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FROM SOLIDARITY TO ENTREPRENEURIAL VALUES: THE NEOLIBERAL SHIFT IN THE 'CENTER FOR EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP SUPPORT'

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FROM SOLIDARITY TO ENTREPRENEURIAL VALUES: THE NEOLIBERAL SHIFT IN THE 'CENTER FOR EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP SUPPORT'

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ABSTRACT:

Drawing on ethnographic sociology, this paper presents the findings of a study conducted at the 'Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support' in São Paulo, Brazil. For over six months, several visits were made to this public institution in order to interview young workers. However, the word "Entrepreneurship" raised specific concerns: How does a public institution integrate São Paulo's working class into the job market through entrepreneurial values? To address this issue, the study moves from the micro level of ethnographic observations to the macro level of external neoliberal forces that have shaped Brazil's economic and political policies over the past decades. Furthermore, while the Center now promotes and even celebrates entrepreneurial values, the young workers' perceptions and experiences, as captured through qualitative interviews, reveal their reasons for seeking support from the institution and highlight how a reality shaped by informal labor challenges neoliberal approaches to public services.

Keywords: ethnographic sociology, entrepreneurship, informal labor, neoliberalism, public policies

DA SOLIDARIEDADE AOS VALORES EMPREENDEDORES: A VIRADA NEOLIBERAL NO CENTRO DE APOIO AO TRABALHO E EMPREENDEDORISMO

RESUMO:

Partindo de uma sociologia etnográfica, este trabalho demonstra os resultados de uma pesquisa realizada no 'Centro de Apoio ao Trabalho e Empreendedorismo' na cidade de São Paulo, Brasil. Ao longo de seis meses, visitas regulares foram feitas nesta instituição pública com o intuito de entrevistar jovens trabalhadores. No entanto, o termo 'empreendedorismo' trouxe preocupações específicas: como uma instituição pública buscaria integrar a classe trabalhadora de São Paulo no mercado através de valores empreendedores? Para responder essa questão, esse estudo se move do nível micro das observações etnográficas em direção ao nível macro relacionado às forças externas do neoliberalismo que moldaram as políticas econômicas do Brasil ao longo dos últimos anos. Além disso, embora atualmente o Centro promova e até celebre os valores empreendedores, as experiências e percepções dos jovens trabalhadores (capturadas através de entrevistas qualitativas) revelaram o que os incentivaram a procurar auxílio nessa instituição, elucidando como uma realidade marcada por trabalhos informais pode desafiar a abordagem neoliberal no que tange os serviços públicos.

Palavras-chave: etnografia sociológica, empreendedorismo, informalidade, neoliberalismo, políticas públicas

INTRODUCTION

The present paper is the result of a broader research project, in which I employed an ethnographic approach consisting of several visits to São Paulo, Brazil, over six months. Specifically, I visited the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support (*Centro de Apoio ao Trabalho e Empreendedorismo*), a public institution managed by the city hall. My objective was to engage with young workers seeking social assistance provided by the Center, which includes job opportunities, unemployment insurance, and more recently, training courses and micro-entrepreneurship formalization.

Although my primary goal was to conduct in-depth interviews with young workers (aged 18 to 29 years) who visited the institution, the field research raised an additional concern: how did a public institution in São Paulo end up having the term “entrepreneurship” in its name? What social and political factors have influenced this local Center to promote and even celebrate entrepreneurial values to a vulnerable working class seeking for assistance? How might public assistance policies be implemented with an entrepreneurial approach to serve the many men and women workers hoping to receive aid? To address these issues, this paper aims to explore the social and political changes related to the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support, along with my ethnographic visits and observations of its operations.

When it was established, the institution was named as 'Center for Employment and Worker Solidarity' (*Centro de Emprego e Solidariedade ao Trabalhador*). However, after a series of changes, the term ‘Entrepreneurship’ was added to its name, marking a shift in the approach to assistance policies in São Paulo. To comprehend this local change, I examined the broader external and historical forces of neoliberalism that have continued to shape Brazil’s political and economic landscape in recent years. For this analysis, I draw on the extended case method (Burawoy 2008), moving from micro-level observations to macro-level processes to understand how local situations are both influenced by and influence broader socio-economic forces.

