

Labour makeup:

a case study of 800,000 cosmetics resellers in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a case study a Brazilian company, Natura, which employs over 800,000 women as cosmetics resellers who are responsible for all aspects of product distribution. The article discusses the status of informal workers and examines the definition of informal labour in its modern form. The relationship between informal labour and brand is analysed while taking into account the connection between labour and consumption in the resellers' activities. The analysis centres on the relationship between a typically female workforce, labour exploitation, and capital accumulation.

Introduction

This article discusses the concept of informal labour in its modern forms. Based on an empirical study of Brazilian cosmetics resellers, it addresses current sociological problems in defining informal labour, and consequently in recognising labour exploitation.

The Brazilian company in question is currently the national market leader in the cosmetics and personal hygiene sector. The company is well known and publicly regarded as an example of social consciousness and environmental responsibility. It employs a workforce of over 800,000 informal female workers. There are no shops selling products, the employees being solely responsible for the distribution of the cosmetics. The sales representatives, defined by the company as 'consultants', are not officially recognised as employees, and many of them do not recognise themselves as such.

The female employees' activities were selected for study because they provide a case study that makes it possible to re-examine modern forms of labour exploitation, a topic which requires a sociological analysis. Faced with changes in labour relations in recent decades, the theoretical references that guide the analysis of labour relations have shifted, acquiring new meanings. When framing the field of reference discussed in this paper, it is important to take account of the context whereby technological innovations, neoliberal politics, financial accumulation and the transnationalisation of production and distribution chains are all factors that have come together to form the basis of modern patterns of labour exploitation. Thus, this study takes part in a sociological debate that attempts to distinguish and define specific changes in the relations of production and their relationship with modern forms of capital accumulation.

Contemporary informal labour

The term 'informal labour' has been interpreted in many different ways within the fields of sociology of labour and economic research. Since the term was first defined in the 1960s, a broad theoretical field has emerged that aims to identify the different forms of informality as much as to define their relationship with capitalist accumulation. (Oliveira 1972; Oliveira 2003b; Portes & Castells, 1989; Cacciamali 2000; Portes & Hoffman, 2003; Portes & Haller, 2004).

In Brazil, theories of underdevelopment that integrated the notion of informality gained ground in the early 1970s thanks to research by the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC), theories of marginality and Marxist analyses. Debates drew on the modernisation of the country, together with the processes of urbanisation and modernisation that, did not, however, lead to an effective reduction of social inequalities. This is the central issue surrounding the analysis in this paper. In Brazil, the system of references used to explain the persistence of inequalities was based on questions of unemployment and poverty and on the activities that made up the sphere of labour that neither appeared directly linked to industry, nor were incorporated into the formal structures that constituted the sphere of labour at that time.

In 1972, Francisco de Oliveira published *Crítica à razão dualista*. This author deconstructed the argument that non-modernisation of the land could be attributed to the backwardness of Brazil and was at the root of urban 'swelling', from which the persistence of archaic relations in the countryside translated into a disorganised occupation of the city. According to Oliveira, 'backwardness' was to be understood politically: in Marxist terms, in the relationship between relations of production and class interests/struggle. For Oliveira, the persistence of archaic relations of agricultural production manifested itself as a form of domination and degradation of manpower in the countryside as much as in the city.

Backwardness was seen as due to the specific form of accumulation so the use of informal labour, from this standpoint, was understood in its relation to Brazilian accumulation. As an important theoretical milestone, Oliveira's theory gave key importance to the constitution of a vast industrial reserve army, and unemployment was thus understood in terms of its role in lowering the cost of labour and increasing the gains of production. In this way, informal labour started to be understood in relation to its total overlap with the chains of production that were developing in the cities.

If the informal labour issue was necessarily linked to underdeveloped countries in the 1970s and 1980s, in recent decades informal labour has become an important issue in developed countries as well (Portes & Castells, 1989). The transnationalisation of commodity chains has combined with the use of immigrant labour and informal labour issues, with informal labour centrally involved in current forms of labour exploitation and capital accumulation. (Sassen 1998; Portes et Castells, 1989; Cacciamali 2000; Portes & Hoffman, 2003; Portes & Haller, 2004; Davis, 2004 ; Davis, 2006 ; Arantes, 2004)

In this sense, it is necessary to place informal labour within the broader and more complex contemporary context of precarious labour. Western terms such as 'Brazilianisation' (Beck, 1992) seek to give a name to the dismantling of mediatory relations between capital and labour that today are taking place at a global level. There

has been a significant reconfiguration of the productive process that redefines as much as it transforms the horizons that used to guide theorisation on the forms of labour exploitation, as well as the possibilities and political potential of the working class itself.

