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Practice and Ideology: A Cautionary Note on the Historian's Craft

JOHN D. FRENCH

Joel Wolfe's article in this issue examines a formative event in the development of the twentieth-century Brazilian labor movement: the 1917 general strike in São Paulo. He focuses on two key relationships: between leaders and led, and between working-class women and class institutions largely run by men. Despite advancing an innovative approach to the topic, Wolfe's article suffers from problems of evidence, historiography, and conceptualization.

Wolfe introduces his general thesis at the outset by recounting a 1914 antiwar rally in the city of São Paulo where anarchist and socialist speakers are heckled by unnamed "workers in the crowd" who demand that they address the workers' immediate problems. Wolfe uses this incident to suggest that there existed "antipathy between the city's workers and labor activists in 1914." Indeed, he later talks of the "workers' protests during the August 1914 antiwar rally." On the basis of the evidence cited, however, these claims go well beyond the data at hand. If one cannot, as the author rightly argues, equate São Paulo's labor radicals with the working-class rank and file, it is equally clear that a group of hecklers, their numbers and identities unclear, should not be viewed as the voice of the tens of thousands of workers of São Paulo.

Indeed, do we even know that the hecklers *were* workers? And which of the two newspapers cited is the source for the account of this alleged heckling? If his main source is the conservative *Correio Paulistano*, organ of the state's Partido Republicano Paulista, the incident may not have occurred as narrated, given the newspaper's conviction that labor radicals were always outside, usually foreign, agitators who never spoke for the legitimate interests of the masses.

His account of the episode is strengthened if it is drawn from the

socialist newspaper *Avanti*. Yet even in that case, the incident is at best suggestive of the existence of a gap between the more abstract and politicized “class consciousness” of leaders and the more immediate and mundane material concerns of other workers. Wolfe suggests as much later when he quite sensibly observes that São Paulo’s workers “opposed the impact of the war on their lives” but did not “articulate the anarchists’ critique” of that war.

The Rank and File Versus the Anarchists

Wolfe charges that historians of Brazilian labor have “glossed over the conflictual relationship between left activists and the rank and file.” As a result, they view the 1917 general strike as part of an era of “anarchist-oriented labor activism” rather than seeing this unprecedented event as a product of rank-and-file workers. To further strengthen his argument, Wolfe suggests that earlier scholars have conflated the “experiences of anarchist tradesmen . . . with those of industrial laborers,” thus ignoring “the gulf” between the two.

Thus Wolfe suggests that the scholarly literature on the anarchist labor movement in São Paulo has been naively celebratory. Yet to say, as many have, that 1917–19 was the high point of anarchist success in organizing Paulista workers is by no means the same thing as idealizing anarchist labor militants while implicitly demeaning the contribution of the rank and file. Indeed, the classic articles and books by Michael Hall, Sheldon Maram, Boris Fausto, and others were all critical of the anarchist leadership and its shortcomings. Moreover, Sheldon Maram and I have both emphasized the distinction between the minoritarian social base of the organized workers’ movement and the mass of the working class which was found in the industrial sector, especially textiles. None of these scholars ever claimed that anarchists or labor militants in general were single-handedly or even directly responsible for the events of 1917. Although labor leaders spoke in the name of *all workers*, they were keenly aware of the precariousness of their claim to represent and effectively lead the working class as a whole during these years.¹

Later, Wolfe observes that the left in São Paulo “lacked coherence and a strong base in the industrial working class well into 1917.” He blames this situation far too one-sidedly on the radicals’ continued concentration “on antiwar politics at the expense of shop-floor [union] organizing.” How-

1. This point is well illustrated in some of the contemporary anarchist articles reprinted in Iara Aun Khoury, *A greve de 1917 em São Paulo e o processo de organização proletária* (São Paulo, 1981).

ever, part of the explanation surely can be found in the violent employer and government opposition to labor organizing. And the relatively low levels of combativeness and disunity among the rank and file no doubt also contributed to this outcome.

