

Operários sem padrões: Os trabalhadores da cidade de Santos no entreguerras.

By Fernando Teixeira da Silva. Campinas, Brazil: UNICAMP, 2003. Notes. Bibliography. 475 pp. Paper.

This is Fernando Teixeira da Silva's doctoral dissertation as submitted to the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP). It traces the history of the labor movement in the port city of Santos between the two world wars. This chronological focus is deliberately unconventional, in that it bridges the year 1930, still widely accepted as the dividing line between a period of "authentic" labor movements and a new era overshadowed by Getúlio Vargas's welfare and labor legislation, which supposedly co-opted workers and corrupted unions. Silva argues against such a periodization by illustrating continuities in labor organization and stressing the specificity of the workers' demands both before and after 1930. He also revisits the *cupulismo* thesis — the argument that Communist labor leaders undermined unions by putting party dogma ahead of the members' bread-and-butter demands — and refutes it for the case of Santos, where the Communists gained the trust of the rank and file in the longshoremen's union by combating favoritism and democratizing the allocation of work under the closed shop.

Silva places the "encounter" of two concepts at the center of his analysis: writing the history of the labor movement, he argues, requires an understanding of the respective "culture of work" (p. 26). He defines "culture of work" as the "experience of social groups identified with the place they occupy in production" (p. 26) and adds that it manifests itself "beyond the production process in practices and collective organizations that aim to achieve that double ambition to express a social condition and obtain public recognition" (p. 27). Still, he looks for this experience primarily in the workplace, where the workers "to a great extent defined their lives, their individual and social worth, [and] nourished their desire of independence in relation to other social groups" (p. 27).

The first half of the book focuses on what Silva conceptualizes as the "culture of work," although it really is primarily an economic and often technical analysis of work and labor relations in the two most important local industries: construction and the port.

The workers in the construction industry suffered a steady loss of bargaining power. Before World War I, brief stoppages by skilled artisans were often sufficient to have demands met, but such power was gradually eroded by technical innovation and the application of the lessons of scientific administration. In the port, the reorganization of work affected the different occupational groups less uniformly. Silva highlights the longshoremen's successful push, in the 1930s, for the closed shop as an important victory against the powerful Santos Docks Company. The second half of the book covers the Santos labor movement as a whole and chronicles the city's transformation from a heavily anarchist "Brazilian Barcelona" before World War I to a Communist-dominated "Brazilian Moscow" after World War II.

The study is at its strongest when it considers shifts in industrial technology and the reorganization of work in the analysis of labor organization. Exemplary are the chapters on the changing organization of port operations, where Silva illustrates the specific challenges for labor organization in Santos by comparison with European and North American ports. Unfortunately, the analysis of the "culture of work" in the construction industry never quite reaches that same depth and contributes relatively little to the understanding of the labor movement. The link between the history of the labor movement and the analysis of work in the port is stronger than for the construction industry, but still not as tight as one might expect given Silva's emphasis on the conceptual "encounter."

Despite an intermittent emphasis on the role of shared cultural assumptions, such as the port workers' "valour" (p. 32), and serious concentration on economic and technical questions, this is essentially a political history. It is "political" in the best and deepest sense, covering issues as concrete as labor rackets and political murder and as abstract as the strategic appropriation of Vargas's labor reforms. The politics of repression after World War I and the politics of reform after 1930 appear as key causes of transformation in the Santos labor movement. When it comes to specifics, Silva is very much a social historian of labor. He cites diminishing real wages, a fluctuating demand for labor, and the shifting occupational makeup of the workforce as the main causes of conflict; he highlights changes in the work process to explain the success or failure of particular mobilizations; and he uses indicators of the workers' material well-being as the primary measure for the movement's victories and defeats.

The analysis is persuasive overall, thorough in that it pays attention to the work process, but not distinctly "cultural." Rather than use the introduction to pay tribute to the cultural paradigm, Silva should preach what he practices, namely that an understanding of business strategy and technological change is the key to a sophisticated analysis of workers' demands, labor organization, and union strategy. Silva calls for a less ideological and more historically specific analysis of Brazilian labor movements, and his book is an important step in that direction. He might have advanced his agenda further still had he not taken the conceptual detour through the "culture of work."

Oliver Dinius, University of Mississippi

Published in *The Hispanic American Historical Review* – HAHR
February 2006 – pp. 185-186
Special Issue: Immigration and Nation