It is within this context that this article explores the Direct Selling System and, in particular, the relations between a Brazilian cosmetics firm and its army of informal workers.

The direct selling system and the exploitation of female labour

The Direct Selling System (DSS) was established more than a century ago and over the last few decades has experienced rapid growth in terms of the number of sellers across the world. Our approach is based on the relationship between this growth and neoliberal policies of labour deregulation and modern day forms of labour degradation. Global figures on DSS are alarming: the system has spread rapidly all over the world increasing every year, and it is important to analyse its relationship with unemployment, and forms of flexibilisation, or, more accurately, modern day forms of labour degradation. Today, the DSS has a turnover of about US\$114bn, with over 65.3m sellers (World Federation of Direct Selling Association – www.dsa.org).

DSS is based on the distribution of products by what was originally called ‘door-to-door’ selling (Biggart, 1989) as opposed to sales through shops. A hierarchy can exist, whereby sellers recruit other sellers, and get a commission on their work. This is defined as a ‘multilevel system’. In other cases, the relation is horizontal, with the seller directly linked to the company. DSS today has its own legal organisations, locally and globally, which allow it to adapt the system to local legislation, in order to guarantee local legal protection for the companies for this kind of labour relationship.

Today, the DSS is primarily made up of female sellers, and in the case of Natura, less than 5% of the sellers are men. At the heart of informality and indeed, the very entrance of women into the labour market, is the question that permeates all discussions that consider gender as a supporting element in the world of labour: the primary association of women with work that never reaches the public sphere, namely, domestic labour. Domestic labour has to be understood not only by reference to this lack of regulation and public recognition, but also as unpaid labour, mainly carried out by women (Huws, 2003). The combination of these different aspects is central to the kind of work analysed in this paper.

This inequality is repeated in differing ways in different contexts and historical periods. In their analysis of informality in Brazil, Araújo and Durães highlight the predominance of women in the informal sector. Comparing data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, they estimate that 60% of women are in the informal sector as opposed to 43% of men (Araújo e Durães, 2009). Among these, 17% are employed in domestic work, compared to only 0.7% of men.

The work accomplished within the home is not quantifiable or recognised as labour. Given unequal historical and global grounds, the wage-qualification relation persists, having never been agreed upon in equal measures by men and women. Among the layers of low earners in Brazil, whilst men’s subjectivity is afflicted by the loss of a professional identity through unemployment and new precarious forms of

work, women assume the role of 'getting by', taking on different kinds of casual work and often becoming the head of the family with an income derived from a number of different sources – ranging from domestic jobs to welfare benefits (Abilio, 2005 and 2009). Davis (2004; 2006) highlights similar issues, relating neoliberal policies to informalisation, which he sees as highly adaptable to the female role.

The type of work that is the subject of this research can be found among the diverse activities that today make up typically female informal labour. Through DSS, the resellers who work as representatives of large and small businesses have become very large armies.

The cosmetics saleswomen and the company

Today, more than 850,000 women sell products across Brazil for Natura (www.natura.net). The company has become the national leader in its sector in recent years. Since the 1980s, its turnover has grown more than thirty times, demonstrating its rapid growth. The growth in the number of its sales representatives has also been impressive, increasing by more than 100% in the last four years. With a strong marketing strategy, based on a discourse of sustainable development, social responsibility and responsible exploitation of Brazilian flora, the company has not only made its mark in the Brazilian market, but has internationalised its presence across Latin America and Europe, with a shop in Paris¹ and a Research and Development centre also located in France.

A few years ago it opened the largest R & D centre in cosmetics in Latin America. It has partnerships with public universities and government funding for research development. It also receives yearly awards and is publicly recognised as a socially responsible company.

At the company's distribution centre, there are 850,000 Brazilian women who work without any form of employment contract with the company. They are not even officially recognised as workers. They are called 'consultants' and are women whose occupation is difficult to define. They are resellers whilst also consumers of the products, taking on the sales risk without any guarantees from the company.

