

## 2. Hierarchy and Class Consciousness

Only by way of sociological fiction could one imagine that the slaves and later the freed persons and workers in Brazil—the so-called *povo* (people) or *classes populares* (popular classes)—formed homogeneous segments opposed to landowners and bosses, as the mechanical application of the Marxist idea of 'class solidarity' would make believe. If society was politically and juridically divided into masters and slaves and, on another level, into bosses and free workers, the fact remains that these segments were subdivided internally. The people of color as well as the whites conformed to the general rules of society and were ranked hierarchically in gradual order according to many socially important internal subdivisions. Thus, the black population had within its ranks many differentiated social positions. Historian Sidney Chalhoub (1986) shows that the population of free workers was similarly divided into categories. This hierarchical ordering effaced the consciousness of the Brazilian worker, creating, as Chalhoub underlines, obstacles to class (or 'horizontal') social and political consciousness. Another effect, not always perceived by scholars, was the importance of personal ties in the

competition for jobs. This style of conceiving social relationships in general and working links in particular, as we will see below, endures to this day.

Despite the profound transformations experienced by the Brazilian working order, labor continued to be associated with poverty and stigmatized as a sin and punishment. It is noteworthy that the Portuguese word *trabalho* (work) comes from the vulgar Latin *tripaliare* which, according to the Brazilian Aurélio Dictionary, literally means “to inflict severe pain [*martirizar*] with the *tripaliu*, an instrument of torture.”

In Brazil, therefore, the ideal was not to become a worker but to be an autonomous merchant, to have one's own business, to secure employment with the state, to live by one's wits, or to have a good and generous patron. Even today, Brazilian workers go out of their way to distinguish themselves from the indigents, so as not to be confused with vagrants and bandits.

### 3. Labor, Punishment, and Social Disqualification

In a society in which ‘work’ could be interpreted as punishment and an offense—as a synonym for slavery—it is no wonder that even today Brazilians significantly distinguish among *trabalho* (work), *serviço* (labor in the sense of performing a task or duty), and *emprego* (employment involving an official position within a formal organization). In fact, Brazil is a society in which work does not offer the potential for autonomy and equality but rather implies punishment, perverse inequality, and destitution. It is also bound to produce negative forms of patronage, characterized by distance and alienation, which leads to a kind of (wild) superexploitation.

This degrading of labor no doubt occurs because the categories ‘workers’ and ‘poor’ are associated with the experience of slavery. And in Brazil slavery was more than a mode of production. It was a style of social existence in which work was conceived as sin, as punishment, and as activity that had no affinity with the most elementary forms of personhood and citizenship. Indeed, if one was neither master nor slave, one was a potential marginal who had to rely on charity, patronage, and the personal good will of some person in order to have a position on the social ladder. It was precisely in this no man's-land—this space located between slaves and aristocrats—that the free worker was situated. Slaves were finally freed in 1888, but an effectively autonomous working class independent from clientelistic links did not fully develop. Clientelism hindered the functioning of the labor market, since workers were contracted in a personalized context, not according to the logic of supply and demand. Opportunity depended on each worker's relationship with a boss. The system operated according to an ordered differentiation among subordinates, who distinguished themselves by establishing personal links with their patrons. Salaries for the same position (and task) varied, since the value of work did

not depend on the market but on the person performing the job. A well-connected worker was paid more than those who lacked personal ties, a feature that obviously destroys the positive side of a labor market. This is a very important feature of the Brazilian conception of labor, especially within the realm of domestic activities which are the jobs most sought after by the poor urban population, particularly women.

Therefore, labor is not an autonomous activity done for itself but a means to end—something done for another. One works for the boss, who either exploits or 'is considerate'; for the state, which does not pay what it should; or for the *patrão*, who does not acknowledge the efforts of the worker. Labor is an activity marked by frustration and not by the paradoxical plenitude that characterizes work as a call or vocation in the Western world. Due perhaps to what can be called a 'memory of slavery,'<sup>10</sup> work is associated with that which debases, deforms, rips hide from the back, kills, and destroys people, especially those who are most honest. There is a deep-rooted belief that work does not produce wealth, although it can lead to permanent links of protection, loyalty, and obedience, as well as to an acute feeling of insolvency and subordination.

This stigmatized view of work and poverty which is contiguous with fatality, destiny, punishment, and sin, dialectically engenders a utopian view of a world without labor. The latter is linked with crime and vagrancy—two other survival tactics based on the possibility of living and prospering without having to work. In my view, it is not by chance that the figure of the *malandro* (rogue) emerges so clearly and is institutionalized in Brazil. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (DaMatta 1991a, chapter 5), the *malandro* is an avenger of the worker. If the honest worker can never be free from poverty, roguery symbolizes the possibility of deceiving the powerful but stupid boss and thus lightening the burden of exploitation. The stories of Pedro Malazartes, a popular hero throughout Brazil and the *malandro* par excellence, reveal how honest work leads to exploitation while cunning bordering on criminality offers the compensation of deceiving ambitious and dishonest bosses, if not a satisfactory position in the system.

The Brazilian social universe, therefore, did not produce a 'work ethic' nor a 'working class culture.' However, there is a strong and all-encompassing 'ethic of poverty' based on traditional conceptions and values.

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<sup>10</sup> The utterly credible published deposition of Carolina Maria de Jesus, a poor, black single mother, inhabitant of the favela of Canindé in the city of São Paulo at the end of the 1950s, produced a poignant diary of her life, which confirms this assertion. Thus, in *Child of the Dark* (*Quarto de despejo*, literally Room of Garbage), she writes: "May 13th. At dawn it was raining. Today is a nice day for me. It's the anniversary of the Abolition. The day we celebrate the freeing of the slaves. In the jails blacks were the scapegoats. But now the whites are more educated and no longer treat us with contempt. May God enlighten the whites so that blacks may have a happier life." She concludes, "And that is the way on May 13th, 1958, I fought against the real slavery—hunger!" (1960, 32). Further down, she returns to the theme to question the authoritarian behavior of a police officer who tied a black man she knew to a tree: "Who knows if the officer is ignorant of the fact that slavery is extinct and yet we still live in the regime of the whip" (1960, 106).



In the course of this study, we found that those who define themselves as poor generally identify themselves as workers. They conceive of work in a double way. First, there is the traditional view of work as punishment and obligation which, as we saw, is related the Brazilian connection between slavery and labor. Linked with this old conception, however, we find many signs pointing to the possibility of rescuing the poor and the workers from the condition of being perpetual clients. This second view, most visible in contemporary urban Brazil, envisions the transformation of the poor into equal citizens and competitive workers. Each conception mobilizes different segments of the population and demands disparate social and political adjustments. Operating together, they present an intriguing dilemma.

### III. The Poor and Society

Throughout Latin America the poor have an unavoidable, discomforting presence. As anthropologist Alba Zaluar has stressed, to write about the poor is to reflect upon the majority of the urban population—it is equivalent to discussing the whole *povo* (Zaluar 1985, 34).

Indeed, the poor have an almost divine omnipresence in Latin American societies. They can be found everywhere—in the cities and in the countryside, in public squares and in palaces and churches, in the house and in the street, in this and in the other world.<sup>11</sup> The poor are deeply integrated into the physical and social landscape of the urban and rural worlds. They contribute as much to its traditional cosmology as to the modern political values inspired by the ideology of individualism and utilitarianism, which attempts to explain and eradicate them.<sup>12</sup>

The spirit of modernity, with its emphasis on rationality, urban compartmentalization, and the value of money and labor, condemns and is ashamed of poverty. Yet poverty is also the source of a series of values that permeate the life of Latin American cities. The shantytowns and peripheral neighborhoods, which so shame Brazilians, are sites of enormous creativity that redefine popular speech, gestures, dress, and fashion. With this creativity, a set of values basic for the functioning of society also emerges. I am thinking particularly of generosity, the capacity to laugh at serious things, and the formidable spirit of resistance to unbridled exploitation of labor exemplified by the aforementioned *malandro* figure. There is also the music—samba came from

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<sup>11</sup> In Brazilian Catholicism there are wealthy aristocratic saints and those who are humble and poor. Saint Benedict, for example, is the patron saint of blacks and poor people. In Afro-Brazilian religions, the religious pantheon is comprised of a hierarchy of superior and inferior entities. The other world is popularly viewed as a social domain populated equally by rich and by poor.

<sup>12</sup> According to the study in this series by Juarez Brandão Lopes, the proportion of poor people in Brazilian cities is about 40% (Lopes 1994, 6).



the slave quarters and the shantytown—as well as fundamental institutions of Brazilian society, like the so-called ‘popular’ or ‘Afro-Brazilian religion’ and carnival.<sup>13</sup>

In the Brazilian case, therefore, poverty is a complex social problem and a cultural paradox.

Which Brazilians have not lived intimately with a poor person? Who has never had a nanny from a peripheral community to care for (and generously love) their children? Who has never had a maid who works without a contract or set schedule, looking after the house, preparing the meals, cleaning the books and furniture, answering the telephone, and taking care of the daily shopping with incomprehensible honesty? Though imbued with cosmopolitan individualism, many people rely on the company of their servants to listen with infinite patience and tenderness to their emotional problems and love crises. Others, when sick and in search of magic strength, rely on their servants to make contact with spiritists, *Candomblé* and *Umbanda* houses.

Unlike in New York, London, or Paris—in Santiago, Lima, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, what stands out most in terms of the local reality is the massive presence of poor people. This multifunctional mass takes care of all of the subaltern occupations, just as slaves did previously.

## 1. The Poor and the Urban Space

This mass of poor people that permeates Latin American cities influences the urban way of life. In fact, we might ask what type of social coexistence occurs in these cities? How does the population, imbued with a hierarchical world view, react to this massive and ubiquitous presence of poor people? How do these cities, marked by the conjunction of traditional values, like

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<sup>13</sup> Alba Zaluar was among the few researchers who discussed the role of popular music, carnival and samba as basic elements in the lives of the urban poor in Rio de Janeiro. According to her work, it is through these elements that poor workers articulate themselves, create neighborhood associations, reflect on daily life, and express its conflicts and solidarities. Thus, music serves as an important instrument for harmonizing differences and escaping depressing routines (Zaluar 1985, 174 ff.). Mary Karash (1987) made a detailed study of these traditions from the point of view of slavery. The complexity of these traditions, which contradict the individualist and cosmopolitan ‘civic culture,’ cause certain scholars like Lopes to see the “limitations of the cultural world of Brazil’s urban poor” (Lopes 1994, 12). Such a position assumes that the absence of books, television sets, and formal schooling denotes a restricted mental universe that is as poor as its material conditions of social existence. This ignores the enormous moral and symbolic richness of these populations, particularly in the religious and ritual universe which includes Candomblé, the spirit possessions of Umbanda, the pilgrimages, the miraculous cures, the passion for soccer and samba, the *muxirão* [collective work of all for the benefit of one, who on that day has to foot the bills—ED.], and the generous companionship of popular feasts. For a classic study of popular culture, see Bakhtin (1987). See also DaMatta (1981 and 1992) and Magnani (1984).

hierarchy and clientelism, and modern values, like egalitarianism and individualism, operate? In other words, how is the social space of Brazilian society organized?

One cannot speak of Brazilian society without referring to the opposition between the house and the street. This fundamental duality serves to designate the singular and the universal, the private and the public, the personal and the anonymous. It also connotes a profoundly Brazilian style of expressing familiarity, intimacy, and respect (which belong to the world of the house), in contrast with unfamiliarity, individuality, legalism, and conflict (which belong to the world of the street). As we will see, such an opposition also configures the contrasts and dilemmas between a world view based on reciprocity and another founded on a civic and modern orientation.

## 2. The House and the Street: Generalities

In Brazil, the street implies movement, change, action, while the house presumes harmony, permanence, and calm—the site of warmth (as revealed by the Latin word *lar*, used in Brazil to designate house) and affection. In the street one works; in the house one rests. The house is marked by reciprocity, obedience, and respect, paradigmatically represented by the axis between father and son which is then projected onto the patron-client link. The street is the site where the Brazilian adage *salve-se quem puder* (equivalent to 'every man for himself') defines an individualist, Hobbesian universe, where everyone is locked in struggle. This is a world marked by universal laws and anonymity.

The house/street opposition separates two mutually exclusive domains which are organized in the form of a binary opposite as well as in gradations. The actual spatial division of the Brazilian house, even when it is poor, as anthropologist Tereza Caldeira has shown (1986), suggests the possibility of gradation, since the *varanda* is an ambiguous space, between the house and the street. The same possibility exists with the windows, the points through which one can 'see' the movement in the street, something Brazilians are fond of doing. Another ambiguous area is the space reserved for domestic help, the 'maid's quarters'—conspicuously absent from American houses—which is a zone reserved for social inferiors, the poor and excluded.