Additionally, I contrast the historical changes in the Center’s public services with the expectations and hopes of the fourteen young workers I interviewed during my visits to the institution. The interviews provided specific insights into the reasons why these young workers sought support from the institution. Thus, by contrasting the new operational approaches of the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support with the perceptions and experiences of the young workers who visited the Center in recent months,

I aim to encourage a reflection on how public policies have been shaped by the neoliberal shift over the past decades, and how workers' agency and experiences might shape their understandings of public services, formal jobs, and entrepreneurial values differently.

1. SÃO PAULO AND THE CENTER FOR EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP SUPPORT

Through my initial field research in São Paulo, I sought to follow Benjamin's (1978) advice by losing myself in the city's center to better comprehend my surroundings and attempt to capture at least some moments of the frantic movement that defines this emblematic city in contemporary capitalism. As a sociologist, my goal was to "feel" the urban and contradictory atmosphere of São Paulo. I aimed to experience the "proper heat" of a chaotic environment that vividly reflects the phantasmagoric elements of capitalism, where a faceless crowd is driven by the tyranny of the clock (Thompson 1998). Although I was surrounded by countless people, all of them were racing against time.

Over the last few decades, São Paulo has consolidated its position as one of the largest corporate and financial centers in South America. It is the most populous city in Brazil and is globally influential. Additionally, it is considered the seventh richest city in the world¹. However, the same São Paulo that boasts regions with high Human Development Index (HDI) scores also suffers from tremendous social inequality in others. Moreover, the number of people living on the streets visibly contrasts with the enormous financial buildings that symbolize the city's wealth, which is deeply concentrated in the hands of a minority.

Given the contradictions within the same urban space, São Paulo seemed to be the ideal choice for conducting empirical research on unemployed workers². To gain deeper insights and establish contact with these workers, I selected a specific institution for my research: the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support (*Centro de Apoio ao Trabalho e Empreendedorismo*), which is supported by São Paulo's city hall and the Municipal Department of Labor and Economic Development.

¹ For more information, visit: <https://www.capital.sp.gov.br/w/noticia/sao-paulo-avanca-em-ranking-internacional-e-e-a-33a-melhor-cidade-do-mundo#:~:text=A%20capital%20paulista%20avan%C3%A7ou%20nos,%2C%20trabalho%2C%20viagens%20e%20investimentos>

² As already mentioned, this paper is part of a sociological research related to the study of unemployed workers in São Paulo.

For over six months, I made several visits to this public institution, where the frantic movement of the urban environment was now palpable inside the Center itself, given the large number of people visiting it, especially during the morning hours. On my first visit, I remember being fascinated by the Institution's appearance: although the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support is a public institution, its design featured writing on the exterior walls promoting the possibility of becoming an entrepreneur, which reminded me of private startups aiming to create a more "welcoming" environment.

It is worth noting that one of the main aspects that drew my attention was the term "entrepreneurship" in the institution's name. In fact, a few years earlier, when the Center was established in 2005, it was originally named the Center for Employment and Worker Solidarity ("*Centro de Emprego e Solidariedade ao Trabalhador*"). At the time of its creation, the Center's purpose was to register and provide unemployed workers with opportunities related to "employability" and social inclusion³. It also offered job opportunities provided from companies registered in the Center, as well as services such as unemployment insurance, document issuance, and more. Initially, the Center for Employment and Worker Solidarity was under the Municipal Labor Department, with José Serra serving as the city's mayor.

In November 2009, Decree No. 50.995 introduced the first change to the Center's name, from the 'Center for Employment and Worker Solidarity' to 'Employment Support Center' (*Centro de Apoio ao Trabalho*). This change also involved a reorganization of the Municipal Labor Department, which was renamed the Municipal Department of Labor and Economic Development (*Secretaria Municipal de Desenvolvimento Econômico e do Trabalho*). This reorganization is notable because it removed the terms "solidarity" and "worker" from the Center's name and introduced the concept of "economic development" in the new name of the Municipal Department, effectively shifting the focus towards capitalist development.

Nevertheless, with Decree No. 56.474 established in 2015, the Employment Support Center was given a new focus on "entrepreneurship," resulting in the current name: 'Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support'. Unlike its previous iterations, this version of the Center now aims to promote policies related to entrepreneurship and self-employment, reflecting the prominence of these concepts in today's labor market. Thus, while the Center's original name emphasized worker solidarity, the current name highlights a more "modern" focus on entrepreneurial values.

