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INTERVIEWING THE BRAZILIAN MILITARY: REFLECTIONS ON A RESEARCH EXPERIENCE[1]

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My purpose is to present some reflections about my experience in interviewing Brazilian military officers. Despite the specificity of the Brazilian case, I trust that these observations may serve as a comparative reference for the study of military institutions in other contexts.

Since 1987, I have conducted approximately 250 hours of recorded interviews with 80 people, including cadets (students at the Brazilian Army Officer Academy), officers on active duty during the authoritarian military regime (1964-1985) – including a long interview with ex-president Ernesto Geisel – and military leaders of the "New Republic", the period that started after the military regime folded in 1985 and that goes on until this day.[3]

First of all, it is important to stress that these interviews were made immediately after a period of 21 years during which the military were directly engaged in government. The legacy of this authoritarian experience, particularly in relation to the behavior of some sections of the Armed Forces in political repression, is one of the more sensitive areas of contemporary Brazilian historical memory. Although the military have been under civilian rule for the last 14 years, they have not yet achieved a clearly defined social function. Therefore, they suffered losses in their prestige, in great part because of their behavior during the "military regime".

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[3] So far these interviews resulted in five published books: Castro (1990); D'Araujo, Soares and Castro (1994a, 1994b); Soares, D'Araujo and Castro (1995); D'Araujo and Castro (1997).

In this context, my experience of interviewing military officers was far from trivial. My investigation of the Army Officer Academy was the first independent academic project ever developed by a civilian Brazilian researcher inside a Brazilian military institution. In the project on the military regime, a series of interviews provided fresh views – based on original depositions – of the military about their own performance during that period. In both instances I had to deal with the problems inherent to a new line of investigation and with the related lack of references. Also, I had to deal with the persistent and mutual distrust that occurs between military officers and civilians in Brazil.

The first point I would like to make is precisely about the conditions that allowed such productive exchanges between interviewer and interviewees. In the case of the Army Officer Academy, the general who occupied the highest post in the Army's school system gave me permission to conduct research there. I did not know this person. To reach him, I used a most direct instrument: I wrote him a letter explaining the generalities of my project and stressing its academic nature. Having obtained his permission – a surprisingly easy accomplishment – it was forwarded to the commander of the school, who followed the general's order, even though in his personal opinion he was against the project.

This permission, originating from the highest echelon, was crucial to make the interviews actually happen, and to the application of other research methods, such as participant observation. In an institution based on rigid hierarchical principles, authorization from a higher echelon was nothing less than a pre-requisite to my activity of conducting interviews.[4]

The cadets and officers with whom I talked were content in knowing that my research had been authorized, that the school commander was aware of my work, and that the anonymity of

[4] Se also Leirner (1997), with whom I agree about the matter of how important it is to take hierarchy as a vital principle of military institutions.

their depositions was guaranteed.[5] In a social setting in which the individual is permanently exposed, placed "in the public eye", the interviews represented a rare opportunity for anonymity. As in the ideal type of the "stranger" described by Georg Simmel, many times it happened that I received "the most surprising revelations and confidences, at times reminiscent of a confessional, about matters which are kept carefully hidden from everybody with whom one is close" (Simmel 1971, p. 145).

The interviews were very cordial and the cadets displayed a remarkable interest in my research. In general, when they learned that my father had been in the military (although by then he was in the reserves) and that I had attended a military school for two years, communication became easier. On the other hand, I was concerned with the possibility of being fooled by "staged" behaviors. The cadets could have been previously instructed by their superiors to pass on to me a certain "official story" about life in the Academy. In order to be sure that this was not happening, I conducted interviews under distinct circumstances: inside and outside the Academy (and at the cadet's homes, during weekends), with more than one cadet at the same time, and with ex-cadets (expelled or otherwise no longer linked to the Academy). I checked if there were significant differences in the contents of the interviews, and the result was negative.

Another important concern of mine was keeping in mind that my analytical universe was composed by the *entire set of interviews*, and not by individual interviews. This may sound as a general methodological comment, but I believe that it merits even greater emphasis in the case of interviewing military personnel, given the clear *segmentation* of the military world. "The military" is actually a complex category, encompassing distinct segments defined both vertically (different hierarchical levels and generations) and horizontally (different services, such as Army,

[5] Reference to even a few biographical details in my publications could lead easily to the identification of the interviewees.

Navy, and Air Force, and different branches, such as infantry and artillery). "Segmentation" should not be confused with "division", because what happens is not the opposition of groups of different nature, but of groups of the same structural nature reassembled as a function of special situations. The participation of individuals in each segment gives them a specific identity, but such an identity exists only as a function of the situations that activate it, dissolving itself in larger units under other situations. The identities of "infantry" and "artillery" soldier can be activated in a specific situation as having opposing traits, but in other situations they compose the same category in opposition to others – members of the Army, as opposed to members of the Navy, for example.[6]

To build a general picture of the military institution it is therefore necessary to select a reasonably encompassing *sample*, taking into account all the facets of the military segment with which one is working, and never forget of the non-substantialist nature of all social identities. I am suggesting that identity be viewed not as something constant and unchangeable that characterizes a group, but as a variable that changes as a function of the values of other factors, leading to different results – an "algebraic" conception identity, to use a suggestion of Simmel (1977, p. 59). I believe that military institutions present actually a trap for researchers, because they have a very clear morphological outline – walls with sentries, soldiers with uniforms, and many other evident symbolic and physical distinctions. The researcher must thus resist the temptation of overlapping an inventory of elements, traits and rules of military identity with the morphology of the institution. The challenge is to perceive not "what" is this identity, but "how" it is, what are its symbolic mechanisms and what are the manners by which its *meaning* is articulated, both of which are the very condition for the existence of these elements.