Within the perspective of this report, it is fundamental to observe that the space of the house configures and reinforces traditional ideologies, such as clientelism, friendship, and family ties, while the social sphere of the street alludes to the state, the government, and the set of universal laws and public policies in which the individual is a legal subject and main political agent. Reciprocity is the ethic of the house, while the street is associated with a civic ideology inscribed by equality and individualism.

### 3. On Houses, Squares, and Streets

Both of these spaces are projected onto Brazilian cities where there seems to be a homologous relation between the plan of the house and the plan of the city. Describing São Paulo, Maria Carolina de Jesus confirms this premise: "The Governor's Palace is the living room. The Mayor's Office is the dining room and the city is the garden. And the shantytown is the backyard where they throw garbage" (1960, 33).

The space of the street is frequently subdivided into *centro* and *praça*. The buildings most fundamental to the social life of the community are located on the square: the church (which represents the axis of religious power), the Governor's Palace or Mayor's Office (representing political power), and often an important educational institution. By contrast, the center is a zone of commerce, a sphere where impersonal transactions take place. In fact, the history of many Brazilian cities began with the establishment of the church and the Mayor's Office on a square which is the center, as was the case with São Paulo (Morse 1954, 301; Caldeira 1984; Saia 1972). Even in poor areas of São Paulo like São Miguel Paulista and Vila Ideal, where our study was concentrated, the spaces of the center and the square have exactly the same connotations (Sarti 1985; Caldeira 1984, 1986).

In Brazilian cities there is a gradation from the center to the periphery, from the 'inside' to the 'outside' spaces. As Caldeira shows: "São Paulo, like other large Brazilian cities, is strongly stratified, and social differentiations are clearly marked in space. Moving from the center of the city to its outskirts, from the old to the new neighborhoods, the rich houses are replaced by middle-class houses and then by poor ones; the urban infrastructure and the public services dwindle to the point that they completely disappear. The external area of the city is called *periphery*, and this expression has both a spatial and a social connotation: it refers to the spatial boundaries of the city, and alludes to the extremes of its poverty." (1986, 3, emphasis in the original).

It would be a sociological error to consider these areas without discussing their symbolic value. The peripheries and *favelas* constitute a sort of no-man's-land, precisely because they are unfinished, relatively open spaces. These places are associated with the impersonal and public space of the 'street,' a world linked to openness and an absence of borders, walls, and limits. For this reason, inhabitants of the *favelas* and peripheries are constantly harassed by police, who brutally invade the neighborhoods and homes in search of criminals. It is as if the poor have no right to privacy. Thus, in the peripheral area under study, one detects a clear idea of internal differentiation, since informants distinguish the 'wealthier' areas (more urbanized and constructed, zones that enjoy more and higher quality basic urban facilities and services) from the 'poorer' areas.

If we want to relate cultural values with urban space, the Brazilian cultural equation would be as follows: wealthy is associated with the house, the closed, and finished; poverty is associated with the street, the periphery, the open and the unfinished.

This point is confirmed by a number of opinions collected in our fieldwork which speak of the poor as being "gross, with ruined teeth and poorly dressed," or as someone who "goes around with old clothes and speaks poorly." Maria Carolina de Jesus described the poor as those who are always "lacking," since "the poor never relax. They don't have the privilege of enjoying rest" (1960, 14) and "their children are always hungry" (31); and always dirty (97). Another informant stated that the poor can be identified "by their faces, their way of speaking, their teeth—*Está na cara!*" [It is written on their faces—ED.] Various informants mentioned the suffering, the clothes, and even the typical smell of poor people (as noted by one young woman from Vila Ideal). Their perception of the rich is the exact opposite: they are conceived as "people who dress well, have well-treated skin, good appearance;" they have 'education' (that is, they know how to deal with people and live well), and "have pretty faces and travel to foreign countries."

The cultural place of the poor is on the margins and in the 'street,' which is the site of danger and potential conflict.

All of this makes leaving one's home a relatively complex operation requiring certain precautions. One must not forget personal documents, especially the *carteira de identidade* (identification card). A respectable woman was not supposed to go out for idle strolls—a rule that still persists in poor neighborhoods in Brazil—and children are encouraged to stay close to home so as not to be mistaken for 'street kids.'

The 'street' is represented as being infested by danger and threat. This reinforces the valorization of the 'house,' which is projected on to the urban space, thus creating inequalities. The result is that in Brazil, not the poor but the rich live in ghettos. In sharp contrast to the American urban experience, suburban dwellers are not the well-off in search of bucolic contact with nature but rather the poor who still lack basic municipal services.

The same logic of gradation emerged when our informants spoke of Brazil in relation to other countries or of São Paulo in relation to other states in Brazil. Thus, São Paulo is the 'heart'—the center—the famous 'economic locomotive' and the 'best and richest state of Brazil.' It is the state with the highest income, the most industries, the largest and most open labor market, the most will to work, and the most opportunities to earn money.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Such opinions concur with the data presented by Lopes (1994) in his essay in this series about urban indigence and poverty in Brazil, which indicate that in the southeast there is a structured urban market and consequently greater opportunities for work than in the northeast.



It seems evident that the normal standard for the Brazilian city follows the traditional center/periphery social and spatial divisions. These divisions characterize the history of the city of São Paulo which, as we have shown, expanded from a well-defined 'center.'

This logic of gradations permeated our informants' view of the structure of the neighborhood and the home, thus revealing general agreement as to what constitutes a 'good neighborhood' and a 'good house.' The wealthy (or 'good') neighborhoods are, as one informant from the periphery of São Paulo put it, those that are "more completed, with more services, more policing, more green areas." Perceiving the ghettoization of these areas, another informant mentioned that "in the rich neighborhoods, the houses are bigger, there are cars...though ultimately the rich neighborhoods seem like jails." Corroborating the presence of poverty throughout Brazilian cities, a middle-class informant from Higienópolis, São Paulo, observed that neighborhoods "are totally mixed, just look at Morumbi." Yet, even though both live near each other, it is known who is rich and who is poor by behavior and lifestyle.

#### IV. The Cradle of Traditional Values: The Space of the House

Both the residents of shacks situated in large urban conglomerates and the residents of middle-class neighborhoods share the opinion that the ideal house is defined by the generous space, privacy, security, and comfort that it provides. Such a house should be built with sturdy materials (which would obviously be proof of its permanence and thus symbolize the prestige of its residents) and be large. According to one resident of São Paulo's periphery, the ideal house "would be completely separated, without neighbors on the other side of the wall. Everything would be of great value: expensive paintings, gilded faucets, Persian rugs, marble..." Again, we are reminded of the words of Carolina Maria de Jesus: "The neighbors with brick houses [*casas de alvenaria*] regard the *favelados* with repugnance. I know their hateful stares are because they don't want a *favela* here. A *favela* ruins the neighborhood. They are disgusted with poverty. They forget that at death everyone becomes poor" (1960, 56).

In contrast to the well-built homes, houses with straw roofs, made with clay, mud and sticks, wood, or cardboard—"vegetable houses" to use the Freyre's designation—characterize the poverty of a home and its residents. The smaller, poorly constructed, and unfinished houses of poor neighborhoods are differentiated by the materials with which they are made and by the way in which their residents live and govern them.

## 1. The House as a Moral Abode

The administration of each dwelling reveals the moral importance of the system, typified by a basic opposition of the Brazilian social universe—that between *sujo* (dirty) and *limpo* (clean).<sup>15</sup>

This traditional polarity is important in the structure of society. As anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) has demonstrated, the 'dirty' would be anything (objects, thoughts, words, actions) that are out of place. Housewives' meticulous care of their bathrooms, kitchens, and living rooms is well known in Brazil. Moreover, clean is a metaphor for moral transparency, probity, confidence, honesty, trust and, expressively, the absence of money. Those who are *limpo* (clean) are also *duro* (literally, hard), that is, 'broke' and 'poor.'

In the absence of a house that readily conveys wealth or social superiority by its location, the materials used for its construction, or the objects that decorate it, the poor use ideas of purity as compensation to establish social differentiation among themselves. For one perceptive informant from Vila Ideal, the *quintal* ('backyard,' or the space behind the house) is particularly revealing. In his opinion, a dirty *quintal* indicates "not a financially, but a spiritually [morally] poor person." According to his theory, undoubtedly shared by Brazilians of all social segments:

The house may be humble, but if it has a clean *quintal* you're going to enter a healthy home, a clean home, a home where you can ask for a glass of water and know whether or not the glass has been washed. Therefore, wealth is not in the money. I know people who are rich in money but who are filthy pigs in whose home I wouldn't accept a glass of water.

The opposition dirty/clean serves as a differentiating index of the domestic world, particularly of the conduct of women who, as many researchers have indicated, are the administrators of their homes (for example, Alvim 1979; Caldeira 1984, 1986; Macedo 1979; Pereira 1979; Sarti 1985; Woortman 1987; Zaluar 1985). As 'wives,' 'mothers,' and *donas da casa* ('housewives,' or literally rulers, mistresses, owners of the house), they have the moral obligation to take care of their *lar* (home), especially cleaning and ordering its utensils, furniture, tasks, and objects in general.

Cleaning is also organized hierarchically, since a housewife can hire the services of another woman, her employee or maid who will take care of the dirtiest tasks, thus making the

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<sup>15</sup> This opposition operates at all social levels. In an original study, Marie-Ghislaine Stoffels has shown that the beggars and shanty residents of São Paulo classify their more aggressive peers as 'dogs,' 'filthy,' and 'garbage' (Stoffels 1977, 153). In her book, Carolina Maria de Jesus always feels dirty. In one telling passage, when she finally is able to publish her book, she exclaims: "They promised me that tomorrow I will appear in the *Diário da Noite*. I am so happy! It seems that I was dirty and now they are washing it" (1960, 165).

hiring woman a *patroa* (boss). The space of the house is organized by woman, which is why a husband, in a hierarchical inversion, may refer to his spouse as 'my *patroa*.'

Among the poor the dichotomy dirty/clean, is fundamental. As Pereira (1979, 183) has noted, this dichotomy marks "the distinction between workers (dirty) and the upper class (clean), just as it differentiates them from the 'miserable,' the '*favelados*,' and the 'beggars.'" All these endless domestic tasks for which women are responsible are marked by an obsession with cleanliness. Such activities include: cleaning and pressing clothes; educating and taking care of children; planning meals, cooking, and serving the food;<sup>16</sup> managing the family income, saving financial resources; mediating domestic conflicts (especially between the husband/father and children and among siblings); taking care of household utensils and the home itself; establishing and overseeing the moral limits of the home and its network of social relations, determining who shall visit the house; reminding family members of birthdays and taking care of the festivities; nurturing those reciprocal links between the family and its relatives, neighbors, and friends; caring for the sick; and offering support to family members who have physical or mental problems, such as alcoholism which frequently afflicts men of the lower classes (Alvim 1979; Caldeira 1984; Macedo 1979; Neves 1985; Sarti 1985; Zaluar 1985).

This means that one cannot fully understand the realm of domestic labor in Brazil without discussing its cultural foundations. The housewife might be seen as the *mulher da casa* (woman of the house) as opposed to the *mulher da rua e da vida* (woman of the street). Women of the house are ideally encompassed by domestic life and by the moral authority of the father, brother, and husband to whom they give their domestic services. Carelessness with the home and domestic upkeep, like exaggerated preoccupation with personal appearance and notorious egoism, characterizes 'whores' or 'tramps' whose lifestyles are dominated by laziness.

I believe that it is the relational bent of Brazilian culture that explains the preoccupation with cleanliness (and filth) as a structuring opposition in the Brazilian cosmology. Filth is equated with the world of the street, exploitation, and the bewildering laws of work-life. Cleanliness, on the other hand, is associated with the house, with maternity, and with domestic services which are more sacred because they are not done for money but out of love and a sense of duty. In this context, men are seen as the providers, workers, and legitimate mediators between the house and the street; while the women are associated with the internal order of the house.

Among both poor and rich, there is a fundamental and direct relationship between the residents and their houses. The house encompasses and is encompassed by the social

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<sup>16</sup> In Brazil, the symbolism associated with the realm of food is deeply engrained and basic. I have noted elsewhere (DaMatta 1991b [1985]) that this sphere is entirely under the control of women who, as housewives (and *patroas*), decide what will be eaten and how, where, and frequently with whom the daily or festive meals will be shared. For more on this fascinating topic see Pereira (1979, 159) and Zaluar (1985, 105).

personality of its inhabitants, a basic element of their social identity (Sarti 1985). This intimate relationship between resident and house helps to illuminate the general perception among Brazilians of residents of poor neighborhoods and *favelas* as dislocated, ignorant country bumpkins, criminals and outcasts (Leeds and Leeds 1977; Zaluar 1985; and, especially, Perlman 1981). It is as if the ugly appearance of the neighborhood corresponded to a disorganization of the homes.