³ For more information, visit: <https://legislacao.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/leis/lei-14007-de-20-de-junho-de-2005>

2. VISITS TO THE CENTER

My ethnographic visiting the Center began in November 2023 and continued until June 2024. During this period (except for January), I visited the institution approximately twice a month, staying from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. It is worth noting that the Center consistently had a considerable number of workers, most of whom were primarily seeking for job opportunities.

On my first visit, I was welcomed by a staff member who wanted to understand my reason for being at the institution, so he could direct me appropriately. I introduced myself as a graduate student and mentioned that my goal was to interview young workers for my current research. Upon hearing this, the staff member suggested that, given the special nature of my visit, I should speak with the Center's manager. He then provided directions to the manager's office. However, by the time I arrived, the manager was occupied with another staff member, a young man who appeared to be receiving a warning.

Once the manager noticed me, he asked me to wait and said he would be with me shortly. As I left his office to wait for our conversation, I realized I could barely hear the details of the discussion between the manager and the employee. At this moment, I understood what Burawoy (2008) meant about the necessity for social scientists to be either lucky or devious in penetrating the barriers of hierarchical situations during ethnographic research. I chose to sit close to the office without drawing attention, allowing me to overhear their conversation.

As I listened to it, I was struck by the language and expressions the manager used when addressing his employee. At one point, he suggested that the young worker should “wear the company's shirt” and demanded more determination from him. The manager described the staff member as a “smart guy,” but criticized him for his perceived lack of effort and commitment. The manager emphasized that the issues were not due to discrimination but rather to the employee's lack of flexibility. The mention of “discrimination” seemed particularly pointed, as the young employee was Black.

As the conversation continued, the manager began fostering a sense of competition between the young worker and another employee at the Center, who, according to him, was doing an “exceptional job.” “Let's see if you can do better than him,” the manager remarked. After further discussion about flexibility, focus, and loyalty to the company, the young

worker left the office visibly uncomfortable. A few minutes later, it was my turn to speak with the manager, as he invited me into his office.

During the conversation about my intentions in visiting the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support, I noticed a shift in his attitude once I mentioned that I was a graduate student. In contrast to his earlier conversation with the young employee, he seemed at ease while speaking with me. He proceeded to explain the Center's daily operations, mentioning that it is usually crowded, primarily with low-income workers. He also highlighted that on certain days, the Center offers services specifically tailored for minorities, such as the LGBTQIA+ population.

After our brief conversation, the manager was agreeable to my research within the institution, as I assured that it would not interfere with the Center's operations. My goal was to interview young workers who were attending the institution for various reasons. Once I had permission to move around the Center, I began making more detailed observations. In terms of its services, the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support operated similarly to other public institutions: individuals entered the Center, received a queue ticket, and then waited for their number to be called on an electronic display panel.

Moreover, some public and private companies utilized the second floor of the Center for job applications. It was no coincidence that the building was particularly crowded on application days, as a significant number of workers came in search of employment. During these times, it was almost impossible to move around or find a seat inside the Center due to the large number of job applicants, with people even lining up outside the building.

3. MOVING FROM 'MICRO' TO 'MACRO': THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL FORCES OF NEOLIBERALISM

How can we explain the changes in the Center's name or the flexible demands placed on its employees by management? To address these questions, it is necessary to move beyond this specific local institution and examine the broader external forces that have shaped and continue to influence Brazil's national landscape over the past decades. These social and historical forces may have significantly impacted how public policies are implemented in the city's urban environment. The extended case method provides a framework for this transition from the 'micro' level of São Paulo to the 'macro' level, linking the present with the past (Burawoy 2008).

Burawoy emphasizes the importance of researchers immersing themselves in the lives of the participants they study, then extending their observations over time and space. This extension involves multiple dialogues: between participant and observer, between successive events in the field, between micro and macro levels, and between successive theoretical reconstructions as contradictions and disturbances challenge our preexisting conceptions (Burawoy 2008).

Therefore, to identify the social forces that reproduce the micro-level processes shaping the Center's operation—specifically in promoting entrepreneurship and self-employment policies—it is essential to understand the historical processes that have transformed labor relations and, consequently, labor policies over the past decades. In this context, it is impossible to fully comprehend the current labor landscape without considering the political and economic project of neoliberalism, which emerged in the context of flexible accumulation of capital (Harvey 1990).

