

Of steel yet flexible: The marks of State ownership and the consequences of privatization in worker subjectivity

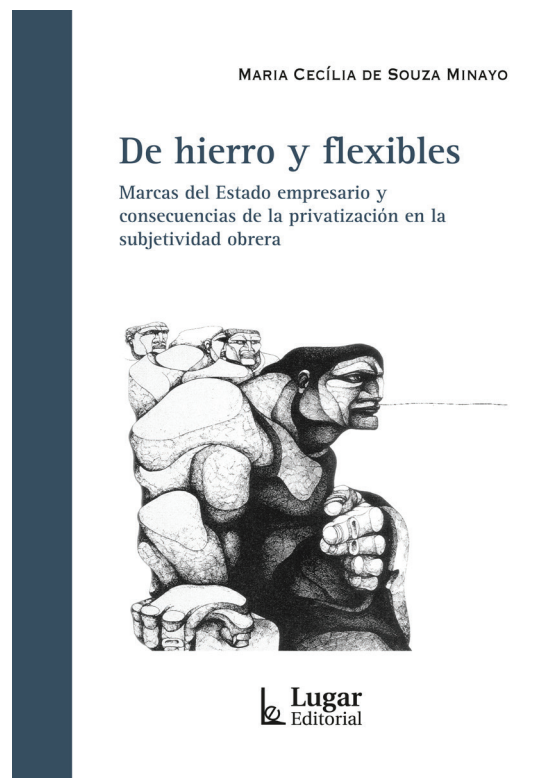
De hierro y flexibles: Marcas del Estado empresario y consecuencias de la privatización en la subjetividad obrera

Hornes, Martín¹

Maria Cecília de Souza Minayo. De hierro y flexibles: Marcas del Estado empresario y consecuencias de la privatización en la subjetividad obrera. Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Lugar Editorial; 2014. 336 p. ISBN 978-950-892-468-1.

The translation of Maria Cecília de Souza Minayo's book, although it was released a decade later, encourages the production of social sciences in the Latin American region. This is a remarkable work that combines political sociology and ethnographic reconstruction, and it is an invitation to discover the history of the transformations of worker subjectivity among surface mining workers in the municipal district of Itabira in the state of Minas Gerais.

In her work, Minayo goes over the lives of the steelworkers of the Vale do Rio Doce company (CVRD) [*Compañía Vale do Rio doce*], starting in the 1980s until the late twentieth century, tracing the history of a company created by federal government's initiative in mid-1942 which was then privatized at the beginning of 1997. Conceived as a crucial company in the export scheme of the Brazilian industry, the CVRD succeeded in ranking in its golden years among the companies with the highest number of interventions in the field of mining in the region. Currently, the CVRD web page highlights the presence of its



activities "across the world." That presence guaranteed in every continent through technological development and productive innovation helps us reach Minayo's goal of seeing a particular worker segment as "steel yet flexible men." It is about those men who underwent the processes of the

¹PhD in Sociology in progress, Instituto de Altos Estudios Sociales, Universidad Nacional de San Martín (IDAES-UNSAN). Doctoral Fellowship, Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET), Argentina. m_hornes@hotmail.com.

industrial transition between Fordism and Toyotism, who sometimes struggled, and some other times conformed to the reorganization of the productive scheme and its implications for the social, political, economic, and cultural life of Itabira.