Thus, in all of the interviews we found a surprising degree of satisfaction with their own homes among our informants. Many informants revealed that they did not like their neighborhoods or their streets but liked their homes. Others praised the beauty of their houses or openly admitted that they lived in “a poor and humble house, but one which is fine for living.” As if the house, more than a profession, social class, neighborhood or city, were the basis of social identity and classification.<sup>17</sup>

Aside from practical and utilitarian considerations—a good capital investment and the repository of life savings—a house is above all a moral asset. A house concretely exemplifies the success of a family in its social segment and in the eyes of society in general. Owning a house (*ter casa própria*) is a sign that, despite everything, the person built something and is the ruler of his/her own destiny. Those who own a house have a place ‘where they can drop dead,’ as the saying goes!

There is, thus, a significant cultural equation between the physical construction of a home and the social construction of its residents.

## 2. Society as a House

It is evident that society is permeated by the values discussed above. In fact, as I have already noted, they form a sort of skeleton of the Brazilian system. The force of this tradition permits us to say that the house can be taken an ideal for (and of) Brazilian society. The values born in the house usually take shape as a hierarchical relationship whose paradigms are the links between parents and children, the opposition between clean and dirty, and the position of the woman as the center of the home. They also articulate interpretations of the society, expressing and manifesting a world view endowed with surprisingly anti-individualist, anti-utilitarian, antimarket—in sum antimodern—aspects.

This perception of society, inspired by the house, orients the cultural perceptions of the urban poor. Indeed, poor people utilize this code more overtly and often than rich people, thus

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<sup>17</sup> In this respect, Zaluar suggests that because of the chronic occupational instability that afflicts everyone from construction workers to street vendors, only in their homes do they enjoy a positive social identity (Zaluar 1985, 62).



articulating their lives by way of ancient ideals of reciprocity and hierarchy. Our modern world view tends to repress and forget these ideals, even though they are present everywhere in many societies, in competition with the more overt and familiar, egalitarian, individualist, and market-oriented values.

Seen from the outside, poverty obviously implies physical-economic privation. From the inside, however, it reveals a world in which social relationships have more weight than the economic or bureaucratic institutions that operate in the city and in the street.

Hierarchy occupies a central position in the discourse of the urban poor. Although the poor are forced to operate within a system where the autonomous individual is the subject of written laws, their view of society privileges the moral interconnections among people. In this universe, to give, to receive, and to reciprocate is a fundamental structural principle. Next to this logic of reciprocity, values such as hospitality, revenge, shame, honor, respect, deference, honesty, personal loyalty, and debt are equally important.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. A World of Cultural Compensations

These values are manifested in various ways and on many levels. Particularly notable is the way in which an informant's low social position is compensated by considering the fact that though he or she is poor and may be in bad economic shape, there are people who are poorer or more miserable than he/she is. By situating the social world on a hierarchical axis, informants can either look up or down. Looking up induces either conformity or revolt. Looking down confirms the fact that there are people in worse situations. Following a line of reasoning that reproduces medieval conceptions, the Brazilian urban poor include several categories of people in this relatively inferior condition. Thus, they mention the 'miserable' who live in the street, the infirm and crippled, those who 'live in the gutter' (Caldeira 1984, 156), those who live 'under the bridge,'<sup>19</sup> those who are mentally ill or incapacitated (Cardoso 1978), those who live in shelters

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<sup>18</sup> The basic study of reciprocity is the classical book by Marcel Mauss on gift-giving (1974), which refers to tribal, traditional, and modern forms of reciprocity. For one of the few studies of the urban poor with an important discussion concerning reciprocity and trust, see Lomnitz (1977, chapter 9). In a series of classic and polemical studies, Oscar Lewis (1959, 1966, 1969) called attention to a 'culture of poverty' which revealed a morality similar to the one discussed here. However, we do not wish to imply that this behavior is homogeneous, exclusive and reified, as Lewis's concept of culture suggests. For exemplary studies of this morality in the case of Brazil, see Woortman (1987), Sarti (1992 and 1993b), and Lanna (forthcoming). These studies confirm the themes I have been developing since the 1970s. Also see the essay by Durham (1978) which treats the migration and persistence of these values in the city.

<sup>19</sup> Speaking of 'living under a bridge,' one of our informants told us that she had met a woman on the bus who lived under a bridge in the center of the city. Full of curiosity, our informant asked: "Isn't it awful living under a bridge?" The answer was: "Of course not! It's better than living on the periphery." The prestige of living downtown may compensate for the type of home. Following the same logic, our informant declared that she preferred to live in her neighborhood on

for beggars and indigents (Jesus 1960, 21), those who 'don't have a place to fall dead,' and those who have nothing (*nem eira nem beira, nem ramo de figueira*).

The continuity with medieval images of the poor has been conspicuously ignored by researchers of the urban poor in Brazil and Latin America who simply do not pay due attention to cultural and historical values as part of the lives of the poor populations they study. Indeed, fascinated by the study of formal institutions or by questions of change (and development), these studies are usually more preoccupied with denouncing the living conditions of the poor or describing the poor as a segment excluded by the capitalist market than with showing that they are an intrinsic part of a historical tradition and a cultural system. Thus, if the urban poor react to some problem, the reaction is taken to be an index of some social or political transformation, never as a revelation of certain culturally defined styles. Because of this bias, these researchers have not perceived how the ideas of employment, labor, poverty, the state and politics are filtered and redefined by local traditions and their respective relational values. If they had done so—as I am doing here—they would realize that these values continue to give meaning to the universe of the house as much as the market; the personalized boss or *patrão* as much as the modern boss; and the ties of loyalty and hierarchy as much as the 'outside' world of the 'city' with its automatism and impersonality, competition and individualism.

In this sense, the categories 'rich' and 'poor' obviously define a terrible contrast but they cannot be translated into absolute states, materialized in actual, compartmentalized, and mutually exclusive social groups. In fact, the general perception found in the research was that 'poor' neighborhoods (above all the neighborhoods where the informants live and which they take as the main reference for their discourse) are not populated exclusively by poor or rich people. The urban space is marked by residential areas that oscillate ambiguously, being 'more-or-less rich' and/or 'more-or-less poor' according to the purpose and the context of the discourse. Contrary to the modern conception which traces precise and neat 'baselines' for poverty and interprets social life through mutually exclusive categories—rich/poor, black/white, national/foreign—the urban poor of São Paulo tend to represent themselves and the rich who govern and exploit them in a relational and contextual mode. In the important social reflection of one informant from Vila Ideal:

To be poor is awful, but the good thing about being poor is that you have freedom. The poor person is free, nothing bothers him. Only sickness, but aside from this nothing bothers him. Now, let's think about a situation... You buy a refrigerator and you begin to worry. My God, one day I won't have any money. For everything that you buy for the house, you worry about how to pay. When that day comes, you use the money to pay, but have no money for bread. Something is always missing for the poor. So poverty is awful because of this,

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the outskirts. She explained: "Here, nobody bothers me! Under the bridge I would be constantly invaded by others. It's better here where we do as we please."

but it offers freedom... Who is going to steal from the poor? The thief who steals from the poor just comes away feeling shock, because there is nothing to steal...

Poverty enforces modesty in consumption but, in compensation, confers freedom. Wealth, on the other hand, allows one to enjoy everything but, by the same token, forces rich people to hide from thieves. As the informant said during the interview, this is particularly true if the person is both rich and famous like Silvio Santos, a well-known television host and owner of an important network that carries his name. Another informant, this time a *favelado*, adopting a typically compensatory point of view declared; "Sometimes there are rich people who are sicker than I who am poor!"

Because the hierarchical logic renders social categories in terms of gradations and scales, there are the rich but there are also the super-rich—or *podre-de-rico* (the rotten-stinking rich). According to our informants, these latter are the 'powerful rich,' the *marajás* (Brazilian word for the Hindu *maharajah*), the 'fat bankers,' the *tubarões* (business sharks), and the 'potentates.' These rich people differ from the 'common rich' in the quantity of money they have and also in the type of power they amass and manipulate. *Rico-poderoso* (the rich and powerful) expresses the frequent equation between money and political power, when someone is elected or appointed to an important public position. 'Business shark' refers to the person who became wealthy through commerce or industry. One informant, Mr. Rubens, 55 years old and owner of a small printing press, was fascinated with 'big bankers' and those he called 'rich potentates' who, as he understood, "could do as they pleased." There are also, as Caldeira has shown, the *rico-bom* (the good rich)—those who show "more understanding when a person is in need...[and] in critical moments, they help" (1984, 158). There are also *os mais ou menos ricos* (the more or less rich), who do not *manda* (exercise power) (Caldeira 1984, 160).

Similarly, the poor see themselves through a framework replete with nuances and gradations, extending from the poor to the 'beggar,' the 'miserable,' the 'poor of the poor,' or the *pobres de tudo* (the poor in every way) (Caldeira 1984, 160). This style of representation allows for, among other things, the consolidation and legitimation of social distances as well as distinctions among those who would be economic equals. A resident of a *favela* on the periphery of São Paulo near Vila Ideal stated:

The poor do not have anything, like me. But there is the humble poor man [*o pobre humilde*] who has nothing but always shares a little with those who are even poorer. And there is the proud poor man [*o pobre orgulhoso*] who has nothing in life but thinks that he is a master of himself and a master of everything. You see, however, that he really has nothing. He lives here, but he turns away and doesn't greet you. This is the proud poor man who thinks that he doesn't need you. The humble poor man, on the other hand, always contributes the little he has...

Another resident of the periphery, said:

If you want to see something terrible, look at a poor man who got rich. He doesn't care for anyone, not even his poor relatives.

Another told us:

There are poor people here who I would never vote for. They pose as rich but in fact they don't have anything. They are the *pobre fresco* [the aristocratic and pretentious poor] who look at you and turn up their faces pretending that they don't know you.

And another:

Rich people have that arrogance, that arrogance to say: "I have money! The poor don't." But there are a lot of poor who are as arrogant as the rich.

This hierarchical representation suggests that the moral dimension has not lost its importance in Brazilian society. Thus, despite the tremendous weight of social classification by the economic dimension, moral categorization continues to operate. That is why it is legitimate for the poor to morally reject their peers who are arrogant and pose as superior. This not only shows the negative position of such values as individualism (read here as mere egoism) but also reveals the importance of traditional values such as humility and loyalty to relatives and friends among the urban poor.

The poor and the rich, as our informants' discourses revealed, define themselves not only by their material conditions of existence but also by means of a moral classification. Hence, the positive presence in this ideological universe of the 'humble poor' in opposition and compensation to the negative presence of the 'proud poor'—poor who got rich and became unbearably immodest and haughty. As one informant stated, the latter are the "*pobre besta* (the self-conceited and foolish poor) who are full of shit and think they are royalty just because they achieved something."

In this context, it is worth remember what another informant said in trying to define what makes a 'good person':

There are ugly people who have good hearts. Just because of an ugly face, you miss seeing a good heart. Some people might be pretty, but where are their hearts? Sometimes handsome folks are gossipers and cheats.

This discourse reveals a noncapitalist, antimarket code that compensates for the absence of social mobility. This relational code associates upward social mobility and planned work with egoism and sin, thus questioning the positive, modern meaning of material success. While



upward mobility is synonymous with personal success, it also is a motive for people to eventually assume despicable moral attitudes. The one who 'gets rich' tends to think more of himself than of others, which causes him to ignore everyone, 'even his own poor relatives.' This makes him a 'stuck-up' creature who embraces the logic of money and individualism (here clearly interpreted as egoism) in place of the positive values of family hierarchy, which should be always honored.

#### 4. Reciprocity

Reciprocity is a basic principle in the construction of the social universe of the urban poor in Brazil. It orders the home, the family, and the neighborhood. While in the house it is modulated by 'blood' ties and unquestionable family obligations, in the realm of the 'street' and of the neighborhood, these moral principles do not have the same force. A neighborhood of the periphery includes people with diverse origins, professions, formative experiences, and life projects. The peripheral zones bring together long-time and successful residents—people who have already completed an urban trajectory from migration to total adjustment to city life—with recently arrived migrants who still have not assimilated the set of values, institutions, and signs of the urban world.

In the absence of common external values and explicit norms that could orient the lives of new residents, they turn to the only available codes for social articulation—the traditional codes. This explains the notable preoccupation with the morality of the neighbors, the incessant gossip, and the cases of envy, which are so often cited by informants of peripheral neighborhoods. Hostility is projected onto neighbors in the attempt to exercise control over them, thus pressuring them into conforming to a set of common values, which would increase the social cohesion of the group and provide some people with authority and power.