3.1 Flexible accumulation and the neoliberal's historical shift

The addition of the term “entrepreneurship” to the Center's name reveals, even at a micro level, a broader transformation rooted in historical processes that have impacted labor relations globally. When looking back to the 1970s, we notice that capitalism faced a deep economic crisis following the long period of the Keynesian-Fordist model, which has resulted in a decline in capital productivity and the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (Antunes 2009). In fact, the rigidity under Fordist's logics was unable to meet the demands of international competition, which was being driven by newly industrialized countries in a context of ongoing financialization and economic globalization (Chesnais 2000). Moreover, the 1970s oil crisis also contributed to dramatic changes in big companies' investments, which increasingly demanded more flexible⁴ and dynamic markets.

In this context, the consolidation of Toyotism in Japan highlights the adaptation of capitalism to achieve greater flexibility in both production and worker conditions, with workers performing a variety of functions. Through the ‘Just in Time’ system, production variety expanded compared to the earlier Fordist model. Additionally, with the advent of flexible accumulation, companies began to embrace the notion of workers as “collaborators”

⁴ “Flexible accumulation, as I shall tentatively call it, is marked by a direct confrontation with the rigidities of Fordism. It rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption” (Harvey, 1990, p.147).

and “partners,” fostering a sense of company loyalty and belonging (Basso 2003). As a result, alongside the objective changes in labor relations, new subjective perceptions of the working class emerged, aiming at diminishing classist identities. Workers were redefined as collaborators and partners (Antunes 2018), engaging in supposedly more horizontal relationships with their bosses (Sennett 2006).

By the 1980s, the rise of neoliberalism, combined with flexible accumulation, began to stimulate specific ways of integrating the State and the capitalist market. Neoclassical economists were now influencing government policies, through the promotion of extreme individualism and the so-called *laissez-faire* doctrine (Harvey 2007). In other words, the idea of a self-regulating capitalist economy free from state intervention started to reshape public policies. When considering the political and economic scenarios of the world's leading nations, the rise of Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States is crucial to understanding the advance of neoliberalism, which became the core directive of economic administration (Harvey 2007).

During these governments, we witnessed efforts to roll back or reverse state welfare policies, primarily through the privatization of public companies. Also, responsibility for basic services such as health and education was increasingly transferred to private and individual hands. Nevertheless, neoliberalism is not opposed to all forms of state intervention; rather, it seeks to deepen the integration of capitalist's market principles into state functions.

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (Harvey, 2007, p.02)

Although many scholars and proponents of neoliberalism argue that the state is inefficient in public policy and thus advocate for its minimal existence, it is important to note that the state remains a crucial tool for implementing neoliberal policies. Thatcher and Reagan's governments, for example, focused on attacking union organizations, eroding labor rights, and deregulating labor markets (Harvey 2007).

When examining assistance policies, there appears to be a shift from welfare-based approaches to workfare models, now legitimized by moral claims emphasizing self-employment and personal responsibility for one's position in the labor market, even when this involves low-wage work. This shift consolidates a neoliberal-paternalist approach within a range of policies (Purser and Hennigan, 2018). It is no coincidence that authors like Van

Oort (2015) have examined how job search programs in the U.S. produce neoliberal subjectivities, promoting individualistic self-transformations and ideological frameworks that attribute social problems to personal failings.

Thus, neoliberal policies have promoted a more pronounced symbiosis between entrepreneurial values and the state, particularly under the influence of international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which prioritize a favorable environment for financial businesses (Harvey 2007). Moreover, neoliberalism spread worldwide, and Brazil's policies were no exception.

3.2 The persistence of neoliberalism in Brazil

In Brazil, the advance of neoliberalism unfolded within the broader context of the declining "developmental state," which had been characterized by the interplay between the state, foreign capital, and national capital. This model began to fall due to the country's massive debt accumulation and the reduction in public investments. Also, the political victory of Fernando Collor in the 1990 presidential election marked the beginning of neoliberal policies (Soares 2001), which continued to be promoted when Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC) succeeded Collor as president, particularly through the transfer of state functions to the private sector, including the management of public services (Sallum Jr. 2000).

The Brazilian neoliberal shift did not occur in isolation but was heavily influenced by international directives established in the Washington Consensus, which promoted the neoliberal model across Latin American countries. As a result, the dominant economic paradigm became closely aligned with global institutions representing the interests of financial capitalism, particularly under U.S. influence. Consequently, during the Collor and FHC governments, the state came to be viewed as excessively rigid and bureaucratic. From that point onward, the state was expected to pave the way for "modern" economic theories centered on the free market.