Wolfe claims to offer “a new interpretive framework for twentieth-century Brazilian labor history”: that “conflicts between the industrial rank and file and anarchist activists were as important in shaping working-class consciousness and politics as the conflicts with employers and the state.” This exaggerated claim collapses of its own weight. São Paulo’s radical labor activists, who numbered in the hundreds at best, had only sporadic contact with the mass of 85,000 workers in the state. This episodic and inorganic relationship cannot possibly be equated with the ongoing, daily, and unrelenting impact of the employer/employee tie. Even if one granted that the relationship between anarchists and workers was primarily antagonistic, one would be hard pressed to argue that the powerless labor movement of the First Republic in São Paulo had even a fraction of the influence on the shaping of working-class consciousness exercised by employers and the state.

Moreover, the author often falls into monolithic usages (such as “the anarchists,” “the workers,” “women workers,” or “the rank and file”) that run against his own awareness of the distinctiveness of work cultures and consciousness both between and within industries. Indeed, although Wolfe invokes the concept of class formation, he fails to advance our understanding of this process. (For cutting-edge research in this regard, readers are urged to consult Eliana de Freitas Dutra’s superb 1988 book on the labor movement in two cities in Minas Gerais during the First Republic.²)

Women as Labor’s Vanguard?

In his brief in favor of the rank and file, Wolfe advances the related claim that “structural factors propelled women into a vanguard position” within the emerging working-class movement based upon their numerical predominance in the largest single industrial sector, textiles. Thus the “vanguard” is the rank and file with women occupying a position of prominence that has been missed in past scholarship.

Despite an abundance of detailed statistics on the textile industry in São Paulo between 1912 and 1920, however, Wolfe fails to provide the needed demographic, occupational, gender, and wage data about textile

2. Eliana de Freitas Dutra, *Caminhos operários nas Minas Gerais. Um estudo das práticas operárias em Juiz de Fora e Belo Horizonte na Primeira República* (São Paulo, 1988).

employment in the state. Wolfe contents himself, for example, with citing a 1912 survey of 31 textile factories to suggest that “women were the majority of industrial (especially textile) workers.” In using only this selective sample in Table 1, he leaves the impression that 72 percent of all textile workers were women. Yet the census data for 1920, a comprehensive source closer in date to the strike being studied, reveal that women were only 55 percent, a bare majority, of the overall textile work force.³

It is surprising that Wolfe fails to explore wage differentials in textiles between male and female workers or the differing distribution of women across the hierarchy of jobs within the state’s textile industry. It would be worth asking why women predominated in São Paulo or in a given factory when evidence from elsewhere in Brazil suggests that this was not an inevitable feature of textile production per se. What explains such regional or enterprise-level variation in female employment?⁴

Wolfe also devotes far too little attention to analyzing the gender politics of the São Paulo workers’ movement. He suggests, for example, that women “consistently avoided participation in male-dominated unions” in response to neglect by the labor movement and the sexist attitudes of its anarchist leaders. Yet current scholarship on gender and labor suggests that there are far more complicated explanations for women’s lesser propensity for activism in the labor movement.⁵ Moreover, the quote he uses to prove the anarchists’ “outright misogyny,” a term too harsh by far in this case, could equally well be seen as a realistic reflection of one dimension of gender politics within working-class families.

Wolfe would be well advised to place his arguments within the context of recent Brazilian scholarship on women workers in the First Republic.

3. See Table VI in Esmeralda Blanco Bolsonaro de Moura, *Mulheres e menores no trabalho industrial: os fatores sexo e idade na dinâmica do capital* (Petrópolis, 1982). Additional statistical material can be found in Maria Alice Rosa Ribeiro, *Condições de trabalho na indústria têxtil paulista (1870–1930)* (São Paulo, 1988). Wolfe fails to fully exploit the possibilities offered by the 1912 data he used in summary fashion in Table 1. The report in question provides detailed descriptions of different factories, including Crespi, along with a breakdown of each enterprise’s work force (Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro and Michael Hall, *Condições de vida e de trabalho, relações com os empresários e o estado* [São Paulo, 1981], vol. 2 of *A classe operária no Brasil*, 69–71, 82–89).