Since such groups do not articulate themselves through explicit juridical norms, neighbors are constantly complaining about the behavior of children, the volume of the television or stereo, the loud conversations at all hours, and even the aroma from the kitchen. Hidden complaints are constant among neighbors. The potential for open conflict is proportional to the degree of juridical, political, social, and economic parity. Most of the cases of conflict, envy, gossip, and 'evil eye' that we studied involved neighbors as main protagonists. Social equality seems to complicate problems, precisely because it attests to the absence of a traditional authority incarnated in a concrete person, a local *patrão*, and not in an abstract, universal law internalized within each individual. This situation is aggravated by the fact that the 'peripheries' are usually conceived in terms of the worst stereotypes and negative expectations. I sensed that when our informants talked about 'security,' a real obsession for many who were interviewed, they were above all expressing the ambivalence of this kind of absolute, substantive equality. In the

absence of public authorities, 'equality' meant that the use of force could be an important (and frequent) resource for resolving conflicts and differences of opinion.

In this sense, the perception of disorder, strife, and incessant struggle, which many residents cite as basic elements of their existence, is directly related to the absence of ties of traditional patronage and obedience. This looked like a social world without traditional *patrões* and also without modern mechanisms of social control such as the respect for universalistic rules valid for all. Indeed, we observed that the lower on the residential scale, the greater the potential for radical equality and the higher the number of open physical conflicts. Going up the social scale, from the *favela* to the more urbanized zones of Vila Ideal, we noticed the outlines of a social hierarchy and, thus, of less conflict. In a certain region of Vila Ideal where we worked, two shopkeepers exercised important stabilizing functions. *Patrões* who extended personal, elastic credit to two large vicinities, they formed chains of moral obligations which helped to establish ties of solidarity among the neighbors through traditional patronage. Thus, debt and flexible credit, more than mere impersonal financial trust, recreated a familiar social fabric, even within an immense urban periphery. Without doubt, this related to the perception among residents that their streets were 'good' and 'calm.'

Alongside these elements, patronage sponsored by political parties (especially the Workers' Party—PT) and factions of the Catholic Church constitute an important aspect of traditional social organization. This role can also be taken by well-organized criminals such as drug dealers. Like the local merchants, these actors help to articulate the local rules within a context of local radical equality. Thus, the local leaders of parties or institutions (a day care center, health center, school, or church) also tend to be important elements of social organization. With the practice of reciprocity, they reestablish the centers of traditional hierarchy within a 'modern' context, sometimes using the rhetoric of political reform or even of revolution.

The situation contrasts with that of the *favela*, where we found the common denominator was fighting, drunkenness, matrimonial scandal, and the abuse of wives and children. All of this aggravated by the intolerable lack of privacy and physical space between what the residents called, significantly, 'shacks,' not 'houses.' It was as if the 'shack' were a proto-residence which would correspond on the political level to an embryonic form of citizenship. This situation, by the way, constitutes a great part of Carolina Maria de Jesus' descriptions of daily routine, rife with all kinds of conflict. I believe that it is this radical equality forced by poverty, in addition to the total absence of traditional or modern authority, that made her observe: "Every year the *favelados* make bonfires. But instead of looking for firewood, they steal it from each other. They go into the yards and carry off the wood of other residents. I had a rafter which they took to burn. I don't know why the *favelados* are so bad" (1960, 71). Later she exclaims: "I'm so tired of fights. There are so many fights in the *favela*!" (176). And at another point she affirms with great bitterness and

remarkable sociological perception: “The only thing that doesn’t exist in the *favela* is solidarity” (17).

Similarly, one unemployed male informant bitterly stated:

Here in the neighborhood there is no community. In fact, there is a lot of disunity here. Every election year politicians starts this business of endless meetings. What a sham! The whole year goes by and only when the elections are coming do they start with the meetings talking about the neighborhood and the ‘community.’

This helps us to understand the preoccupation among the urban poor with their ‘neighbor-friends’—those who, besides sharing the same life situation, are intertwined in networks of reciprocity. Through these links ‘neighbor-friends’ exchange mutual aid, resolve crises, celebrate birthdays and marriages and, especially, share information about the urban world in general. Especially critical are the links with ‘important’ or ‘prestigious’ people (categories that also include researchers) who can be crucial contacts when a relative needs medical help, when one needs an official document, or when one is looking for a job. Friends of friends, according to this relational logic, are also friends. And neighbors are always the potential intermediaries. One informant from Vila Ideal said: “I have to become friends with people to know what kind of people we’re going to live next to and what kind of neighbors we’re going to have.” And according to another: “The boss can help in cases of necessity, when they are nice. I had a female boss who took me to the doctor, helped me with credit problems and with a school whose director was really stuck up.”

The awareness and the certainty that without personal relations the world becomes a much more difficult place to live in causes people to take great care to foster relationships with family, friends, and benefactors. In fact, contrary to the opinion of some sociologists, these relationships do not diminish when rural people migrate to the city but, rather, are increasingly reinforced. Among the urban poor there is a generalized awareness that ties of kinship and friendship constitute invaluable social capital.

## 5. The House and the Religious Universe

Another sphere in which mutuality, reciprocity, and hierarchy emerge as essential elements is the realm of ‘popular religions,’ which dominate these marginal urban areas. Indeed, in Brazil the field of popular religion is significantly organized into ‘houses’ and *terreiros* (sacred pieces of land and space) and managed by ‘families of the saint,’ not by formal and relatively impersonal associations, congregations, or parties.

Afro-Brazilian religions, such as *Candomblé* and *Umbanda*, as well as variants of Pentecostal Protestantism play central roles in these poor marginal communities. As many researchers have shown, these are religions founded on charisma, spirit possession, the moral value of the person, and on the crucial mediation between this and the other world.

The focus of their moral message is the old golden rule 'give in order to receive,' which is institutionalized as dogma within the unwritten theology of these belief systems. In the context of an urban world lacking civic articulation, permeated by political factionalism, and rife with government corruption and inefficiency, this dogma reconstructs on the spiritual level the old forms of reciprocity found in the realm of the house. Therefore, the belief in a moral universe where everyone is connected is reaffirmed in the realm of the supernatural. Thus, everyone is able to reach out morally to others through magic and make good or bad happen in their lives.

As in the domain of the house and the family, these religions emphasize charity, poverty, submission, loyalty, and humility. They go out of their way to explain the origin not only of poverty but also of suffering. It is also significant that their authority relies on charisma and possession—when a god or spirit enters the body and commands it. Note that these are religions that highlight the relationship of the follower with his/her guardian spirits or saints. It is, thus, the link that is the subject and the center of this religious ideology. In Afro-Brazilian religiosity it is the connection that is emphasized and said to cause things to happen, not the autonomous (and fully responsible) individual.

On the religious level, a system of spiritual (or moral) kinship ties is recreated. In reproducing a sort of ideal house, these religious groups give material assistance to the poor and needy, cure physical ills, and alleviate suffering. In this way, they foster feelings of hope, faith, resignation, and tolerance.<sup>20</sup>

On a general level, reciprocity brings to the surface the idea of dignity, obligation, and respect. These notions undoubtedly provide a moral counterweight to extreme urban solitude and exploitation.

## 6. On the Mutuality between Rich and Poor

A surprising number of stated opinions confirm that the rich and the poor are deeply related, forming a hierarchical duality. This hierarchy, based on reciprocal obligation and a permanent moral link, constitutes a modern-day set of ideas that, I repeat, harks back to forgotten medieval doctrines.

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<sup>20</sup> See especially Bastide (1960), Birman (1983), Brandão (1980), Brown (1986), Camargo (1961), Cavalcanti (1983), Maggie (1975), and Vogel, Mello, and Barroso (1993). Also see my evaluation of this topic in DaMatta (1992).



According to these doctrines, as we saw in section 1, the opposition between the poor and the rich did not imply an effort to eliminate the poor but, rather, reaffirmed their presence as a structural element that gave meaning to the very idea of wealth.

When we asked informants whether the rich have an obligation to the poor, we obtained a variety of responses which suggested both the traditional idea of complementary mutuality between the rich and the poor and the modern idea that the rich and the poor are relatively independent of each other.

Some informants spoke unequivocally of the obligation between rich and poor people. Irrespective of their occupations, genders, and ages, they similarly outlined the obligations of the rich as: a) offering small jobs or employment; b) helping 'in general'—that is, providing opportunities, houses and, of course, work; c) giving food and clothes, and looking out for those who have little. In exchange, the poor should reciprocate, having, as one informant said, "the obligation to work for the rich."<sup>21</sup>

Alongside these opinions, there is a modern discourse which recognizes that there ought to be 'respect' between the rich and the poor but that there really is no obligation between them. On the contrary, the rich owe the poor. Thus, one informant suggested that we shouldn't speak of 'obligation,' but rather, that "the rich shouldn't even exist!" Along these same lines, another informant stated that there were "poor people because the white-collared rich don't do anything for the poor. They should do something, for example: put an end to unemployment." On the other hand, another said, "it is not necessary to be rich to help a poor person."

Despite these modern opinions, which see the existence of poor and rich people as a phenomenon dictated by the market and by power, the traditional discourse was still predominant. One informant said:

The poor depend on the rich and the rich depend on the poor. If the poor don't have the means to go on, whose door are they going to knock on? On the rich man's door. And the rich need the poor to work for them. That's my point of view. Only at times the rich depend more on the poor than the poor on the rich. Just because the rich want luxury (chauffeurs, servants, washerwomen, gardeners), they think that the poor should be their slaves. But this is not how they see it. The rich don't know how to work, they only know how to depend on the poor.

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<sup>21</sup> Tereza Caldeira shows a similar opinion in her book when one of her informants says: "I don't believe that the rich live independent of the poor; *they live at the expense of the poor...* Because how are the factories, these establishments going to survive...without the poor, the worker, how is it that they are going to live? They don't have any other way... The poor also need the rich, yes indeed, because without the rich, they also don't live, because they lack the means..." (1984, 152).

Here, the informant—Mr. Roberval, 35, a cleaner and painter—not only admits the reciprocity between the poor and the rich but produces a familiar hierarchical inversion<sup>22</sup> when he affirms that, in many situations, it is the rich, in fact, who depend on the poor. On the other hand, his judgment of the rich is not political or economic but, rather, moral. The rich are guilty of ambition (when they want everything, especially luxury) and abuse when they think that the poor people who might eventually be their employees are actually their slaves. Besides this, the rich don't know how to work, another element of the traditional vision.

There are also opinions that affirm that the difference between the rich and the poor will never end, because there can never be a society of 'rich people,' as envisioned—for example—by the American Dream of building an affluent society. One informant said:

It will never happen! Never will everyone be either rich or poor [that is to say, equal], no! Because it won't work that way. If it happened, we would have a war. With everyone rich, there won't be any poor people to take care of them, and with everyone poor, the rich people will kill themselves because they aren't capable of being poor. Because those who are born in a golden cradle would not let themselves fall like that! No way!

And another:

During these centuries and the centuries to come [the difference between the poor and the rich] will remain because didn't God send his son to earth to be with the poor? There's that saying: 'A bull will pass through the eye of a needle before a rich man is saved.' In other words, God loves the poor more because they also suffer. They suffer, poor things!

To probe more into this view, we asked the question: Will poverty end one day?

This provoked the following responses:

No! Historically, societies have always been made of unequal groups. Rich and poor. At the most we would be able to reduce the number of poor people.

I don't believe so. Because there will always be people who step on others. Those who are wealthier may even help the poor, but they do this to prove their power.

No. The rich are born in golden cradles. And the poor are always poor. Only the lottery could change their situation. Labor doesn't make anybody rich.

No, because [inequality] is inherent to man. A balance is difficult because the differences are eternal...

No. Life conditions vary and are heterogeneous for human beings.

No. Because this is the law of life. It was always like this. Some with a lot and others with nothing. Those who have a lot will have more every day; and nobody helps the poor.

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<sup>22</sup> We saw this before when it was said that the rich lack freedom, or when it was affirmed that "wealth doesn't bring happiness." In both cases, hierarchical inversion compensates, as in carnival and many popular festivities.

Because people are egotistical. People want to get ahead. They don't know that in their rush to get ahead they hurt the others.

Because society is divided. There's no way.

No. Because every day another slick guy comes along to swindle. And this causes the powerful class to grow and steal more from the poor and defenseless.

In addition to these traditional opinions, which emphasize the complementary duality between poverty and wealth, we also heard responses that suggested change and expressed a modern view of the problem.

Depending on the system, yes and no! [Inequality] might end if there were changes in the distribution of income.

No. The tendency is to increase poverty with everything so expensive.

No, because those who govern don't think of the poor, they only think of themselves.

No! If they continue to govern this way, the tendency will be to get worse.

Perhaps in the future societies will be able to balance the accumulation of wealth. But hierarchies will always exist.