Nevertheless, after the initial social consequences of neoliberalism in the 1990s, the turn of the century saw the rise of more progressive governments in Latin America, such as the Lula administration in Brazil and the Kirchner administration in Argentina. For a moment, it seemed that the neoliberal agenda had come to an end. However, as Gago (2018) points out regarding the persistence of neoliberalism, we must avoid simplifying our

understanding of neoliberalism as merely state policy, as this could obscure its deep and multifaceted roots in society.

In fact, there was no significant break from global financial interests coming from these progressive governments, as most of the public policies were designed to boost consumption and purchasing power rather than providing effective social security (Gago, Mezzadra, Scolnik and Sztulwark 2014). Consequently, these policies did not challenge the financialization of life central to neoliberalism. Instead, they promoted social inclusion through financial intermediation. Hence, social inclusion was now achieved through market integration and consumption. While we have seen the creation of jobs and opportunities under these governments, many of these jobs were informal and lacked guarantees for workers (Antunes 2018). This shift is justified by the priority of integrating the population into the imperative categories of the capitalist market economy, regardless of the nature of such integration.

Thus, it is important to question the extent to which there was a definitive break with neoliberalism during the “progressive era,” given that financial capitalism continues to deeply influence the daily lives of the working class. Moreover, the lack of effective measures against neoliberalism may pave the way for far-right demagogues. The further implementation of neoliberal policies during Temer’s and Bolsonaro’s administrations is no coincidence. Conversely, neoliberalism does not appear to be coming to an end with Lula’s return to the presidency in 2023, as he has continued to align with the financial sector and agribusiness⁵.

3.3 The Center’s synthesis of multiple determinants

Given the social and historical forces that have shaped Brazil’s political and economic landscape in recent years, the establishment of the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support is not surprising, as it reflects the neoliberal trend of reshaping already limited state social assistance programs. Thus, the Center is not an ‘awkward’ institution but rather a synthesis of multiple determinants (Marx 1993), shaped by external forces that are now embedded in the daily experiences of thousands of workers seeking social assistance through this institution. It is worth noting that the inclusion of the term

⁵ More recently, Lula’s administration announced a new program named ‘Acredita’ (Believe), which aims to provide credit or microcredit to promote entrepreneurship among Brazil’s lower-income population. For more information, visit: <https://www.gov.br/memp/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/presidente-lula-lanca-programa-acredita-para-oferecer-credito-diferenciado-e-desenvolver-pequenos-negocios>

“entrepreneurship” in the institution’s name occurred during Fernando Haddad’s administration as São Paulo’s mayor. This change clearly aligns with the “institutional shift” in addressing social issues such as unemployment and integrating workers into the labor market, even under a mayor who is a prominent member of the Workers' Party.

As highlighted by Guimarães (2002), the approach a society takes toward labor issues and the provision of social resources can vary depending on its historical and social context. Even within the same society, policies can change over time. In the neoliberal era, despite claims from defenders of neoliberalism about the inefficiency of the state, it remains a core instrument in establishing the urban and public policies essential for neoliberal capitalism. According to Druck (2021), the Brazilian state has shifted towards the propagation, incentivization, and even celebration of market values. On one hand, we have witnessed an increase in privatization within state sectors. On the other, what remains of public services is increasingly submerged in corporate logics. Thus, contrasting with the “classical” approach to managing public resources, the prevailing trend now involves market-related concepts and practices that can effectively merge with state services.

In this context, the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support exemplifies the fusion of entrepreneurial values with public policy. According to its website⁶, one of the Center’s primary functions is to promote entrepreneurship by regulating the Microentrepreneur condition (Microempreendedor Individual – MEI). This regulation aims to formalize the status of independent workers. However, the concept of "Microentrepreneur" encompasses a wide range of individuals in diverse social situations, including those working informally, such as street vendors or domestic service providers. As a result, the MEI framework tends to normalize informal and precarious labor.