Minayo's work, which is divided into four parts and comprises twelve chapters, provides an extraordinarily detailed description. Its first part deals with a general approach to the subject of study, set against the backdrop of Itabira and its main actors. The author revisits a major part of the anthropological and sociological works about the mining industry and miners to highlight not only how specific the exploitation of surface mining is, but also the national strategic interest in exportation. Itabira, a municipal district linked to the extraction since colonial times, will never be the same. Backed by the actors' accounts, Minayo thoroughly explains the different historical processes that outlined Itabira's geography after the arrival and transformations of the CVRD: *"There's that beast, that beast, that power built with our own blood, sweat, and tears."*^(p. 49) [Own translation]

As we progressively advance through the chapters, each part starts blending with the whole. The second part sets out on a crucial historical journey through the organization of the CVRD and how different transitions of the productive processes show changes in the worker subjectivity and daily life in Itabira. Three moments are crucial for the author: 1) the moment of "physical strength" (1942-1951), which highlights the preference for manual labor, 2) the moment of "mechanization" and "automation" of labor processes (1952-1972), and 3) the moment of technological innovation and technification (1972-1990), which marks the arrival of qualified experts, bringing an increasing division of work and emergence of outsourcing and precarious conditions that were typical of the 1990s. Those men of steel who called themselves "Lions of the Vale" and broke stone with their "arms"^(p.65) got to know the "business culture" of transparency, competitiveness, and efficiency.

In the final chapters, we draw near the best-known period according to studies of the labor world from conventional sociology, but with the particular characteristics of constantly recreating the transformations of the mining industry and working-class subjectivity of Itabira. The era known as globalization and the emergence of neo-

liberal theses in the setting of the Latin American region mean a new productive reorganization for the workers of the Vale. The strategic planning started by the company turns into a globalization of capital, investments in the financial capital, and the provision of its services in North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. However, the theses also mean a reduction in force, early retirement programs, and turnover in the plant with younger and more qualified staff or with staff more adapted to the new rules of the labor markets. The emergence of business management after the privatization of the CVRD involves mechanisms and an unknown productive reorganization of the workforce: the processes of collective individualization.

From the very first pages of her book, Minayo addresses conceptual categories such as "labor-process" and "general conditions of production," and her work encompasses, analyzes, and discusses theoretical ideas reconstructed with an exquisite ethnographic desire, to firmly convince us that the subjectivity of the workers of Itabira must be understood outside the frameworks that give purpose to the world of social, political, economic, and cultural life of the "steel yet flexible" workers.

It is important to highlight that her work is worthy of a thorough methodical analysis, not only for those interested in this field of study, but also as material for debates to graduate students who want to reflect on the structure and approach of their subjects of study. With no qualms, Minayo accurately describes the successive stages of her work detailing the encouraging exchanges from fields as diverse as sociology, anthropology, history, and economics. She also carefully describes the different approaches and ways of conducting fieldwork, with more than two revisits during the 1980s and 1990s, and some others spread over a four-year period. The author introduces the readers to her most genuine concerns and doubts about her first contact concerning personal and familial relationships, the unavoidable estrangements, and the issues raised in the context of this fieldwork. The author does not skimp on valuable information about the construction of the research unit and gives a comprehensive account of her choice about the methods of analysis, the open interviews, the stories of life devoted to a career in the industry, and records on the field journal notebook. All of this work was carried

out with the aim of undertaking an ethnographic task: "To reconstruct the way in which that core of workers represents, organizes, and classifies their experiences."^(p. 57) [Own translation]

We greatly welcome the arrival of a work which, on the one hand, produces great premises of tasks for those who study in the field of labor but, on the other hand, turns these premises into challenges which are hard to meet.

Firstly, just as Minayo highlights that several authors who study the Brazilian working class show that all foreign models of work organization go through a "Brazilianization,"^(p. 12) it is important to highlight that one of the strong points of this book is showing neoliberalism as a governmental moving technology. In other words, apart from

the traditional approaches on the implementation of neoliberal formulas and the transformation of the labor market, there is a study which requires a reflection on the transformations of the specific local environment, discussing macrocategories from the construction of identified and specific empirical evidence. Secondly, and in line with the previous ideas, her work boasts the introduction of ethnographic categories which take us straight to the social universe of Itabira and help us understand the frameworks of perception and appreciation that make up the subjectivity of the mining workers. Thirdly and lastly, it provides us with an integral look at the social structures and cultural customs which provide a better understanding of other aspects rarely explored in economics.

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