4. Eileen Keremtsis, “The Early Industrial Worker in Rio de Janeiro, 1870–1930,” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1982), 64, discusses the predominance of male workers in the work force of the Bangu textile factory in Rio de Janeiro.

5. After reviewing the wider literature, John D. French with Mary Lynn Pedersen, “Women and Working-Class Mobilization in Postwar São Paulo, 1945–1948,” *Latin American Research Review*, 24:3 (1989), 119, identified a pattern where participation by women workers is highest at peak moments of mobilization while women are largely absent from the ongoing organizational activities of the labor movement. At the same time, the article emphasized that this pattern “is not unique to women but rather mirrors in an exaggerated way the ups and downs of male working-class participation.” In other words, male/female differences in this regard are a matter of degree, not absolutes.

How do his conclusions, for example, relate to the work of Maria Valéria Junho Pena and Margareth Rago? Both authors are critical of the sexism of the anarchist labor leadership, and each calls attention to the key role played by the women workers of the Cotonifício Crespi in the 1917 strike.⁶

Wolfe must also confront the conclusions of other scholars that contradict his own arguments. In her 1982 book on female and child labor in São Paulo, Esmeralda Blanco Bolsonaro de Moura notes, as does Wolfe, that women and children played important and highly visible roles in certain strikes during the First Republic. Yet she judges this type of participation by women workers to be primarily isolated acts of immediate protest. And “even when the participation of women, minors, and children is expressive,” she emphasizes, “all the most important decisions [in such movements] . . . are left to the adult worker of the masculine sex.” She explains this phenomenon as a reflection of the prevalent gender ideology among workers, which held that adult men had a “responsibility” to “protect” the weaker members of their class.⁷ It is not surprising, Bolsonaro de Moura suggests, that women, minors, and children were “the most disorganized section of . . . a precariously organized working class.” Emphasizing the absence of organized activism among women workers, she suggests that it is to be expected that “the woman, divided between home and work, should see [her industrial job] only as a means of subsistence” and thus fail to organize on a political or class basis.⁸ Wolfe no doubt disagrees with such arguments, but they must be dealt with seriously and not simply ignored.

Wolfe has set out in this article to rediscover the agency of women workers that has been too long neglected or denied. In doing so, however, he has failed to resist the temptation of wishful thinking that Margareth Rago has warned against. In her discussion, Rago emphasizes that male suppression and the distortions engendered by male sources rendered the struggles of women workers invisible to later observers. Yet she also recognizes that, given women’s complicity with their own oppression, one cannot simply “right the balance” by advancing “a heroic image of the woman, [viewed solely] as a combative figure silenced by the dominant

6. Maria Valéria Junho Pena, *Mulheres e trabalhadoras* (Rio de Janeiro, 1981), 182, 190; Margareth Rago, *Do cabaré ao lar: a utopia da cidade disciplinar, Brasil 1890–1930* (Rio de Janeiro, 1985), 70–73, 67.

7. Bolsonaro de Moura, *Mulheres e menores*, 11, 116.

8. Ibid. Ribeiro, *Condições*, 159–160, mentions the abundance of contemporary complaints about women serving as strike breakers, a subject Wolfe ignores. Without taking male complaints at face value in every case, there are enough examples to suggest that a significant minority of women workers did act in such ways. To be complete, our analysis must incorporate this dimension of female working-class behavior as well. Ribeiro, *Condições*, 145, quotes a 1919 denunciation of four female strike breakers at Crespi who had been promoted to foremen.

discourse.” While calling for a study of day-to-day female resistance, she rejects the notion of a hidden history “in which working-class women [during the First Republic] emerge as a specifically female movement, demanding their rights as a marginalized and oppressed group.”⁹

The General Strike of 1917

Wolfe should be commended for his approach to the study of the generalized strike movement that we have come to know as the São Paulo General Strike of 1917. The standard approach has been to speak briefly and in general terms about the strikes occurring at this or that factory and then jump quickly to the formal demands presented by the emergent leadership of the movement, the *Comité de Defesa Proletária* (CDP). Indeed, I myself have taken this approach.