Additionally, the Center has increasingly focused on offering courses and training related to small business development. When visiting the institution’s website, one can find inspirational stories of individuals who “pursued their goals” (*foram atrás dos seus objetivos*), often accompanied by personal tips to help others generate their own income⁷. Among these stories are the example of "entrepreneurial mothers" who share the challenges of balancing motherhood and entrepreneurship, encouraging “you, as a mother, to become an

⁶ For more information, visit: https://www.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/cidade/secretarias/desenvolvimento/espaco_do_trabalhador/index.php?p=220248

⁷ For more information, visit: <https://cate.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/dicas-e-inspiracoes/>

entrepreneur”. On another page, the website offers advice on building one's own social network, embracing the common corporate jargon of “networking.”

These examples illustrate how the state’s approach to individuals has changed. Instead of the "classical" method of providing social assistance through benefits or formal employment, the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support now emphasizes entrepreneurial training, offering tips, courses, and preparation for workers who must learn to navigate an oversaturated market with limited job opportunities. Moreover, the way the Center addresses social issues through entrepreneurial values can also be linked to the growing number of workers who have their classist identity obfuscated (Purser and Hennigan 2018), now treated as independent contractors or entrepreneurs by employers or even by law and jurisdiction itself. As Dubal (2017) highlighted:

A growing number of workers are not considered “employees” under the law but “independent contractors,” working-class entrepreneurs who are ineligible for basic employment safeguards such as the right to collectively bargain, the right to a minimum wage, and the right to protections against employment discrimination, among others (Dubal, 2017, p.67)

4. THE INTERVIEWED WORKERS’ PROFILE

In addition to my observations on the Center’s operations, I conducted in-depth interviews with 14 young workers, aged 18 to 29, who visited the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support between November 2023 and June 2024. While 14 interviews may not represent a large sample, it's important to note that my aim is not to generalize about all young workers who visited the institution. Instead, qualitative research requires a nuanced exploration of fieldwork, which is influenced by time, space, and the specific historical and social scenario (Burawoy 2008). The diversity in interviewee profiles and the variations in interviewer perspectives and questions mean that this research represents just one aspect of the broader need for ethnographic studies.

Below is a chart illustrating the profiles of the fourteen interviewees, including their age, race, gender, and reasons for visiting the Center.

Name⁸	Age	Race	Gender	Visited the Center for
Ana	19	White	Female	Job application
Estela	19	Black	Female	Job application
Gabriela	19	Black	Female	Job application
Gustavo	26	White	Male	Unemployment insurance
Heitor	19	White	Male	Job application
Iago	24	Black	Male	Job application
Isabella	22	Black	Female	Job application
Juan	23	White	Male	Job application
Laura	20	White	Female	Job application
Leonardo	21	White	Male	Unemployment insurance
Claudio	20	White	Male	Job application
Thiago	19	Black	Male	Job application
Mathias	24	Black	Male	Job application
William	22	Black	Male	Unemployment insurance

Chart 01 – interviewees' profile and reason for visiting the Center

As demonstrated by the chart, I interviewed nine male workers and five female workers, with an average age of around 21 years. Of the 14 individuals, half identified as white and the other half as Black. However, it is important to note that the majority of people seeking support at the Center was African descent, which aligns with Gonzáles' (2020) observation that the subproletariat and unemployed population in Brazil are predominantly Afro-Brazilian. In fact, the Black population continues to be overrepresented in unemployment and informal labor statistics in the country⁹.

Additionally, although I didn't observe a significant disparity in the number of women and men visiting the Center, previous research has already demonstrated the gender impact on job acquisition. Many job posts tend to prioritize men, who often receive higher

⁸ All names used for interviewees in this research are pseudonyms to protect their privacy and maintain confidentiality.

⁹ For more information, visit: <https://portal.fgv.br/artigos/negros-ainda-sao-maioria-rendimento-ate-2-salarios-minimos>

salaries, over women. Employers frequently terminate women's employment due to the perceived "cost" of potential maternity leave or other absences (Hirata 2018). Also, Damaske (2020) highlights the challenges women face when attempting to re-enter the workforce, as they often have to balance family care responsibilities with their professional roles.

Concerning the reasons why the interviewed workers visited the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support, there was a significant emphasis on job applications. As mentioned earlier, both private and public companies can register to announce job openings and conduct interviews on the institution's second floor. Consequently, not only the workers I interviewed but also the majority of people visiting the Center were there to seek formal employment, as evidenced by the large number of individuals waiting to be called to the second floor for job applications. Additionally, three out of the fourteen workers interviewed visited the Center in hopes of obtaining unemployment insurance.