What is surprising in such opinions is their antimarket orientation. Hearing them, I sometimes had the sensation that I was before a side of Brazilian society that I wanted to forget. The fact is that such a discourse oscillates between a modern notion of equality based on the law, on political rights, on the market, and on the individual as a citizen, and on an ideology of reciprocity and resignation. It is a discourse of people who evidently 'know their place,' are very careful when calling for change, and always know with whom they are speaking. Of course, they might indulge in an outraged and resentful discourse, especially when the theme is political and modern and they are encouraged by the white cosmopolitan interviewer. But deep down, when the conversation leads to more profound questions about social difference, the traditional orientation invariably emerges.

## **V. The Street as a Cultural System**

In Brazil, the 'street' is more than a functional thoroughfare for transportation and communication within the urban space. Besides a practical means for getting around, the street refers to a social domain with precise symbolic or cultural characteristics. It is, as my eminent colleague, Clifford Geertz would say, a cultural system.

## 1. The Domain of the Street: Generalities

Generally, the street is semantically associated with the 'city' or with the *centro da cidade* (downtown). As such, it is seen as a fascinating area, as a place of dream and fantasy, as a complete, varied, dynamic, and 'hopping' world. For some, like Carolina Maria de Jesus, the street is a marvelous space: "When I go to the city [*centro da cidade*], I have the impression that I am in paradise. I find it sublime to see those women and children so well-dressed. This is so different from the *favela*" (1960, 84).

The street is also the site of leisure and 'night life,' with its pleasures, its luxuries, and its mysteries. It is the repository of history, where churches, palaces, squares, market place, and great commercial establishments are located.

Above all, the street is a place of brutal anonymity. It is a realm governed by individualism, competition, and destructive labor. Besides this, the street is dominated by all kinds of outcasts and by the official authorities who control the legitimate use of violence and oppression. The street is the place of work, market, money, and of all kinds of opportunities. It is also the sphere of 'politics' which moves history and makes things happen. If the world of the house doesn't need written laws, in the world of the street everything is written and explicit: from the stop lights that guide the traffic of automobiles to the Constitution; from the indispensable *carteira de trabalho* (work card) to labor contracts. In the house, the word is trusted; in the street, what counts is the guarantor and the signature legitimized in the *cartórios*.<sup>23</sup>

The 'state' and the 'market' are two elements of the world of the street that challenge the comprehension and good sense of our informants. For these people, the state and the market are mysterious institutions which probably represent the worst of the modern world. The 'state,' after all, emerges by way of 'politicians,' 'authorities' and 'civil servants,' who for the urban poor are generally represented as inhuman, uninterested, arrogant, and corrupt. As one informant from Vila Ideal said: "If the government had serious policies and politicians, who didn't always think of lining their pockets and getting the goods for themselves, Brazil would not need the first, second, or third worlds. Brazil wouldn't need anyone, it would be independent!"

The market, in its turn, appears characterized by a proverbial devaluation of labor and a notorious and unbearable price law that fosters, as one person said to me: "the high cost of

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<sup>23</sup> In Brazil, *cartórios* are very old organs of social legitimation, dating from the colonial period. Their responsibilities include signature recognition for official documents, proof of property ownership, filiation, crimes, and other basic facts of social life which, in Brazilian society, must be attested by a third party—in this case, by the *cartórios*. Political scientist Hélio Jaguaribe coined the expression "Estado cartorial" to define the peculiar political and social roles of the Brazilian bureaucracy. For a modern analysis of *cartórios* in Brazilian political life, see Araújo (1982).



living, and all kinds of *negociatas*, ill-intended business, and inflation.” Both the state and the market undermine the usual links of patronage that are part of the traditional world view.

## 2. The Street, the State, and Civic Culture

All of this brings me to an important point. In the street, the poor fear not just criminals but also the law—the written universal norms that organize the state. I call this apparatus ‘civic culture’ since, besides encompassing institutions and specific social policies, it organizes the way in which the state is manifested in Brazil. This cultural code is defined by many characteristics, but the urban poor emphasize its impersonal ways, its incoherence, its legalism, and its lack of regard for the ‘ignorant,’ the ‘humble,’ and the ‘destitute.’

Ultimately, it is a state that always says ‘can’t do!’ through the mouth of an arrogant civil servant who, as we will see, is interested in anything but attending to the needs of a citizen.

Just like the liberalism that was adapted to conditions imposed by the national bourgeoisie who wanted liberty with slavery and a risk-free, state-subsidized market, the Brazilian state apparatus was domesticated. In the modern world the state is ideally founded on the creed of equality, as a provider of services, whose efficacy is measured by its autonomy and by its interest in its contributors—the ‘taxpayers.’ However, in Brazil the state developed in association with oligarchic interests and remains harnessed to dominant groups. Thus, the Brazilian state paradoxically converts the principle of equality before the law into a sign of subordination. And the poor, more than anyone else, have concrete and personal experience of this.

In this respect, one informant referred to the relationship between the ‘people’ and the ‘government,’ vehemently underlining the following:

The Brazilian people are stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid, three times! Because the government lies down and rolls over the people and nobody takes action. For this reason Brazil is shitty, excuse the term. The Brazilian accepts everything.

Along the same lines, another informant declared:

Brazil is doing fine, but the government ruined everything because lately there’s a lot of unemployment, high cost of living, inflation, and a lot of sickness. I think that Brazil, thanks to the ‘government,’ is going backward.

But what are the principal forms of manifestation of this civic culture? In other words, how is the street seen by the urban poor in Brazil?

### 3. The Street and the Concrete Manifestations of the State

The urban poor we studied do not speak of the state and the market in an all inclusive, theoretical fashion but rather of the visible hand of the public administration and about the nasty side of the structure of production. Hence, the poor always talk about the *o governo* (meaning the actual concrete dimension of the state machine) and the *políticos*—the politicians and functionaries who control it.

It is precisely this personalism that, for them, quite correctly explains the nepotism and the disregard for the law among governing leaders. One quite politicized male informant who supported the PT said of the left-wing mayor from that party, who had promised an ideological and 'clean' administration: "Erundina didn't appoint her brother only because he had already died."

Another informant said that in Brazil, nobody obeys the law because, given social distinctions and an intricate legal system designed not to punish anyone, the people do not regard the law as a force to be obeyed. Therefore, the Brazilian people

were not taught to obey the law. People don't obey any laws. Being able to trick the law, the Brazilian finds pleasure in getting around it, in paying bribes, in corruption. Thanks to the lack of punishment, the law is disregarded, because it is not carried out. This has a long history. Brazil was colonized by bandits and prostitutes who were expelled from Portugal. Do you want to go to jail or to Brazil? I'll go to Brazil! It started there. Brazil started already as a lie.

The informant knew through experience that the impersonal letter of the law is difficult to apply in a social universe defined by reciprocity and dominated by personal networks that tend to connect everyone with everyone. For this reason, he understood that impunity is a structural feature of the system. He elaborated further:

The solution to this would be to punish the most powerful first, to serve as an example. First, punish the white collar, and you will see that the corruption in government will come to an end. This is not just today, it was always like this. Ibraim Abi-Akel [the ex-minister of justice in General Geisel's government] was denounced, arrested, caught dealing in contraband precious stones and nothing happened. The big guys are unpunishable [*impuníveis*]. But the down-at-heels [*pés de chinelo*], the petty car thieves, they are punished. My stepson is a policeman [in the local Military Police]. He went to work on Wednesday and they stole his car at the subway station... But they already found the car! So these guys know who the bandits are, they know where they live, they grab the thief and bring the victim to the police station, waiting for ever, to register a complaint. Afterwards the bandit goes out the back door and leaves.

I have a brother who also lives here in Vila Ideal. Sometime ago they broke into his house and stole his stereo, while he went to eat Sunday lunch with his wife. He went to the police station and registered a complaint. His brother-in-law is a lawyer, and some weeks later, they caught the thief. They took the thief down

the street past all of the houses and the thief said: "I stole here, I stole there, and I stole a stereo from this house. Later I passed the stereo off to someone else—to a mediator." But the guy who had burgled my brother contracted the brother-in-law of my brother, his very lawyer, to defend him, to get him out of jail. The lawyer said: "I can't, the victim is my brother-in-law!" and passed the case on. Now, he said to his brother, go there and get him out of jail. And how about the stereo? It was with the mediator. But to get back the stolen goods, you have to wait for the guy to be judged. Then you have to file a process, the case goes to court, and you have to wait for the guy to be judged. If he is found guilty, you have to file another process to get your stereo back. Look, if the guy said: "I stole the stereo from the house of so-and-so," and if he said, "the stereo is here," then the guy should go to jail, right?

But the law doesn't work that way. For this reason Brazilians do not obey the law, because the big guys, who should provide the example, are the last to be punished. Am I right or not?

Aside from this legalistic dimension, the state presents itself to the poor through its functionaries, its authorities, and especially its services and policies. Thus, social policies destined to help the poor, like day-care centers, schools, housing, sanitation, health, and food programs (*cesta básica*) reach needy populations through state functionaries who mediate between the political goals of the government and their actual manifestations. Without considering the concrete role of these intermediaries and the way they interact with the public, studies of social policies will be abstract exercises, unable to perceive the real interplay between the state and the poor in Brazil and other Latin American countries.

One point that stands out in this set of informants' discourses is the sensibility everyone demonstrated in relation to the coercive power of the state. They expressed fear of the authorities and, above all, of the formal manifestations of the law. The informants fear legal processes in the form of highly legalistic summons, which characterize the operation of Brazilian justice. As one person said, "once a case begins, it can never be stopped." Furthermore, such legal processes are uncontrollable by the common citizen who barely understands the language and movements within the judicial sphere.

This fear of official authority is not unique to the Brazilian urban poor; here they are joined by other social classes. Yet the fear is sharper among the poor because they do not have access to legal resources to defend themselves against arbitrary authorities nor do they possess the personal and educational resources to understand and negotiate the jumble of laws that can be invoked by authorities in bureaucratic, jural, and civil disputes.

Thus, there is an enormous preoccupation with all sorts of certificates, titles of possession, 'labor cards,' (*carteira de trabalho*) 'identity cards,' and 'voter registration cards' (*título de eleitor*). All of these documents or 'paper heaps' (*papelada*), as all Brazilians know, should be 'in order' or up to date. Sooner or later they will be demanded by some authority or be necessary for obtaining other documents. For in Brazil, documents beget documents in a most

peculiar process of legal reproduction. Thus, a bachelor's diploma affords one the right to a special prison, even when she or he has committed a common crime; a master's diploma from a school 'recognized by the Federal Council of Education' can increase the salary of a municipal, state, or federal civil servant even if he or she is not performing any teaching or research function, and a bachelor's title can generate a promotion in the public service.

By the same token, the possession of a signed 'work card' indicates that the holder works for someone. This produces jural effects, promoting formal obligations on the part of the employer and giving the employee the rights to aid and retirement benefits through the National Social Security Institute (Instituto Nacional de Previdência Social or INPS).

The generative function of legal papers has not been lost to popular jargon in which the word 'documents' serves as a metaphor for the male genitalia. Losing one's documents is as grave as losing one's sexual organs, potency, or identity. This reveals, on the cultural level, the importance of 'documents' and legalism within a society in which the formal manifestation of the state has a critical role as power resource.

In this society, therefore, the state does not just function as a body of collective administration but also confers regulated (or selected) modalities of citizenship. As political scientist Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos (1979, 77) has pointed out, after 1930 the state began to control and confer what he calls a 'certificate of civic birth' through the reorganized Labor Ministry and new labor laws. This legislation allowed the political order to control the market and labor relationships and to institute the state as a crucial mechanism for granting citizenship by way of professional identity and formal professional cards. Through these cards some selected professional activities were regulated, legitimated, and thus made 'official' by the government. As anthropologist Mariza Peirano (1982 and 1986) has shown, in the Brazilian case it is the possession of a document that confers citizenship, not the other way around.

Obviously, this is a kind of power that oppresses the uneducated and semiliterate. Nevertheless, scholars have not perceived this form of oppression and instead have focused their analyses on the formal structure of the state, ignoring the way in which national institutions concretely operate. The poor, however, know better than sophisticated intellectuals. A young bank employee related the following experience:

The other day in the bank where I work as an attendant, a person came in wanting to open a business. I only know that they showed him such a huge 'bureaucracy,' such a large amount of papers he had to read and sign and the amount of income he had to prove, that the guy looked at it all and said, "I've changed my mind, there's no way!" Then the manager said: "I'm very sorry, but there are conditions to every loan."

This oppressive power is legally codified into written law in a language that is invariably complex and full of formulas that are difficult to decode, particularly by the majority of Brazilians



who are illiterate. This power is also based on a ruthlessly anonymous treatment of persons in need of official help and advice, in a society whose structural skeleton is made of intimate, warm personal relations. One of the results of this style of domination is an extreme mistrust of the state, which produces a rebellious reaction and eventually leads to resentment and deep feelings of injustice.