For the cosmetics resellers, the relation to the company is horizontal and structured in the following way: the saleswomen earn a 30% commission on what is sold. The company receives their orders online or from call centres. Orders can only be processed when they are worth more than R\$200 (around 90 Euros). After the orders have been made, the reseller receives the products in around two to four days, along with an invoice to be paid within 20 days. The invoice covers the value of the order without the 30% commission. Therefore, the company doesn't pay the seller at all at this point; instead, she receives the value of the product plus the commission from the clients, and pays the company for the value invoiced. When payments are not made on time high interest rates are applied and breach of contract annuls the reseller's licence.

The company's factory operates 24 hours a day, six days a week. The production line is made up of approximately 1,500 workers and is divided into three daily shifts. In addition to these production workers, approximately 4,500 employees work in the

¹ The French resellers include women of French, Brazilian and Bolivian nationality, among others. Between 2007 and 2010 the number of consultants in France increased from 400 to 1400.

administrative and creative areas of the company. Production is semi-automated; in the storage and raw materials sector, production has become 100% automated. Each order placed by the resellers is processed by the distribution sector: the ordered products are automatically placed into boxes via a conveyor belt. The pace at which the distribution centre operates is thus dictated by the women working outside the factory.

Transport companies and couriers are responsible for delivering the boxes to the homes of the sellers all over the country. Every day 40,000 parcels are issued on average. The relationship between the resellers' activities and those of the factory is important in the context of this analysis: the flow of activity of the women outside the factory determines the flow of production and distribution inside the factory.

The socioeconomic profile of the sellers is broad. Their heterogeneity is striking. With an age range from 18 to over 70; they include single and married women, widows, unemployed people, domestic workers, workers with formal sector jobs and informal workers; they also encompass educational levels ranging from the illiterate to graduates. Social status is also very varied, ranging from women who earn less than the minimum wage to the wives of executives of multinational companies.

This heterogeneity fits perfectly with the absence of a clear sales method. The activity of the resellers is not clearly defined, enabling a permeability into very different social activities, from selling perfumes in the workplace, to displaying a catalogue of products over a family lunch. Friendships, jobs and family combine and interweave with the sale of products. The sale of products overlaps, therefore, with the most varied types of social relations and spaces: there is no pre-defined form (Biggart, 1989). Here, the designation 'informal labour' can be interpreted literally in the sense that there is an absence of publicly defined forms – which enables the activity to be highly adapted and combined with many other different activities and situations.

One of the interviewees, Eliana, started the conversation by stating that she probably would not contribute much to the research, because she is a teacher and not a consultant. This statement highlights two issues that emerged and were repeated throughout the interviews. Firstly, the seller's job may not be recognised as work. Secondly, while some may construct an identity as sellers, others prefer to deny it, depending on their professional career trajectory. For Eliana, the question was clear: she is a well-paid teacher in one of the most prestigious private schools in São Paulo, and this is her primary identity. Aged 48, she has been teaching elementary school for the past 28 years. She became a consultant when a colleague stopped selling the products in the school. Like Eliana, the majority of women interviewed were not able to specify exactly how much they earned from the sales. The total value of the orders is usually composed of the value of customer orders plus the products that are consumed by the consultant, as well as the products that she purchased as an investment – in order to build inventory and to take advantage of promotions that are offered every month by the company. Promotions like 'two for one' are always attractive to the consultants, whether for their personal consumption or for the possibility of profiting 100% from a sale.

Eliana estimated that when sales are good she earns around Brazilian reais 400 per month (180 Euros). Today, sales are banned in schools, despite the fact that their own head teachers still buy the products. Revenue has fallen, and Eliana claimed that she is

in a 'feedback' system. What she earns with the sales is equal to how much she spends on her personal consumption. From her point of view, 'the activity makes a profit as long as you are not spending on it'. Essentially, this teacher makes sales in order to consume, paying less for the products.

However, even when the amount of sales equal her own consumption, she may emerge with losses. When the products for personal consumption added to the orders do not reach a specified minimum score of 100 points, Eliana orders goods that were not ordered by clients and will not be consumed by her in the short term. Thus, she has a 'box full of products at home', which will not necessarily be sold. With falling sales, her inventory keeps rising, but she continues asking for products that have not been ordered. Wanting to ensure her own consumption, as she says, 'I have not given up, because I use Natura.' Eliana typifies the sellers who sell to consume, a consumption that is 'laborious' but is not necessarily recognised as actual work. The mention of drawers full of products was very common in the interviews. It is clear that there is an indistinguishable long-term amount of money that has been invested and spent, in addition to the time that is devoted to activities that are often not accounted for. In other words, the jobs they have as saleswomen are not recognised as labour and the commission reverts into discounts for their own consumption.