Although the Center has expanded its "entrepreneurial services" in recent years, many workers still rely on it in order to find a regular job or receiving traditional unemployment benefits. This raises the question of how the shift towards entrepreneurial services and self-employment courses aligns with workers' aspirations and perceptions. In fact, I expected to encounter people seeking formalization as micro-entrepreneurs or applying for microcredit to start small businesses, but this was not the case. Nevertheless, it's important to note that many applications can be requested online. As a result, this research may not fully capture the potential youth population (who are generally more comfortable using online services) that might be pursuing entrepreneurial support.

Still, what could explain the discrepancy between the traditional job support services sought by the interviewed workers and the new emphasis on entrepreneurship promoted by the Center's public policies? The in-depth interviews have provided insights into the personal experiences and labor trajectories of the workers, which may help answering this question.

5. INFORMALITY EXPERIENCES AND THE PREFERENCE FOR FORMAL EMPLOYMENT

As I interviewed young workers visiting the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support on job application days, I was able to conduct the interviews while some of them were waiting for their number to be called. One of the young workers who

kindly spared some of her time to talk to me was Isabella, who was eager to secure a formal job. When we discussed her past occupations, nearly all of Isabella's previous jobs were in the informal sector, marked by feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. She often didn't have a fixed income, with her earnings constantly changing depending on her sales (when working as a saleswoman) or moonlighting as a waitress.

Despite the neoliberal discourse that highlights the supposed advantages of being freed from the bureaucracy and rigidity of regular jobs, Isabella's negative experiences with informal work made her a strong defender of employment with a signed work contract, as she expressed below:

I do prefer a signed contract! Working with a signed contract gives us more safety, right? When it comes to our payment, rights, all of that. You do your job well and know that you have your rights. (...) So I feel safer knowing that I'm gonna have my rights and get my salary the way it's supposed to be.¹⁰

Like Isabella, Laura also emphasized the drawbacks of informal work based on her personal experiences. Since the age of fifteen, Laura has had to juggle work and school—a common scenario for Brazilian youth—which has restricted her to mostly informal jobs, as she has not yet completed high school.

After finishing her basic education, Laura tried to take professional training courses to improve her chances of finding a stable job. However, the lack of stability from not having a secure job prevented her from completing most of these courses. Given the recurring uncertainty in Laura's experiences, which often alternated between informal employment and unemployment, she now advocates for public policies that provide social insurance for unemployed individuals.

I think that unemployment insurance is a good investment because if people are not able to work, they won't be able to live, basically. How are they going to live? Only on air? So, whether we like it or not, the government needs to understand that some people need some kind of insurance to survive.

Another of my interviewees was Iago, who unlike the other workers who participated in this research, had only been in São Paulo for a month. He came from Brazil's northeast in search of better opportunities. Nevertheless, in his previous region, Iago also had the common experience of informal jobs rather than formal ones. In fact, due to the necessity of having any experience to put in his resume, he decided in his own words to “throw himself into anything” (*se jogar em qualquer coisa*) in order to build any professional background.

¹⁰ All testimonies presented in this paper were translated from Portuguese to English by the author, ensuring that the meaning and words were kept as close as possible to the original.

Moreover, since Iago is beginning a new life in the capital city of São Paulo, he is clear that his best option for a first job is a formal one, which explains his reasons for visiting the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support.

Well, given that I'm here wanting to start a new life—like having a stable income, living by myself, and really building a way to live—I'd feel safer with a formal job. Because in an informal job, you can be fired at any moment, your rights aren't as good, and you don't really build anything for yourself. For all these reasons, I'd choose a formal job.

Due to the constraints of this paper, it is not possible to provide detailed accounts of all the interviewees' experiences at the Center. However, as illustrated by the previous chart, all the young workers who participated in the research were seeking job applications or unemployment insurance. Nearly all of them expressed a preference for formal employment as a means of livelihood and viewed the Center as a potential provider of such services. When asked about entrepreneurship, some workers were enthusiastic about the prospect of starting their own small business in the future. Nevertheless, most of them quickly pointed out the difficulty of having immediate extra income to launch a small enterprise. As Juan stated:

Unfortunately, you need to have some money to start something, you need a place, a space, some education, and guidance from someone. So, like, you can start on your own, sure, but you need to have something... it's one thing to start at home, baking bread or stuff like that. But if a person has nothing, no home, nothing... But I think entrepreneurship is the ideal for a lot of people who work for others.