For the urban poor, work cards, voter cards, and income tax forms (CPFs) are the most important documents. The identity card, with the right thumb print, frontal photo, signature, height, weight, color, complete name, parentage, place and date of birth, verifies the bearer's identity in a most 'naturalistic' and precise way as if the identity card were a true copy of its bearer. The voter card affirms the bearer's right to vote, which is important for joining a political party and establishing clientelistic ties with a politician. The work card and the income tax card show that the person has work, an income, a 'boss,' and consequently is a responsible, self-sustaining individual, who should not be confused with a 'marginal.'

It is worth recalling the research done by sociologist Luiz Antonio Machado da Silva, who wrote:

[For the working poor] the most valorized status symbol is the professional card. It indicates that the bearer enjoys a certain degree of job stability... The phrase 'so-and-so is an employee of,' has a connotation of praise and recognition of the others' superiority. This is explained, not only because it is easier to obtain credit...but also it affords protection when stopped by the police. Yet the work card is not the only valued document: any document, no matter how dubious it is—declarations or requests on sealed papers, for example—is highly regarded. All of the 'serious talk' begins or ends with the presentation of documents, many of which have nothing to do with the relevant case. One possible explanation for this is that these documents are a kind of proof of 'intimacy' with people, organs, institutions, and associations. In sum, they are proof of the bearer's 'importance' (Silva 1969, 163–164).

Such documents are always carried by the Brazilian poor in large cities; they would not dare to go out without them, since there are various situations in which the police can detain them in order to verify their 'documentation.'<sup>24</sup> Those who do not possess i.d. or signed work cards have to 'explain' and may be 'persuaded' to go to the police station. This is an age-old custom in Brazilian cities.

One informant of the São Paulo periphery recalled:

The law that we have is this, and I speak based on my experience. I was arrested once because I was without my documents. In this country, if you are arrested and if you have money, you do not go to prison. But if you don't have

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<sup>24</sup> Concerning the insecurity and danger of going out without one's documents, I cite again the telling testimony of Carolina Maria de Jesus: "I was already thinking about going to the Juvenile Correction Center [to look for her daughter, Vera, who had disappeared]... *When I returned to the favela to get my documents to go to the city, Vera was looking for me*" (1960, 56, my italics).

money, you can be sure you will be imprisoned. If you are arrested and taken to the police station, one officer's lie is worth more than your two hundred truths. But this only happens with the poor, because the rich are not imprisoned. I am 53 years old and I have never seen a white collar say "so-and-so got thirty years in jail," never.

The oppressive power of documents shows a profound preoccupation with the control of individuals in a flagrant, symbolic, and unconscious limitation of citizenship. This limitation is paradoxical because it emerges before the authorities of a state that is explicitly constituted by modern notions of civil liberty and equality before the law. However, in this system, as the indignant discourse of the informant who was arrested for not having his documents showed, citizenship is regulated by legal measures that allow for the reestablishment of hierarchy among citizens within the context of a modern egalitarian sphere. These measures include the simple verification of documents in possession and the way in which they recognize, manipulate, and use the documents. Therefore, documentation, legalism, and power are interrelated in a deep cultural equation, an association that affects the constitution of citizenship and the way in which Brazilians utilize the public services of their country.

#### 4. The Conflict between Familiarity and Anonymity

In studying the discourses of the urban poor, it is clear that what most shocks recently arrived migrants who settle in the periphery is not their low wages or miserable living conditions—they experienced these in the rural areas from whence they came—but the fact that they do not know anyone and that nobody helps. It is a transition from a universe of closely related 'persons' to a world of competing 'individuals.' This tremendous compartmentalization and inhumane anonymity is metaphorically expressed by the feeling that the work card, or any formal document, is more important than the actual person in the plenitude of his/her personal integrity.

See, for example, the touching words of one of Tereza Caldeira's informant, in which she complains precisely of the absence of personalized treatment—as a 'somebody,' as I have pointed out before (DaMatta 1991a)—and bitterly speaks of anonymity as a symptom of the absence of codes of reciprocity which characterize her view of humanity:

I think that there are many things wrong with our country that should be fixed. The best repair would be that people *assist us with greater humanity*. Sometimes we go to these places [meaning public offices] and the people think we're outcasts. We feel bad in a certain way, because I think that *outcasts are treated the same way as citizens today... There is little justice* in our country... For the following reason: I'm a nobody in life, I started as a simple peasant and today I'm a simple mason, but I fulfill all of my obligations, my rights, and my duties, and when I go somewhere and *need my rights, nobody attends me like a citizen, they make me feel to be an outcast, they deal with me as if I were an*

outcast. I think that this is a *failure of our justice* (Caldeira 1984, 232—italics in the original).

The crux of this statement is precisely that the system fails to treat the worker as a *person* worthy of equality, respect, and consideration. It is precisely this indifference sustained by bureaucracy and the legalism of civic culture that motivates this justly resentful and pained discourse. For the poor, this indifference characterizes Brazilian-style injustice.

The most visible consequence of this is the disenchantment with the state and its social policies and a paradoxical admiration for the bandit, the authoritarian political boss, and the transgressor, who appeal precisely to the logic of personal sympathy, territoriality, honor, friendship, and loyalty, as opposed to the universal laws which come from the 'center' and 'above,' and which, in a very precise way, persecute both the poor worker and the bandit.<sup>25</sup>

The state also manifests itself as a taxing organ: an agency that demands many compulsory payments but gives little in return. Not even a decent coffin is provided at death for people who contributed to the state. As one informant said:

My whole life I paid retirement, water, taxes, light... The government should be obliged to return this money that we paid, because all of this, the will, the coffin, all of this you have to pay for when you die, when you suffer an accident and go to a public hospital. When you're an employee, a worker, the line is long, you know? The negligence of the hospital... Why doesn't the government do this better if we pay our whole lives?

Therefore, if all want the state as an instrument of life improvement, they also know that it is simultaneously an instrument that subordinates and draws borders between people. For, those who must depend on it are the 'poor.'

## VI. The Visible Hand of the State: The Poor and Social Policies

Although the state is corrupt, authoritarian, and legalistic, many depend upon it. As we have seen in previous sections, the poor in Brazil are defined by historical experiences and by a set of needs that render them the trash of society, in the words of Carolina Maria de Jesus, 'the inhabitants of the garbage rooms' in the big cities—the unfinished and filthy *favelas* and peripheries. To be poor in Brazil means to 'live without resources,' 'without aid,' without knowledge' (meaning access to education and information), 'depending on the good will' of everything and everyone but most of all as formal prisoners of a huge and inefficient welfare state and its social policies.

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<sup>25</sup> For basic studies about the social and political aspects of crime in Brazilian society, see Paixão (1988, 1990, and 1991).

To be rich, by contrast, means to have money, comfort, material goods, social position, and prestige, and it connotes a desirable independence from public services. Those who are defined as rich are those out of the direct reach of the visible hand of the state and its social policies. If rich people need medical care, hospitals, schools, security, and transportation, they buy them or obtain them by using political influence and friendship. They don't have to depend individually and anonymously on these services. Of course, the poor also use the same personalist strategies of social navigation, which are not monopolized by one social class. In fact, many informants explicitly mentioned the use of personal connections in order to reserve a hospital bed, to get a public job, or to enroll their children and grandchildren at a school.<sup>26</sup>

In the view of the poor, therefore, the rich are 'on top' because they have money and resources, because they don't have to wait in line, and because they enjoy a visible independence from public services. Many informants mentioned that even when the rich need these services, their superior position becomes apparent because they get special treatment wherever they are. As one informant said, it was enough 'to speak to a powerful friend,' in order to 'crash the line' (*furar a fila*). They didn't need to wait and were attended to with deference and humanity.

Thanks to their networks of personal relationships, the rich are able to use public services in a personalized way. The rich are not humiliated nor are they subjected to the bureaucratized and inhumane impersonality of government institutions. Their links with important people save them from having to live 'begging' for public services, as one informant put it. One cannot study the relationship between wealth and poverty in Brazil without regarding the state as a special domain, whose resources can make a fundamental difference in terms of providing social equality.

### 1. The Obligations of the Government

For the poor, there is no doubt that the government has certain obligations to the general population and to them in particular. The overwhelming majority share the conviction that the government ought to provide a number of services and that everything that it offers is important. One informant argued that, "everything that the government does is important. It's like a car: if

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<sup>26</sup> As one informant said, "I was able to matriculate my children at the state schools of the neighborhood only because my wife is also the manicurist of a teacher. So she put the names of my children on the list. There is no entrance exam; in other words, one is not matriculated on the basis of capacity or performance but through the 'presentation' [meaning mediation] of someone more important." Another woman interviewed said: "I went to register my granddaughter for school. The director first attended the white mothers and those who were best dressed. I was left for the end. I obtained a place only after returning three times and bringing a letter from a *patroa*, who works in the education office."



we make a car without tires, it won't go. Without a motor it also won't run. Likewise, all government services—education, health, social security, sanitation, transportation, etc., are important; principally health and education. Because we pay for all of this!"

But what are the obligations of the government? How are they represented by the urban poor, whom we have studied?

The interviews conclusively show that the poor interpret their relationship with the state through an ethic of reciprocity. Inequality between people and social segments engenders a hierarchy that stabilizes the positions of a superior (who has the obligation to give protection, employment, and respect) and an inferior (who has the duty to offer labor, loyalty, and obedience). The state is the partner in another hierarchical relationship between the 'people' and the 'government,' in which this same general complementary relationship between the superior (the state or government as a 'super-patron' that gives, cares for, and protects) and the inferior (the people as clients who need work, protection, and aid) is reproduced.

In this sense, public services are not seen as an individual right or as a citizen's right but as part of the state's obligations to the 'people.' Precisely because the poor perceive themselves as being outside of the circle of full modern citizenship, which requires familiarity with legalist, lettered, individualist, and egalitarian civic culture, they vehemently speak of 'government's obligations.' These obligations, nevertheless, would not be part of a set of individual rights but part of a hierarchical world view, in which the superior segments are obliged to alleviate the lot of the inferior segments. These demands do not affirm a right, but correspond to the vindication of debts and mutual 'obligations.' The logic is that of reciprocity, not of citizenship.

From this perspective, I am tempted to affirm that the idea of obligation (and of moral debt, as Lanna suggests [forthcoming]) is sociologically more fundamental than the modern notion of individual rights, which leads to the well-known conception of an individualistic contract with the state.

In other words, the state is obligated to provide public services to workers, poor people, and the needy. These services would be like donations in exchange for the labor, loyalty, good will, and, last but not least, votes of the people.

Thus, instead of the rational, enlightened logic of individual and universal rights, it is labor that legitimates these opinions. Labor forms the basis of the moral vindications of the poor, confers their identity as pre-citizens who demand services, and constitutes their juridical and political connection with the national state through professional cards and contributions to the INPS and other government agencies. Since they work, they deserve retribution. These retributions initiate a chain of reciprocal obligations whereby the poor offer their labor to the rich, to the bosses, and to the government.

## 2. The Relationship with the State

We generally speak of the state as an institution designed to respond to certain universal human needs. The state, therefore, exists in order to mediate disputes, order individual interests, and coordinate collective interests. Within this perspective, which has dominated modern political thought, it is important, according to Geertz, to interpret the state as an agent of government or of governability or to remark on its 'splendor, display, dignity, presence—*stateliness*.' In fact, we are so impressed by the state as a mechanism of power, in its most physical sense, that we tend to focus only on its capacity to modify surroundings, people, and things. This leads us, as Geertz points out, to obscure "our understanding of the multiplex nature of high authority. Impressed with command, we see little else" (Geertz 1980, 121).

I think that Geertz is right. As he shows, the state derives its power from its capacity to use force within a given territory and its legitimation by way of pompous and theatrical dispositions. I would like to add, however, that these symbolic aspects are also manifested in its daily operations. If the state shows its might in national rituals, it also operates through obscure civil servants and ceremonies within concrete spaces and norms in daily life. Hence, the importance of looking at the state's microscopic and apparently humble and unimportant routines.

Geertz's work discusses a theatrical state operating in Bali. Here, focusing on the routine operations of the government, I would like to develop the idea of a state that derives its force from its legalistic dimension which, after all, is an intrinsic part of its organization everywhere. What I want to suggest is that, in the Brazilian case, the state is manifested concretely through the capacity to demand formal documents that only can be issued by its institutions. For the poor, the state's apparent ability to determine scales of participation in social life by controlling, issuing, and demanding official documents without which one cannot properly act in the spheres of public life is perhaps more important than its capacity to use force.

In discussing the interaction between the urban poor and social policies, I will focus on their point of contact. It is that zone where policies leave the paper and gain substance through civil servants, counters, sliding windows, and cultural and formal norms which consciously or unconsciously regulate the behavior of their users. In other words, I seek to examine the human and social poles of social policies at the moment in which they take shape in flesh and bone. This moment occurs when social policies translates into service.