When Eliana says that 'sales occur by themselves', this raises issues central to the research. Whether the activity is recognised varies depending on the workplace and its jargon, which in this case has a very clear meaning. The recognition varies depending on the seller's professional and socioeconomic profile. In the case of Eliana, to be a seller does not suit her profession; ultimately, her identity is as a teacher, formally employed, with a relatively high salary in a very prestigious school in Sao Paulo.

Unlike Eliana, Lorena is a consultant who made cosmetic sales her primary source of income. Thirty years ago, she worked as a typist in one of the largest publishers in Brazil. She began to sell in the workplace, and resigned, 'because what I earned in a month at Editora Abril, I made in a week at Natura', so she began to work exclusively as a reseller. Twenty five years ago, competition between consultants was much less fierce than it is now. In Brazil in 1980 there were only 2,000 consultants, compared with 50,000 in 1990². Lorena's narrative is one of decline, with a 'before' and 'after' both in her life and in her perception of Natura.

Before, in her view, the consultants 'were handpicked', but 'unfortunately, now they are choosing, not that I am prejudiced, people who work as housekeepers.' This narrative, on the one hand, can help understand why Eliana, a teacher, refuses to declare herself as a Natura seller. But it also explains the difficult situation of women like Lorena, who for 30 years devoted herself exclusively to sales and now sees her professional identity diluted in the flood of lower-income women entering the occupation. What is a profession to Lorena, could, for other women simply seem to be an opportunity to make a bit of money. It is difficult both to maintain a professional identity as a seller and contend with this growing competition.

For women who are in selling as their main occupation, competition has brought not only the difficulty of maintaining the income that was previously generated from

sales, but also a loss of recognition. Whilst in the past it was possible to think of one's professional identity as a consultant, this has disappeared now that the work has taken on a new dimension. For Lorena, there was a fine line between continuing or giving up on this long trajectory as a seller. What opportunities and chances still existed for a 60-year-old woman to re-enter the labour market? What were the possible strategies to continue working as a seller? She recently found a solution to this problem. After 18 years of selling Natura products exclusively, she began to sell Avon products too.

Rosana is part of a category of 'entrepreneur consultants': women who have a different status within Natura and are governed by different rules and statutes because of their high monthly sales. These consultants receive 35% commission instead of 30% and their point scale for closing an order is not 100, but 500.

Rosana has worked in this category for 10 years. I interviewed her in a place that she denominates her 'office' in the Ipiranga neighbourhood of São Paulo. It was difficult to carry out an interview, given that we were actually in a small shop during commercial hours. Natura prohibits third parties from opening shops selling Natura products, therefore the shop is run informally. The establishment is open six days a week, eight hours per day. All products have a 20% discount off the price given in the catalogue, thus, of the 35% that she would receive from commission, 20% is given up as a sales strategy. In the area where she works, this strategy of offering a 20% discount is customary among consultants, so much so that competition in the neighbourhood has resulted in a general fall in commission. In a sort of invisible organisation, providing a discount, in addition to being a sales strategy, has also become a pre-requisite for being able to compete.

Before starting up this point of sale display, Rosana had never worked outside of her home. She has been selling Natura products for 10 years, and had the shop for four. As well as selling, she also buys the products herself, confirming that almost all of the personal hygiene products and cosmetics in her house are by Natura. Holiday photos and trophies line the walls of her shop. The main difficulty, she says, 'as occurs in all businesses' is defaults, from which she has frequently suffered: 'Sometimes the cheques are returned, and I am not able to claim for it ... Because Natura has already sent me the product, it is completely our responsibility'. This entrepreneur consultant was not able to tell me her exact income. Her estimated turnover was approximately R\$3000,00 per month (1,320 euro), though it was not possible to calculate how much she invested in stock, nor how much she herself spent monthly on the products. Compared to the other women interviewed, Rosana's sales volume was relatively high, taking into consideration that everything she sold had a 20% discount, so that she received only 10% commission. Rosana is the owner of a micro-enterprise which generates revenue, but is not formally established, nor can it be formally established. This informal work sits on an unclear line between what is a worker and what is an owner, in the midst of a loss of publicly recognised forms, in a shop that isn't a shop, with an owner who is a 'consultant'. In this case, the links between the informal work, the production chain and the company's distribution are immediately recognisable.