Wolfe proposes instead to focus on the textile factory whose striking workers initiated the sequence of events that became the general strike: the *Cotonificio Crespi* located in the São Paulo neighborhood of Mooca. Although the Crespi strike was not the first such movement in textiles in 1917, it was, as has long been known, the immediate spur to the strike movement. Moreover, this plant, which employed approximately 2,000 workers, was the third largest in the textile industry of São Paulo and as such provides a window into the grievances of the industrial proletariat.

Given his aim, Wolfe’s failure to explore the gender dynamics within the Crespi factory is a disappointment. Bolsonaro de Moura argues convincingly that women’s factory labor cannot be analytically separated from the question of labor by children and adolescents. Not only are the practices interwoven but so is the discourse. Yet Wolfe ignores this question, despite the abundance of contemporary complaints about the use of child labor at the *Cotonificio Crespi* factory that he focuses on. The anarchists, Bolsonaro de Moura also points out, had launched a campaign against child labor in March 1917 even before the general strike. Significantly, demands relating to child labor figured in both the original Crespi demands and the CDP’s demands in 1917.

There is yet another curious lacuna in Wolfe’s conceptual framework. What is the relationship between the female workers at Crespi and their

9. Rago, *Cabaré*, 74. Eva Alterman Blay, *Eu não tenho onde morar. Vilas operárias na cidade de São Paulo* (São Paulo, 1985), 273–277, presents a description of factory life at Crespi by a woman who, with her entire family, worked at the plant from the late 1920s onward. Her discourse provides rich raw material for an analysis of the complexities of consciousness among working-class women. For another example, see the transcribed recollections of three women workers in Osasco, São Paulo, who were being interviewed about the *Vidraria Santa Marina* glass factory before World War I (Helena Pignatari Werner, *Raízes do movimento operário em Osasco* [São Paulo, 1981], 81–145).

male co-workers? Wolfe has pictured female workers as consciously arrayed in struggle against sexist anarchist leaders, yet he tells us nothing about how they deal with the gross inequalities and male supremacist views of their fellow shop workers—many of whom, after all, are their fathers, brothers, and future husbands. Could deference to male authority and acceptance of paternalistic male discourse characterize this aspect of their lives? And if so, what are the implications for his analysis of their alleged conflict with labor leaders?

Given the importance of the Crespi strike, it is disappointing that Wolfe fails to provide a detailed and in-depth discussion of the factory's composition and the particular sequence that made Crespi the detonator of a larger working-class insurgency. In his article, he seems to care little about the specific events in which the Crespi workers were protagonists: he is content to simply use the strike to exemplify his broader theses about women as vanguard and rank and file versus anarchists.

I think it would be more fruitful and revealing, however, for Wolfe to draw us into the day-to-day, week-to-week unfolding of this dramatic struggle. In this way, we would come far closer to the actual experience of work and conflict of this group of workers. Citing some of the same newspaper articles used by Wolfe, Paula Beiguelman's account in *Os companheiros de São Paulo* lays out the second set of demands formulated by the Crespi workers in early June, the company's subsequent decision to close the factory (a lockout not discussed in detail by Wolfe), and narrates a violent clash between the police and a crowd including female workers.¹⁰ Or look at the rich possibilities suggested by the information on Crespi provided by Boris Fausto's *O trabalho urbano*. One of the workers' complaints, it turns out, reflected their resentment over the mandatory collections by management to finance the Italian war effort. In addition, the Crespi strike actually began in a single section of 400 and only later became general. And, finally, Fausto reports that there existed both a male and a female factory commission at Crespi! All of this is extremely relevant to Wolfe's theme and should be incorporated into his discussion.¹¹