It is on this level, when a civil servant who represents the state comes face-to-face with a user, that one can observe the operation of cultural styles. Because it is here that the bureaucracy begins to exist as a concrete cultural reality. How is it possible to serve each user individually when society is founded on relationships and avoids anonymous individual presentations of self? Or to rationalize service by the users' order of arrival if the line contains

friends and relatives? Or to follow a rational logic that requires the precise registration of the user and a description of his/her case if the client barely knows how to write his/her own name and feels threatened by the written word? Or to provide the service if the employee in charge of the program uses his/her position to better serve friends, relatives, and political cronies, thereby effacing the rule of universal and equal service for all? Or to serve the people if the program lacks resources, since a great part of its funds were spent on fulfilling electoral or clientelistic party promises?

During the research, we noted a generalized mistrust of the state. We found no informant who was not dissatisfied, shocked, or outraged with the service at health centers, schools, hospitals, public offices, and other government agencies. Judging from our informants' opinions, social policies in large urban centers are a huge failure. They may be well designed in theory and certainly they have an impact on many regions of the urban world, diminishing or even resolving many problems. But they are put into practice in a visibly negative manner. Ultimately, social policies do not create the conditions for citizenship but confirm the social differences between the superior and the inferior, which the state seeks to control, restrict, or terminate. Thus, the state is not an instrument to remedy or eradicate ignorance, feed people better, provide deserved benefits for the aged, and create better work and housing conditions. On the contrary, the state is transformed into an agency of power and prestige, in such a way that public service becomes a fundamental ritual of confrontation and, at times, rebellion—a ritual that tests the democratic or authoritarian vocation of any modern state.

### **3. The Concrete Face of Social Policies**

How are social policies put into practice? How do they appear in the public eye? What expectations and experiences do they crystallize and develop? How do they socialize the using public? What, in a word, is their cultural meaning?

When they go to a state agency, our informants are ambivalent. They hope to find “good doctors, cordial people, because in a lot of these places there are people who know how to give information,” but they also encounter functionaries who “make us out to be idiots and are very aggressive. We go to speak to them and they barely look us in the face, they don't even know if we're white, black, or blond.” The hope of finding a functionary with a cordial and attentive attitude is quickly dashed by the arrogant reminder of employees who dehumanize users. As one informant said, “I think they make us out to be clowns.”

Let us look at some stories or social dramas triggered by and at the very intersection between the state and the urban poor.



Case 1. Dona Maria takes her son to the public health center:

Today [March 1992] I went to the health center to take my youngest child for an examination. The boy had a cold. I was treated very well even when I entered the doctor's office. Indeed, I had a completely different impression of him from the other day when I found him to be very angry. I had said to myself, "Damn, I got a quiet doctor, he doesn't look us in the face!" But when we went today, everything was different: he played with the boy; explained where I had to go to take care of the documents and stamp the papers. This is good, because sometimes we go to places where the people practically say, "Get out of my sight!" I have even gone to places where the people don't so much as look us in the face. We would be explaining the problem and before letting us finish they would say: "What can I do? I can't do anything!"

Case 2. Dona Norma takes her son to the first aid station:

Once I went to the first aid station of Vila Ideal because my son had a burning fever, had bronchitis, he was in bad shape. I asked the woman if it was possible to take his temperature. She said no, because then she'd have to do the same for other children who were there in the line and who arrived before us. So, I said, "But I am asking because the boy really has a fever, if he were OK, I wouldn't cut in front of anyone." She said, "If you want the service, wait." And I said, "Alright!"

This was at about nine in the morning. I waited and waited. I know I waited because it was 4:30 and I was still there. I was a bundle of nerves. Other people arrived and she went along, taking care of them, without calling my boy. Do you know what I did? I got up and said, "Where can I make a complaint?" The woman said, "Up on the top floor." I went up there and explained that the boy had a burning fever, that he had bronchitis, that I had been there since 9:00 AM. It was a good thing that I had a ticket marking the hour, proving that I was there. I said, "I've been here since nine, the boy was not attended, a lot of people have come through here and the boy still hasn't been attended." Then, the doctor took me inside, looked at me and got mad. With this, the other women also wanted to go to the fourth floor [to complain]. I said, "I think I started a revolution here!" The doctor said, "Just because you complained, I'm not going to look at your son. I want the name of your son and yours, because I'm not going to look at him."

I said, "Go try, go try to refuse to examine my son and get my name for something. See if I don't go to the police and report you now, because you are refusing to give first aid!" He looked at my son with bad will. "Lift up the boy's shirt!" I said, "Look, you do it, I'm not here for free, if you're doing this job, it is because I pay the INAMPS [National Health Insurance Institute (Instituto Nacional de Assistência Médica Previdenciária)] and it's your obligation. Do the favor of looking at my son properly, or else I'll go to the police station and report you, alright?" He said, "I could leave you for last just because you complained, because we know when we should attend a patient and when we shouldn't." I said, "Go ahead talking like this and you'll see what I'll do, OK? You're thinking that I don't know how to read or write, aren't you? You're not speaking to your daughter, nor with your mother, OK?"

I stood there silent and another man came in [one of the higher employees of the station]: "Are you being well-attended?" I said, "No, I am not. He is treating my son very badly." The doctor remained silent and the other man went out and called the doctor into the corner. They talked a bit and then he came over and began to examine the boy properly. When we were leaving, he said, "I'm sorry if I was rude to you." I said, "Excuse me, but if you had gone on talking like that to me, you would have seen where your 'little name' ended up. You thought that I'd



leave here just like that woman who left crying, but you're wrong, you're the one who is going to leave crying."

I only know that when I left, he asked forgiveness for the way he had treated the boy. Afterwards, he even gave the boy a little kiss.

I was really tired. But after complaining, everyone was examined right away.

Case 3. Dona Ana reflects upon her husband Francisco's health problems.

I'm going to tell you something that happened because my husband has a *convênio* [a contract for medical care in a public hospital]. My husband went for an exam. He has fainting spells. If he cuts his finger and see blood, he faints. So, he went to get this job and he saw a guy on the floor of a building, up high, working in construction. The guy got an electric shock, fainted, and fell. He was helped, but he died.

So I said to him, "Look Francisco, you go to the doctor and do some exams because this business of you fainting at any little thing is very dangerous. You just saw a man die because he fainted and this is very tragic." So I told him to go to the doctor. He went but you know he doesn't have a contract with the INPS [National Social Security Institute (Instituto Nacional de Previdência Social)]. So, he did some little general exams and the clinic told him, "Come back in a month and look for the cardiologist because there is no room for you now." He sent my husband to a place in the city that I don't even remember now. There he found a place that gave him a contract as if he had a job there and he went to get all of the requested exams. In the general clinic they told him that he has a heart condition, but he had already taken care of the paperwork, all of the exams and two electrocardiograms. Look here: through the INPS in only a month's time! When would he get examined? After a month he would have gone to the cardiologist, and after another month they would have done a cardiogram. After another month, he'd have needed another exam. I mean, people can't wait a month, another month, another month. Thank God, my husband's problem was not that serious, but what if it had been? To wait for treatment for a full month! I think that this is a lack of respect for the human being. Nobody can be sick and only see a doctor after a month goes by!

Case 4. The generous *patroa* who helps her maid, Joana. Joana tells the story:

I woke up with a headache which wouldn't go away. I took everything: aspirin, *guaraina*, every type of analgesic. I had low blood pressure and dizziness from so many pills, but the headache wouldn't go away. By mid-morning, I began to pray and I decided that I couldn't go to Dona Teresa's house (my *patroa*) because the pain wouldn't go away. So, I left my house and went to a public telephone with a token that I had saved for this reason, and I called my employer. I told her the situation and went to the hospital. There, nobody gave me much attention, only a few little remedies, and I went home with even more pain. The next day, I phoned Dona Teresa. She came to see me, and since she knows the people there [she is a psychologist], everything changed for me. I received attention right away. She spoke with the neurologist, who did some exams on my head and took an X-ray of my brain. She decided that I should stay in the hospital for more exams. She was very good to me and told the others about me. Everyone treated me very well, with great attention. But for one exam, I needed to get my registration, and Dona Teresa got it for me by talking to people she knew. Later, she took me to her house and stayed there the whole day, calling to find out the results of the exams. I had meningitis, a very serious illness, and I didn't even know it. I could have died, if it weren't for my *patroa*. It

was she who took care of me during my illness. She wouldn't even let me go home.

#### Case 5: William is hit by a bus.

Dona Eva's son, William, was hit by a city bus near his home, as he was crossing a busy street in the 'downtown' area of his neighborhood. According to Dona Eva, the bus driver was talking to a passenger and didn't see the boy, who was close to the center line. The passengers shouted that he was about to hit the boy, which made the driver swerve at the last second and brush the boy, without killing him. Still, the side of the bus hit him. The driver, afraid of the police, the passengers, and what could happen, ran away and didn't help the victim, because he knew it was his fault. Two passengers detained him, and they ran back to help the child. The neighbor in front, Dona Esmeralda, had a car, but she didn't know how to drive and her husband wasn't home. Still, she was very kind and lent the car.

They took the boy to the emergency room at a city hospital. When they arrived, an attendant told them that they couldn't attend to the child, and that they should take him to another hospital. Dona Eva reacted by saying that the attendant wasn't in charge, that she wasn't the boss, and started to push her. She entered the hospital and started to scream, asking them to help her son. Shouting in desperation, she went looking for a doctor until she delivered her son to one of them. Then she fainted.

The doctor examined the boy and reported that he had fractured his skull and needed to have an operation. This was done. He stayed in the intensive care unit for a few days, 'between life and death,' but recovered and, 'thank God,' suffered no permanent damage.

The bus driver wasn't punished by anyone: not by his company, not by the police, not by the authorities. Since there had been a victim, the police opened an investigation, but to this day there has been no outcome. Dona Eva and the witnesses have been heard three times, but it's still the same. Since she can't pay for a lawyer, she thinks that the process will ultimately lead to nothing.

#### Case 6. Pedro's kidney and liver problems:

I had problems with my kidneys and I had an inflamed liver. I was feeling terrible because my stomach hurt a lot. My wife, Margarida, had to carry me around for everything, to take a shower, to urinate... I stayed in bed feeling weak and not wanting to take any medicine. I went to the hospital on various occasions. The doctors barely looked at me and would say, "You have a sore throat. You have a cold. You have this, you have that..." They kept giving me medicine and I went along, spending, spending, but not getting any better. Then, one day, my wife took me to an INPS hospital and the doctor finally examined me properly, and asked for blood and urine samples. I had to pay. I borrowed money from my mother and I did the exams. I waited for the results. When the results came, I went, very weak and sick, to find the doctor so he could see the results and resolve my case. But he wasn't at the hospital, his shift had ended. I explained the situation to the other attendants, but they said, "Look, only next week now, when the doctor returns." And I asked them, "Why can't we give the exam to another doctor?" I was so angry that I decided to throw a fit that day. After a lot of argument, they called the chief doctor. I told him that he had to look at my exam, that my wife (who spoke more than me) and I were waiting for the results, and that, due to my weakness, I couldn't wait another week, he had to see it now. The chief said that he couldn't because it was his colleague's case, this, that, and the other. I threw another fit until he ordered another doctor to look at the results.

He looked at them and it showed that I had a first degree kidney infection, and in the gall-bladder too. The doctor gave me a bunch of medicine, and it took me a month to get better.

In other words: we pay the INPS, afterwards we pay for the exams, and they still want us to wait until next week! I thought that was an abuse.

## Commentary

All of these cases—which could be easily multiplied—reveal a style of service that compromises the best-intentioned program and corrupts any social policy. They indicate that at the point where public service meets the needy public—that critical social area where the state becomes visible to its citizens—there is a gap between the modern rhetoric of the government (which often asserts that the state is an instrument of equality) and its actual practice. In other words between the social policy and its practical application there is a huge void, filled by an authoritarian style of service.

In all of these cases there is, on one hand, an employee who represents the state and, on the other, a needy client who is treated unjustly. Between the public employee and the client there is a chasm created and accentuated by state power and an impersonal, indifferent service. At the very bottom the cases demonstrate an already mentioned paradox: this state, which wants to take care of the needy by creating services to lessen the social distances, is the very instrument that ends up accentuating the existing differences between the poor and the rich, who can dispense with its services.

In this frustrating ritual, the state is not alone. It is assisted by personalist cultural codes which order the domain of the house and are projected onto the public realm. Therefore, people have high expectations of those who occupy important positions or are 'educated.' From these 'superiors'—as Case 4 well demonstrates—one expects not only attention but *consideração* (esteem) and generosity. As members of the 'people,' all expect consideration, respect, and especially deferential treatment. At the same time, everyone imagines that his/her drama, illness, or case is the most important of all, since it must be singular and absolutely different from the others. This leads to demands for personal attention, which run counter to the universalistic code of civic culture and the bureaucratic norms that govern public services.