Patrícia, 27 years old, has worked as a maid for 12 years. At the time that I interviewed her, she had been selling Natura products for one year, explaining that she

had started by helping her sister-in-law who, because of the debts she had with one of the companies she sold for, had had her her fiscal national identity number (CPF) blocked and added to Serasa, an agency that protects financial agencies from indebted clients, thus making it impossible to place orders in her own name. Therefore, Patricia started working for Natura, making it possible to register the orders in her name, while her sister-in-law carried out the majority of the sales. They split the profits as well as the losses. An example of this was when a client made a purchase of R\$200 (90 euro) but was late with the payment, resulting in R\$100 (45 euro) in interest which both Patricia and her sister-in-law had to bear. They keep a small stock and sometimes purchase products from other consultants, giving up their commission to be able to guarantee sales to the more assiduous clients. In Patricia's account, her personal consumption of the product stands out.

From her work as a maid she earns on average two minimum salaries per month. According to what she tells me, she often spends more than what she earns from her sales on products for herself. 'I really like cream, lipstick, makeup. My husband fights with me because my makeup is already out of date. It's all there and I keep buying!' She says that she likes to open the drawer and see it full of products. 'This month I had an almost full pot of cream, but I bought another one. I'm a fanatic. I don't wait for the cream to finish'. In Patricia's case, the overlap between consumption and work translates as an uncontrolled consumption of products that are very accessible, after all, she is a seller herself now. For now it is pointed out that as well as the activity being an instrument for consumption that is actually 'laborious', it can also be looked upon as work that ends up 'being expensive', when the seller spends more on products than she earns.

Francisca, 53 years old, is a cook at a public school in the south side of São Paulo. She worked with metallurgy for more than ten years in a lamp company and had a number of temporary jobs in other factories. Once her children were born she became a housewife. She started to resell Natura products four years ago, and two years ago she began working again in order to complete the time necessary to be able to retire. She also purchases the products. She explains that her reason for starting to resell the products was to pay less for the products that she already consumed in order to guarantee a 'profit that could pay for my things'. The maximum that she has earned in commission was R\$200 (90 euro). She has also spent more than she has made at times, but says that today she controls her personal purchases. Her principal source of income is from the promotions that enable her to make more from each product sold.

When we talked, she was extremely worried about the risk of the next non-payment. She had already borne the expenses of some defaults, but, according to her, this one would be the worst. A client left her job at the school and 'disappeared', without paying the R\$200 she owed for orders. 'Imagine this for someone who earns the minimum wage' (R\$550, 240 euro).

A survey carried out on professionals in the beauty field for a brand in competition with Natura provides an interesting point for analysis. Beauty salons have become fixed points of sale for cosmetics bought through catalogues, particularly for Natura and Avon. A manicurist who earned R\$800 (350 euro) per month claimed to spend R\$300 (130 euro) on products. In the majority of the 20 accounts from that particular survey,

the women claimed that they reverted part of their commission into the consumption of products, and eventually spent more on the products than they earned from the sales. As well as revealing the notable level of consumption on the part of the sellers, with no form of negotiation from the company, this survey also showed how the beauty salons become representatives of the brand.

Diva, 67 years old, is married to a businessman and lives in a high class neighbourhood of Sao Paulo city. She has been selling Natura for 6 years, and was invited to the Crystal sector. 'The Crystal sector is another nucleus of Natura. Our promoter was asked to make up a group of chosen people to sell to high society clients to encourage these consumers to buy Natura products as opposed to imported products. And we really have captured this segment.'

I interviewed Sônia, a Natura employee linked to the Crystal group. She explained to me that the group was the result of an incompatibility, a socioeconomic diversity among resellers: 'The people were part of the team, but did not feel this way. It is just not viable to have a post-graduate on the same course as someone who doesn't even know how to read properly'. She explained that the upper class do not buy via the catalogue, 'there is just one way to make them buy: try. It's as if we are going back to our origins. A woman gathers all her friends together and sells'.