Women's Vanguard Role and the Anarchists

Wolfe pictures women's nonparticipation in labor organizations as the result of a conscious decision by women (which ones? how many?) to opt instead for "their own formal and informal associations, such as factory and neighborhood commissions that were comprised solely [point unproven]

10. Paula Beiguelman, *Os companheiros de São Paulo* (São Paulo, 1977), 83–85.

11. Boris Fausto, *O trabalho urbano e conflito social (1890–1920)* (São Paulo, 1976), 192–194, 253–254.

of women.” Then, in the section titled “Popular Mobilization for ‘Reason and Justice,’” he makes his most sustained effort to prove his contention about women’s vanguard role.

Having uncovered labor virtue in women, Wolfe goes on to credit the “city’s women workers,” apparently en masse, with having taught left activists “the importance of labor organizations.” Indeed, Wolfe claims that “anarchists *as a group* embraced unionization campaigns” only after women had demonstrated the latent power of the working class. In his indictment of the “anarchists” (an ambiguous label which one should probably shy away from),¹² he denies that labor activists contributed in any significant way to the grassroots organization and ferment that led to the 1917 strike. Yet this claim too can be empirically challenged, as Wolfe obliquely recognizes. After all, São Paulo’s radicals were engaged in a major drive in early 1917 to establish neighborhood-based leagues as a step toward organizing workers (a development much discussed in the literature). Thus, it is likely that some of Wolfe’s independent actions undertaken by “workers” or “women workers” in “factory commissions” were by-products, at least in part, of such initiatives.

In fact a Liga Operária da Mooca existed in the neighborhood of the Crespi works, and both Beiguelman and Fausto directly tie this anarchist-led Liga to the Crespi strike. We also know that meetings of the Crespi workers were coordinated later in June by this organization, and there is a June 9 article in the anarchist *A Plebe* that specifically refers to the “comrades” of the Liga Operária da Mooca having carried out propaganda with the Crespi workers at their numerous meetings “before and after the strike.”¹³ Proof of contact between Crespi workers and anarchist activists does not, of course, prove that the latter were *the* organizers of the movement (even anarchists don’t claim this). It does suggest, however, that Wolfe needs to reconsider his thesis that anarchists played no role in initiating the 1917 strike movement. Moreover, a finding that the Liga Operária da Mooca was actively involved in the Crespi strike would also explain an anomalous detail reported by Wolfe. After arguing that a female factory commission provided the strike’s leadership, he notes without comment that “interestingly . . . a group of men with no ties to the factory commissions arrived at police headquarters to negotiate on behalf of the strikers”—behavior reminiscent of that observed by Bolsonaro de Moura as cited above.

12. Angela de Castro Gomes, *A invenção do trabalhismo* (São Paulo, 1988), 85–89, discusses the importance of anarchism in the labor movement but emphasizes the distortions that such political labels pose for understanding labor politics in this period.

13. Khoury, *Greve*, 133.

I have examined the author's treatment of the May 1917 strike in detail in order to suggest the questionable foundations of the author's overarching theses regarding it. I should add, however, that I am equally skeptical about the empirical basis for his treatment of the role of the textile union (UOFT) led by anarchist weaver José Righetti after 1917. Here, too, Wolfe consistently posits a distant and almost entirely antagonistic relationship between what he terms "workers' commissions" at the factory level and Righetti's trade union.¹⁴

Wolfe has advanced a daring and provocative thesis but has done so with insufficient attention to its empirical, historiographical, and conceptual foundations. It would have been a more useful exercise if he had limited himself, in his own words, to tracing "the complex relationship between the rank and file and labor activists" in one geographic location during a dramatic moment of labor mobilization.

14. Rago, *Cabaré*, 49–52, analyzes anarchist discussions of factory committees as a step toward workers' control. On page 56, she discusses a September 1919 UOFT proposal to create internal factory commissions subordinated to the union.