[6] In this matter I am trying to follow the spirit of the analysis that Evans-Pritchard (1940) made of the political institutions of the Nuer.

In texts based on oral history, many times we find an emphasis given to the inter-personal barriers that must be overcome in the process of interviewing. However, my experience in interviewing military personnel shows clearly that understanding the characteristics of the *social environment* of the individuals is of equal importance to the success of interviews. For example, in a *totalizing* social environment such as that of military life, the value of individuality is not strongly emphasized, because military personnel ideally move about in limited social circles.[7] Besides, interactions are strongly concentrated within the institution and there is an overall standardization of possible professional pathways. The military go through similar experiences of professional socialization (in the Brazilian case, by the way, this has been remarkably stable for decades), and they experience the same institutional rites and career turning points.

The cumulative effect of these characteristics on the interviewing process is remarkable. First, the outlines of the interviews are also easily standardized, to a high degree. On the other hand, many of examples, images and expressions that are used by interviewees are potentially unfamiliar to the interviewer. Again, it becomes clear that one cannot understand fully what is being expressed if there is a lack of sociological understanding of the meaning that military personnel give to issues such as command, leadership, hierarchy and discipline

This is valid even in the case of interviews with military personnel who are in the reserves and have accumulated significant experience outside the sphere of military life, such as in politics. “Before anything else, I was always a soldier”, “everything I am I owe to the Army”, and “we, the military”, and other expressions that refer directly to a corporate identity, to a belonging to the military institution, are common.[8]

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[7] I am applying here a concept developed by Simmel (1971, chapter 18), for whom the importance of a group varies in the reverse proportion of the value given to individuality.

[8] This was noticed also by other Brazilian researchers who interviewed military personnel. See D’Araujo (1994) and Farias (1994).

When the interviewee is involved in *extra-ordinary* events linked to his military career, though, this entails important differences in the interviewing process. This became obvious in the series of interviews about the 1964' military regime that I conducted together with Maria Celina D'Araujo and Gláucio Soares. We interviewed officers who were active in political repression or held important executive positions during the military regime. In 1964, most of them were middle-rank officers who would reach the top of the ranks only in the following years. Therefore, to a great extent they helped forge the military regime itself.

When we interviewed these officers, between 1992 and 1999, they already were in the reserves. Therefore, their decisions to make depositions were personal, not demanding approval by superiors. Their motivation in accepting invitations to be interviewed was above all the possibility of giving their own version about what they had experienced during the military regime. They all shared the discomfort of carrying the stigma that branded the military institution and, by consequence, their biographies, in the post-authoritarian regime. Some of them were actually under the weight of being individually accused of illegal acts related to their participation in political repression. Some were even accused of being torturers.

When we started our series of interviews with these officers, there were very few available sources on the "military version" about the 1964 regime. Memoirs and depositions of the "1964' generals" had been published, it is true, but these players had soon faded out of the political scene. In contrast, there was very little information about the experiences of the officers who built their careers during the 21 years of military government. We were trying to break the "pact of silence" that these officers had made about the "dirty years" of Brazilian history, and thus build up a new set of *documentary sources*.

It was obvious to us, the interviewers, which did not agreed ideologically with the opinions of these players, that much of what they were saying was false. However, it was

important to bear in mind that lying or telling the truth is not the privilege of any single social group, and that all oral sources are highly problematic in this respect. Oral history methodology yields basically *subjective interpretations* of the experiences of interviewees. Nonetheless, our final results were highly rewarding. We found that there is not *a* "military memory" about this period, but several, competing and deeply divergent *memories*, pertaining to different factions of officers. As we explored the conflicts between these players and their versions, working with the entire set of interviews, we formulated new interpretations about the military regime. For example, we saw that the conspiracy that led to the 1964 coup had several foci and was not at all centralized; that political repression also harmed the military institution itself; and that there was deep internal disagreement about the idea of returning the country to a civilian democratic regime. In this case, we were dealing not with the above mentioned *segmentation* in everyday military life, but with *divisions* among groups that held different professional and political projects and that were fighting among themselves for power.

For us, the most important thing was to make them speak and thus furnish new sources of information. Other factors besides the possibility of defense against personal and institutional stigma influenced their decision to accept our invitation. One was the knowledge that other officers, either friends or enemies, were also being interviewed. Another was the identity of the interviewers as researchers linked to an important academic institution, as opposed to journalists avid for sensational "breaks". Some interviewees enjoyed learning that they need not answer questions about which they did not feel comfortable, and that they would have a chance to revise at will the transcripts of their interviews before publication. When the project was over, we found that very little had been changed or suppressed during these revisions, and that the basic content of the interviews was not jeopardized. In some cases, revisions introduced only stylistic changes, maybe because of a discomfort with the oral "style" typical of depositions. The most important

consequence of this procedure of guaranteeing that interviewees could revise their depositions was to make the interviews themselves possible, given the above mentioned prejudice and ideological difference between interviewers and interviewees.

With quite a degree of variation, a non-negligible difficulty in conducting interviews with important players of the military regime was dealing with an "object" with which we had no empathy. However, we maintained a strong degree of respect so that the interviews could flow in a professional and cordial atmosphere. Despite some formal similarities, an interviewer is not an inquisitor, nor an interrogator. In most of the experiences in which oral history is used, the interviewer has empathy in relation to the interviewee, or at least in relation to the group to which the interviewee belongs. The danger in this case is the interviewer loosing the required intellectual *distancing*, as long as he intends to be a *researcher*. (This, of course, does not mean that interviews cannot me made for other purposes.) A final point that the interviews with some of these military officers made clear was the importance of keeping in mind the role of the interviewer as a *researcher*. In this role, he should not seek an emotional engagement with his interviewees, but rather to expand the knowledge about the topic under investigation.

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