The Crystal sector is made up exclusively of elite São Paulo residents and those with access to this section of society. Sônia highlighted the wide range of socioeconomic profiles: 'You see anyone from a builder using a Natura deodorant, to a person that has money using Natura makeup'. These consultants combine the role of housewife with a remunerated activity that is not formal work, and cannot be linked to a single determined class position. Diva is one of these consultants for the elite of São Paulo who achieves this type of conciliation, combining the sales with her social activities. She estimated that her volume of sales varies between R\$2,000 (870 euro) and R\$9,000 (3950 euro) per month. She relates her selling work to her experience working as a volunteer and being socially responsible. 'I was head volunteer. And Natura does everything that we did: recycles, has refills, carries out socially responsible work. I felt it was me. And as I already had a lot of credibility through the voluntary work that I did, it fitted, and it worked'.

Diva also purchases the products, saying that she has progressively substituted her consumption of other brands with Natura products. She invests in promotional products and the largest selling products each month and says that she is 'scared to calculate how much there is in stock', estimating that it is between R\$6,000 (2,630 euro) and R\$8,000 (3,510 euro). Unpaid debts are rare, with the majority of her clients being from the upper classes. She also sells to the 'people who have less money', referring to the consumption of the more expensive products for her lower income clients. She says that the middle and upper classes also invest in expensive products. The facial creams in first place, and in second place moisturisers and makeup. When asked what the reason is for buying perfumes, in particular, she answered: 'I think it's status, they can say, "I use Natura"'.

When she describes the company, it does not seem as if she is describing a cosmetics company, but something that is defined as 'a truly Brazilian experience'. Of

her own accord, she organises excursions to the Cajamar Factory, having already taken 12 bus loads to visit. She combines a sales strategy with pride in the company: taking people there is a way to 'gain more clients', as 'the people's fascination with the factory' translates into the consumption of products; as well as a possibility to show the Brazil-that-works. 'It's like this, the women arrive there talking, that excitement. Then they start to listen, they stop talking and are quiet. It touches you emotionally. You know that it is a national company. We are so disappointed in the government, in the mess, and to see that somebody is doing something well ... it's touching'.

This wide variety of experience among the diverse interviewees raises important questions. What should the activity of these women be called? What is the status of their work? Are they informal workers? Certainly they can be described as informal in the sense that they work for themselves, and are not subcontracted, since there is no regulation in the relationship³, but a more precise definition would be useful.

DSS is not new, but the context in which it operates has changed. Labour flexibilisation and unemployment, as we experience them today, give it new social dimensions and meanings. The exponential growth in the number of resellers, points to the fact that today the company relies on an immense army of active and 'potential' consultants. The availability of this incalculable reserve army has translated into an increasing reduction in the number of benefits and protections that the company now provides (something that the older workers who were interviewed frequently discussed). For the company, there is the elimination of costs, for the sellers, increased competition and the adversities that accompany it.

Labour and capital accumulation

From the perspective of capital and labour, the risks and costs of trading have been completely transferred to the resellers from the company. The first and most obvious corporate advantage is that there are no overheads for the physical structure of distribution. Obviously, a lot of investment is needed for the logistics of ensuring that the 40,000 parcels sent out every day reach their destinations at the right time, as well as the minimum necessary training for the sellers. However, there is no expenditure on rent, contracting workers, investment in architecture, among other elements that would be required for distribution through shops. In this case, flexibility is constituted spatially, in that there is an absence of fixed spatial forms. The company has no specific location; it can be practically everywhere at the same time. This means reduced costs for the company which are transferred to the women. While the company does not have to pay the expenses associated with having shops, the resellers have to invest in their presentation, as well as having to manage the costs of delivery and sale of products. The necessary capital for the sale is therefore transferred from the company and spread across the sellers. The absence of forms makes it impossible to define or quantify this flexibilisation of expenses: it can be found in the clothes worn by the reseller, her phone account or the bus she takes to reach her client. This kind of flexibilisation can thus be understood as essentially the transfer of costs from the company to the worker.

3 The same can be said of the company, AVON, the leading cosmetics firm in the global market, and also one of the largest businesses that distribute globally through the Direct Selling System.