It is worth noting that none of the interviewees considered the Center a viable option for achieving entrepreneurial goals, despite being aware that the institution offers such services.

Given that all fourteen interviewees have their trajectories marked by informal labor relations, it is likely that their experiences have significantly shaped their perceptions and aspirations regarding stable employment. The insecurity associated with informal work may have influenced their lack of interest in entrepreneurship courses or services, as these do not offer the same security or benefits as formal employment.

In this context, although the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support is focusing on new approaches to public policy in São Paulo by emphasizing entrepreneurship and self-employment, the city's population may still rely on traditional forms of employment. Many may even reject this new shift, given their personal experiences with the instability of informal labor relations. Nevertheless, the Center's ongoing shift towards neoliberal policies could have significant implications for public assistance programs in São Paulo and for the working class's access to public services in the future.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this paper, I aimed to illustrate how the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support currently operates within São Paulo's urban landscape to assist workers in vulnerable situations. Through an ethnographic approach, I visited the institution to observe its operations, the types of services it offers, and to interview workers that visited the Center. To explore the decision of replacing 'solidarity' with 'entrepreneurship' in its name several years ago, I applied elements of Burawoy's (2008) extended case method to extract at a local level the external political and economic aspects of neoliberalism that have shaped the Center's changes over the last years. This shift signifies a distancing from traditional social services in favor of more neoliberal approaches that emphasize entrepreneurship and specialized training courses.

While the Center still provides traditional services such as unemployment insurance and formal job applications, the promotion of neoliberal values and discourses is evident. The term 'entrepreneurship' is prominently displayed on the institution's website, external walls, and advertisements. The concept of 'self-employment' and generating one's own income is supported by motivational stories and course offerings, reflecting a growing alignment with corporate values. This shift highlights the ongoing penetration of entrepreneurial values and behaviors into Brazil's state services and institutions, even as they remain public rather than privatized.

However, during my interviews with fourteen young workers who visited the Center between November 2023 and June 2024, it became evident that their expectations were still strongly aligned with traditional services, such as job application opportunities and unemployment insurance. Additionally, almost all of the interviewees were seeking stable and formal employment as a means of livelihood. While some acknowledged and even appreciated the entrepreneurial alternatives, they did not view the Center as a facilitator for achieving entrepreneurial goals, often highlighting the challenges associated with starting their own business.

In my understanding, the interviewees' preference for stable employment over any 'entrepreneurial adventure' stems from their personal experiences with informality and insecurity as young workers attempting to enter a saturated job market in Brazil, currently characterized by high levels of unemployment and informality. Consequently, the workers' desires and expectations do not fully align with the new direction promoted by the institution. Nevertheless, the Center for Employment and Entrepreneurship Support embodies the

ongoing infiltration of neoliberal values and ideology into public institutions, embedding these values in its discourse and approach to public services. This shift has the potential to shape São Paulo's urban landscape in the long term by promoting entrepreneurship and self-employment as solutions for unemployment and vulnerability. This approach aligns with a broader neoliberal ideological trend that individualizes structural problems of capitalism (Ulbricht 2024).

It is evident that institutions wield significant power in shaping people's beliefs and actions over time. Therefore, it remains crucial for scholars to continue studying how neoliberalism persists and influences local policies in micro-spaces. These local policies reflect external forces that continue to impact workers' daily lives and experiences. However, as the qualitative interviews have shown, nothing is predetermined; workers' lived experiences can foster diverse forms of social consciousness (Thompson, 1978), which may challenge neoliberal policies and advocate for basic rights.

Thus, it is essential not to underestimate the agency of those who make history, even within existing circumstances (Marx 2018). While neoliberal forces may push workers toward individual solutions for structural problems, their own experiences can generate resistance to these changes, advocating for alternative ways of organizing public resources or even society itself.

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*** STATEMENT OF RESEARCH DATA AVAILABILITY**

The dataset supporting the results of this study is not available to the public and can only be provided upon specific request.

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*** CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The author(s) declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

*** ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL STATEMENT**

This study was reviewed and approved by CEP committee at Universidade Estadual de Campinas CHS – UNICAMP, under the approval number 6.561.637; – CAAE: 71160723.0.0000.8142

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