Public employees tend to perform according to universalistic criteria, while users do the exact opposite, interpreting the social realm of public service through the concepts of honor, shame, and respect—the values that help him or her to constitute his/her humanity. This divergence, ever-present in all of the cases, is particularly visible in Case 2.

Besides this, a routinized and perverse kind of authoritarianism is manifest. Indispensable and universal public services (like health, education, and nutrition) are used to

create differences among people. In the Brazilian case, this is facilitated by the state's legalism. Its written norms are impossible to know and understand, especially when its users are semiliterate and intimidated by civic culture.

One of the most dramatic moments of the service ritual occurs when the public employee studies, generally with circumspection, the user's 'documents.' Without approval, service cannot be legally given. By situating the legal before the political and the formal before the human, the Brazilian state is characterized by an inhumane, indifferent style.

This cruelty is made plain by a structure that accounts for everything, except the suffering of the user, who always has to wait. To 'wait' is the mark of those who are rendered inferior.

Waiting distinguishes those who have and can give from those who need and must ask. It reproduces a model of patronage, which includes an encounter, a request, a response, and finally, a favor given, initiating a chain of reciprocity and exchange. In the waiting line, therefore, one sees the world from the bottom up.

Such dramas not only occur in the area of health; they happen in practically all areas of public service. The same type of problem occurs in the realm of labor, especially when it relates to the payment of retirement benefits and pensions, as an informant of 72 years bitterly tells.

#### Case 7.

I saw Collor saying that he would deduct 3% more of the INPS from each worker to help pay for retirement. Now I'd like to ask him a question: Weren't all retirees to receive it? I know many retirees who didn't have the right to receive this 147 [an increase of 147% which the retirees were to receive but the government did not pay] because they had the wrong documents, or no document at all, or because they had no time to prepare the document—the mound of paper. There were some who died while standing in line! So I would like to know, why was he going to deduct 3% more to help out, when only a minority would receive the benefits and the rest nothing? Why this increase? How could he take from all, if only a few would receive? I asked various people. I know that there are people with proper identity cards who receive and others who don't receive, and nobody knows why.

#### Case 8.

When you go to discuss the data of the work card and the papers for retirement benefits, if there is an error, like in the case of my husband, you have to do everything again and wait in line again. On the day I went with my husband, there was a line of 100 people and the woman said that there was an error with one item and we had to return. Fortunately, another employee resolved everything.

#### Case 9.

An 80-year-old woman, Dona Santa, went to see if she could retire based on her age. Despite her age, she waited in line from 7 AM. The attendant, a woman,



took the documents. Those who had the INPS card went into one line, those who didn't went into another. The attendant should have seen that the old lady didn't have the paper. Why did she let her stay in that line for so long? When her turn came, the man took her document and said: "You will have to bring a witness to say that you worked in this place." Dona Santa had been a washer, had worked on a ranch at a plantation in the interior. Imagine waiting all that time and then the employee tells you what you need. Why didn't they tell her before? Dona Santa left crying and angry.

The informants went further, explaining their feelings about these situations. One openly commented that upon receiving inferior service, he felt:

Anger. How lazy they are. We stay here the whole time, they don't even have a drop of consideration for us, or for the children. Is it that they don't put themselves in our place? Is it that one day they will no longer need us? When we end up fighting or complaining loudly it is because they've gone beyond the limits of our patience.

Another informant felt anger toward the public servants who are seen as:

Lazy people who don't want to work and are taking the place of a person who sometimes really needs to work, and wants a job and can't get one. And these people, who do nothing, stay there, pretty and lazy...

Some informants have a sharp perception of the clientelistic structure of the state. They speak about the organization of public service, especially the particularistic appropriations of the state machine by public servants, who know that once employed, they cannot be fired. In its personnel policy, the state does not consider the efficiency of services because it cannot fire or punish (as an example to others) its incompetent, delinquent, or corrupt employees.

The poor are fully aware of the miserable state of public service, and are left with a feeling of being nobodies. The totality of those experiences are a bitter practical proof of the Brazilian axiom 'whoever I don't know, doesn't exist for me,' a principle whose opposite is, 'those who I know, have everything for me.' In fact, the currency of this cultural axiom is so profound that informants understand and some even justify the nepotism of politicians and government leaders. Thus, one of them said:

They want to get their relatives jobs so that they can spend more. I would help, especially if I were a politician. Of course I would get a place for them there [a 'job' for others/a 'place' for ours] so they could help me. If we're politicians and we have a brother or relatives close by, they are going to give us more encouragement. I mean, when we're alone in there, we don't feel at ease. But among relatives, we feel more secure, we feel good.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The issue of *Jornal do Brasil* from 16 July 1985 reveals that the then president José Sarney thought exactly the same way. Explaining what made him give his daughter a secretarial job, he solemnly declared: "When she came here, it was as someone who sees her father in danger.

The formalism associated with the clientelistic use of the state confirms that the 'government doesn't pay attention to the poor'—for those who need its services. At the same time, a lack of resources at the hospitals is also a common source of indifference. An informant told how she was admitted to give birth, but the hospital didn't have enough beds. So patients slept in beds without sheets, or two patients shared the same bed. This disgusted the informant, because everyone was sick and they were unfamiliar people with diverse habits. The bathroom of the hospital was a 'pigsty.' Besides, she said,

there were women who smoked, others cursed a lot, and the nurses told dirty and immoral jokes. Like, for example, when a patient complained, the nurse made fun of the woman, reminding her, "Yeah, but when you all wanted to put out, you did!"

For these reasons, many women preferred to have their children at home, as in the old days.

Thus, the poor also know they have to cope with the humiliating treatment of state employees, who arrogantly use their positions to exercise authority instead of furthering the ends of the social policies that they should represent.

## VII. Final Considerations

To conclude, I would like to underline some points and posit some considerations. To this end, we might ask the following: What are the principal findings of our fieldwork? How do the urban poor perceive the state and its social policies? What are the impasses ultimately generated by these policies in the case of Brazilian society?

Four basic points stand out:

1. Given the unavoidable fact of inequality, since all agreed that the world will always be made by rich and poor, those interviewed understand that the state has one function, seen as an 'undeniable obligation,' to provide the poor with the 'means' and 'opportunities' to have access to citizenship, and with this, a more 'decent' and 'comfortable' life. Thus, social policies are systematically perceived as a basic mechanism of social compensation and as instruments for balancing a world that is axiomatically seen as unfair. For this reason, to need the state and to be a client of its social policies is generally seen as a 'thing of the poor,' which causes the rich to avoid using its various programs because of their notorious inefficiency and for fear of being perceived as a social inferior. This helps in understanding why the state is seen as a basic actor

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She said: 'I going to save him!' Like an only daughter, she was by my side. I don't think that I am committing, in any way, any form of nepotism!"

in the operation of social life in Brazil. Everything is expected of and attributed to the state, its agencies, policies, and its personnel.

It is clear, however, that both poverty and wealth are defined by some degree of dependence on the state. The poorer one is, the greater one's dependence; the wealthier one is, the greater one's degree of independence—an independence, by the way, that the state helps to foster. A marked consequence of this is that the groups that most control and best know the civic culture—the wealthiest and most educated segments of the system—do not put pressure on the state.

2. In direct relationship to social policies, two problems stand out immediately. The first relates to the discontinuity of these policies and, therefore, of the 'rights' (and 'obligations') that they, at least legally, entail and bestow. There is an unequivocal resentment toward the changes in policies affecting retirement benefits, education, health, and insurance. The poor simply do not understand these abrupt changes, which often lead to increasingly negative experiences with the state and seem to be due to the capricious will of government officials. Changes on the administrative level cause changes in service and, therefore, lead to the perception of the state as a disorganized, uninterested, and indifferent institution. One result of those changes is an eventual negative perception of the democratic experience because most transformations are linked to elections and the substitution of administrative personnel. Another element closely associated with this basic topic is the well-known fact that political parties tend to clientelistically control the institutions devoted to providing assistance to the needy and the poor. This leads the poor to perceive elections as a mere mechanism to enrich dishonest and inoperative politicians, and to see the formal institutions connected with the voting and electoral processes as a sort of confirmation of the perverse power of some groups. Thus the generalized cynicism with which the poor look at politics and social policies.

The second problem relates to service. This is a crucial aspect because social policies can seem wonderfully adequate when they are talked about by presidents, ministers, and high government officials, or when they are discussed by political analysts. But at the level of society, these programs are actually perceived in a rather negative way. At this level what one has is an encounter between a public functionary and a person who needs help. Service refers as much to access, which is often obstructed by legal and formal technicalities—the famous documents—as to the quality of personal attention given to users. Thus there is a rational aspect of service, the efficiency and capacity to objectively cope with demands, and an expressive dimension that has to do with the way people perceive and relate to those services.

Many studies of social policies consider these two aspects independently. Here, I took them as two sides of the same coin, the currency of cultural perceptions. Thus, I studied the way the poor perceive services, in order to reveal the cultural misunderstandings that surround the



state and society in Brazil. Indeed, because public institutions are established for use by the poor, they carry a bias toward lack of resources and morose inefficiency. To study this link between efficiency and the social meaning of the institutions whose aim is to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor will require more research. What we know for sure right now is that there is a clash between personalist expectations and universalistic (or bureaucratized) conventions, a clash that usually leads to misunderstandings and conflict.

Another important dimension of service is that of timing. The experience of the urban poor is that when one most needs a service, it is not available. Those interviewed referred incessantly to delays, lines, and waits, which reveal how the target populations of these policies are rendered invisible or unimportant. This is the source of another paradox. Social policies that are heralded as solutions to basic structural problems of inequality end up confirming that the beneficiaries are of the least importance. On the political level, the pitiful quality and inefficiency of the service confirms the presence of a subordinated kind of citizenship, if not the absence of citizenship altogether. Furthermore, within the context of public services, waiting emerges as an obstacle created by the 'bureaucracy'—here equated with control and indifference to the subordinate poor. This negative picture is worst in the area of health, in which the obvious urgent need for the service contrasts with the careless indifference of employees, who confuse universalism and fairness with a lack of proper attention.

3. The consequence of this negative perception (which is backed up by experience) is mistrust and disbelief in both the technical and human quality of the service. The result is always a feeling of outrage, disgust, and indignation. Worse still, from this sort of experience a very grave doubt surfaces: Is the government truly interested in the success of social policies? Or are these policies just a farce, hiding the malevolent intention of impeding social mobility, thus maintaining the lower class as a reservoir of cheap labor, on the margins of society?

This research reveals that the urban poor cannot trust in the state. They are also less able to question, demand from, or complain about public institutions. They may be good at rebelling when they feel by-passed in their sentiments of honor and 'humanity,' but there is a big gap between feeling disgusted and putting up a formal complaint. When they resolve to take this path, they must always deal with the spectre of revenge for their 'disrespect' for authority and risk the accusation of being 'subversives,' 'idlers,' 'agitators,' 'revolutionaries' or, at best, 'troublemakers.' As the feelings of outrage and dishonor grow, violence leading to revolt and riots may emerge as an attempt to resolve things directly. But, again, this issue needs more fieldwork to be completely understood in cultural and political terms.

4. In general, the poor perceive the government as incapable of exercising its authority in the allocation of material and human resources in poor, peripheral neighborhoods. They see it as a supplier of goods and services of bad quality (for example, the prefab houses of the National



Housing Bank, which are notorious for their terrible design and materials) in exchange for taxes on minimum wage, considered by all as a 'salary of famine.' For the poor, the government is seen as an institution that only 'wants to take from the people' and allocate its most precious resources to its affiliates—the 'politicians' who control it.

As if this were not enough, the 'corruption,' 'thievery,' and 'fraud,' have led to a growing if not total lack of confidence in all 'powers that be.' The great disenchantment and general disorientation is manifest in statements like 'we don't even know what to do'; or worse still, 'in Brazil it's like this: those who are right end up being wrong.'

All of this leads me to conclude that social policies in Brazil can only function properly if they are understood in their cultural aspects. This does not mean that they should only be discussed from a symbolic point of view. It simply says that one has to be aware that the state, the economy, the market, society, and politics are not entities that float in the air but are pompous names for the multiplicity of events and things that others call life. What our fieldwork demonstrates, to the point of exhaustion, is that between the state and the people lies the reality of public institutions filled with public servants. Until now, because we have ignored the study of the crucial spaces where policies meet people and acquire a heart and a body, we were not able to see social policies as they are—and as they possibly could become. Until social policies are informed by this large reality, they will remain good for electing and enriching a few but incapable of reaching the poor with the level of humanity that they deserve.

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