A second type of flexibilisation also protects capital: the stock of products is not in a factory but in the homes of each of the resellers. It is the sellers who bear the risks and burden of keeping stocks. As mentioned earlier, the just-in-time production in the factory is carried out according to the flow of requests from the sellers. The competition generated between the thousands of sales representatives encourages them to build up stocks, because fast delivery is a way to acquire an edge over other sellers. It is therefore the reseller who keeps the stock, as well as having to deal with the constant innovation of products when she is no longer able to sell those products that rapidly become 'obsolete.'

The company usually has about a 1% default; this also constitutes a kind of transfer of the risks of the commodity realisation. One million women guarantee the sale of the company's products, the risks of default and those associated with the stock are transferred to them, and further, they do not have the legal means to protect themselves against defaults, which is very different from the position of the company. The sales relation between the reseller and her clients is informal, which gives resellers no legal protection against the risk of debts.

Beyond these aspects, the resellers become unpaid marketing tools, as the permeability of their labour into the most diverse social spheres and situations also contributes to the dissemination of the brand that spreads much further than through mere formal means of communication. The social relationships that are built in the life of the 'consultants' also lead to branding opportunities for the company. This is an immeasurable and unpaid aspect of the labour of these workers.

What we can see therefore is that flexibilisation in these relations can be understood as a transferral of risks from capital to labour. The risks are incorporated into the labour of the million or so workers in this particular example, and, in the same way as in all labour relations, this incorporation is achieved through the banalisation of this transferral. There is no form of politicisation or resistance around this increased exploitation. On the contrary, the real and potential army of resellers continues to grow, alongside the consumers (for a detailed discussion on the banalisation of injustices originating in the sphere of labour relations, see Dejours, 1998).

The competition between resellers cannot be clearly defined, but it is present in the everyday experience of each one of them. It exists in the individualisation of difficulty, in which each 'consultant' will find individual strategies to support herself, be it offering discounts and thus losing a part of her remuneration, or making investments that can increase her chances of making a sale. The company is constantly developing strategies to increase the number of resellers and keep them involved, entirely transferring the adversities that come from competition amongst the sellers. They meanwhile remain active in order to hold on to the work, keeping the cycle going by bearing and managing the consequences of competition, and thereby stimulating a further increase in the number of sellers. The consequences of this unbridled competition are not of public concern and there is in fact the opposite perception, with the easy access to this kind of activity taking on the appearance of a backward and 'democratic' movement: selection criteria in the Direct Selling System are practically non-existent (Biggart, 1989).

The democratic aspect of the activity is important in the context of flexibilisation and unemployment. One need only think of the subjective and economic meanings of

an activity that has no selection or exclusion criteria established by the labour market, a market increasingly threatened by dismissal or downsizing. This may be an important element in explaining why the number of resellers continues to increase despite the hardships involved in the work.

Brand and labour

Natura wins annual awards for its environmental initiatives. Nevertheless, sustainable development is more than a company policy or a way to bolster its image; it is the backbone of its brand. Concern for the future of the planet is advertised on every package it sells. In the Datafolha/Top of Mind survey, published in October of 2008, participants were asked to name the most memorable brands. Natura was not considered most memorable for the category of 'personal hygiene', but together with Petrobras, Greenpeace and others, it was among the five most memorable brands for the category of 'environmental responsibility'. The concept of sustainable development has a modern appeal that is even greater because it deals with the proper management of Brazil's flora. Products with 'exotic' names seem to indicate the company's sense of responsibility with regards to its own country. *Castanha do Pará, pitanga, breu-branco, pripioca*; the message to the consumer is that the consumption of Natura products can be a truly Brazilian experience, as exotic and tropical as the country itself. Brazilian women in France reported that they became 'consultants' to 'strengthen the feeling of being attached to Brazil'.

The Natura brand is able to address several modern issues with its products. Consuming a Natura product has come to be identified almost as an 'ethical' gesture. What is new with regards to this commodified citizenship⁴ is that, in this case, it is not only 'responsible consumption' that must be considered but also 'responsible work'.

Apart from brand promotion, sales representatives offer a powerful – and free – form of feedback in terms of consumption and the brand. The sales representatives, as sellers in direct contact with customers and at the same time themselves consumers of the products, provide feedback through a variety of means. Monthly meetings with sales managers involve reports on product acceptance. The consultants who sell the most per sector are invited to speak with brand promotion and product development managers. The company has established informal, distributed channels that ensure market mapping and research. These channels are highly efficient, because the seller is in direct, personal contact with the consumer as well as being a consumer of the product herself.

The association of women as brand vehicles shows us how labour relations take effect in the case of sales representatives: by means of their dispersion, the absence of defined forms of labour, and the lack of predefined workplaces. The informal labour described in this case goes far beyond the issue of informal labour per se. The potential for large profits is rooted precisely in this absence of defined forms of labour. Labour dispersion is crucial to the relationship between capital and labour. The absence of publicly established forms, measures and mediations has been combined with accelerated growth in the number of resellers. Some form of labour control is working, which takes effect precisely due to the absence of established forms of labour.

4 Further discussion of 'the commoditisation of citizenship' can be found in Abilio, 2005 and 2009.

The brand appears as what unifies and organises the widely dispersed sellers and makes it possible to recognise the organisation as a cohesive unit. The diffusion of sellers working without any defined form of labour is bound together by the brand's immateriality. It is as if publicly defined labour standards can give rise to a standard with no recognisable measures. Revealing the brand as fetishism makes it possible to consider brands as phantasmagoria that synthesise the obscure relationship between capital and labour (Marx, 1982). In this way, from the perspective of the change in form of the supply chains and its overlap with what was previously analysed in terms of the flexibility of the conception of labour, the brand stands out as the pinnacle of the blurring of labour relations and the dispersal of relations of production, which are in fact organised, although they may appear not to be.

Organisation through dispersal⁵

Dispersal must be understood as part of the modern makeup of labour control. The case of Natura is of interest because it allows us to examine the hypothesis that new forms of labour control are being used. This study of a million female sellers shows that labour control is carried out by dispersal itself. This ambiguity in labour relations is a new phenomenon which demands more thorough treatment.

The sellers become vehicles for the promise of a better Brazil or a better world inside the package of a beauty product. By defetishising the fetish, labour with no defined form, which is highly penetrable with the strength of the brand-form, lies at the heart of the constant growth in sales.

The activity is structured as a job without qualifications, screening, a defined workplace, techniques or income. What is concretely defined is the catalogue, the bill to be paid, and the products to be distributed. This lack of professional standards for the seller is vitally important for the growth in the number of sellers and for the accumulation of capital. The lack of screening and the large available labour force are profoundly linked to the makeup of this group of amateur sellers that replace shops for this company.

The cosmetic crowd⁶ made up of a million Brazilian women taking on hard-to-distinguish roles in a tenuously held-together structure is sustained by the publicly lauded 'democratic' nature of the company. As has already been noted, anyone with a valid CPF (Brazilian identification number) can become a Natura 'consultant'. To grant this 'democratic' access, the company guarantees entry into the sales and distribution of its products throughout the country. There is no screening process or minimum requirements, with the only important factor being the bottom line: how much product is sold each month. Labour control functions in a dispersed and flexible way, but at the end of the month the different rankings of sellers – the best of the month or of the year

5 This definition is taken from David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 1989.

6 I base my arguments on a discussion elaborated in a previous article (Abilio, 2010). In that article, I discuss in more depth the overlap between consumption and labour, using the term 'crowdsourcing' coined by the journalist Jeff Howe which he used to describe how Internet users can work together without a labour form for different companies. Dujarier refers to 'worker consumer' labour (2008). Ritzer refers to the term 'prosumption' (2008). The term 'consumption work' as it was defined more than 30 years ago gives important clues to the nature of the unpaid labour that takes shape as consumption. A type of unpaid labour which is mainly carried out by women in the sphere of domestic affairs (Huws, 2003).

– are available, along with prizes which can vary from free beauty products to trips and trophies. There is something real in this pseudo-democratic access: in the midst of a labour market entirely permeated by the threat of unemployment and exclusion, access to this activity is guaranteed. It is the absence of a form of labour on which full access and a lack of forms and standards is based. The ambiguity in labour relations and the randomness of access form the basis for these activities.

The survey of sales representative opens up a wide field of issues requiring further investigation in order to examine current labour exploitation. Unemployment, changes in labour relations, and the flexibility in female labour form an auspicious combination for work that is constituted in the absence of publicly defined forms of labour. This absence is expressed in the political impossibility of criticising or resisting this type of exploitation, an impossibility which permeates and is grounded in the informal nature of the work. What is clear is that the potential for large profits is rooted in the absence of defined forms of labour.

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