

## CASE STUDIES &amp; TEACHING CASES

*Ethos of work at the clothing production region of Agreste*

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**THE “BLUE GOLD” IN AGRESTE PERNAMBUCANO**

The day dawned, and Léo would follow the work routine of all mornings. While he got ready for work, he could imagine the tasks to perform when he arrived at the processing laundry. On the day before, with the accumulation of raw pieces of clothing in the tight shed where he worked, it was not possible to stop and think about free time or imagine the days-off when Carnaval arrived. Léo was proud of living and working in Toritama, a small city with an estimated population of 46,164 inhabitants in the Agreste region of the State of Pernambuco that, with other 9 main cities, forms Agreste das Confecções, which is directed to the manufacturing and the commercialization of a variety of clothes. In Toritama, the focus is jeans, also called “blue gold” by the local population, due to the color and the economic value that it has for the region. The whole area is considered a land of opportunities to work and earn money.

When Léo moved to Toritama, it took him long to understand the dynamics of local apparel manufacturing. As he has always been quite curious, he soon found out that, in the past, the apparel manufacturing activities of the Agreste region of Pernambuco were initiated due to the production of “sulanca”, clothes manufactured, mostly by mothers that could not buy clothes for their children, with patches of fabric – especially helanca – firstly coming from the waste of factories from the capital city of the state, Recife, and after, from the South of the country. Thus, he understood that Agreste das Confecções emerged from the seek for survival of families that, given the rural context and the predominance of dry stretches of land, found themselves before the impossibility to keep working in agriculture.

These families started to work with apparel, manufactured in the domestic and family environment and for livelihood, attracting purchasers due to the low prices, and for a long time they supported themselves without the assistance of the State at the federal, state, and local levels.

After some time, Léo understood the local production chain and that, in order to manufacture and sell jeans, there are several players and spaces involved, such as the “facções”, which are production units not registered as companies, responsible for developing one or more stages of the jeans production; the “fabricos”, small “factories” also on the margin of the legal apparatus, which undertake all stages of the clothing-manufacturing process or externalize them for the “facções”; the street fairs and the commercial center, where a great part of the production is sold; and the laundry rooms, where Léo works, which are important spaces for the finishing of the pieces of clothing, but often hazardous environments for the worker.

In the laundry room, the clothes are processed in consecutive washings and rinsings with chemicals under high temperatures in industrial washing machines (between 15 and 350 kg), in order to remove the gum from the fabric (ungluing) and the excess of chemicals (reduction), make the jeans whitish (bleaching), introduce softeners (softened), among others. In the laundry rooms, several effects are manually applied to the clothes, with the aid of sandpaper, pins, grinders, sponges, and pistols with chemicals.

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## “MY NAME IS WORK”

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Léo’s entry in the working world dates back to when he was 13 years old, as a cane cutter, when he earned about 12 Reais a week. Since then, he works informally, meeting the demands that emerge occasionally, such as cutting tree stumps, digging holes, helping to build houses as a hodman, etc. In return, he does not always receive money, but he increases the social bonds with locals and opens new possibilities to earn income, such as the situation in which he worked in the construction of a house, which gave him in return the possibility to work, under better conditions, in a laundry room installed later in that same space.

His biggest dream is never stop working, because work, for him, is “the most important thing in life”. This is the meaning that Léo attributes to work, especially in the laundry room, a social and productive space in which he realizes that his talent and creativity reveal themselves in the countless possibilities to improve jeans to meet the clients’ demands.

His work routine is hectic, and the handling of toxic chemicals poses high risk to health, since, despite the fact that personal protective equipment (PPE) is mandatory, he hardly ever uses it, arguing that “giving productivity” is necessary. Léo says that his name is “work” and his surname is “overtime hours”. For him, in the socio-productive dynamics of the city of Toritama, one must not waste time chatting or playing, because, the more one works, the more one earns in the manufacturing of jeans, which he regards as positive, given that “the best profession in the world is needing not to work for anybody”.

Just like so many other workers from Toritama and Agreste das Confecções, Léo wishes to enjoy the only resting period of the year, Carnaval, during which Toritama turns into a “ghost town”, as the locals say, as everyone leaves for the beaches. In order to travel during Carnaval, people who do not have money sell everything they can: washing machines, refrigerators, television sets, motorcycles, etc. In Dior’s store, a friend of Léo’s who conducts such transactions, they increase substantially during the period preceding Carnaval. Léo recollects that, one day, during one of their conversations, Dior commented that “people get somewhat desperate when they see everybody leaving to get out of the every day’s rush of Toritama”, what makes people try to earn money for the trips by all means, even if they need to buy the machinery sold again when they return, borrowing money to do so.

As he does not have any money or goods available to sell and go to the beach, Léo decided to accept the invitation from a film producer to participate in the production of a documentary showing the city workers’ reality. To do so, he would have to record something that he likes to do the most: talking.

These conversations would take place with people among his social relationships and, after some weeks, he would present the material to the documentary producer. The film is about a central issue: “What does cause people to work with jeans in Toritama?”, which should also be answered by Léo in the conversations he would record.

Léo decided, therefore, to use the days off to talk to people related to the jeans production chain with whom he worked directly in the laundry room. He started by talking to Maria, the owner of the “*facção*” responsible for sewing the jeans processed in the laundry room. With his phone, he recorded a short video talking to her and found that Maria, who lives in Toritama, worked in a large factory for 7 years, and that after its bankruptcy she acquired sewing machines in order to open her own business at home. Thus, following the path of several of her acquaintances in town, she opened a jeans “*facção*”, called a “backyard facility” by some people, which enabled her to cease being unemployed, after being dismissed from her last job, and becoming an entrepreneur, as she defines herself. Maria explains that, after becoming unemployed, she did not want to work for others again: “I have no education and already am 50 years old. In factories, they prefer younger dressmakers, so they can train them, put them in their way. Here, you know, the girls are already on a sewing machine at 10 years old.”

Her biggest dream, she said to Léo, is seeing her business grow and “leaving her mark.” In order to achieve this, she says it is very important that people working in the region see themselves as entrepreneurs, as she learned in the latest lecture on how boosting business she watched.

When he asked about Maria’s routine, Léo found out that her work, including household chores, begins at 5 a.m. and ends between 9 and 10 p.m., which she considers a good routine when there is demand, because “the more you work, the more you earn”, she says, picking up sewn denim pants from big piles on the “*facção*” floor, folding one by one and putting them in new piles, on an improvised table on the corner of the wall, with the help of her son-in-law.

When observing the work done in Maria's "facção", Léo noticed that the movements are repetitive and monotonous, depend on handling machinery, many times with no protection, as in the case of cutting blocks with several jeans layers – the finishing is made with stylets and other sharp equipment. He also noticed that most people working in the "facções" are paid per piece of clothing produced. Therefore, it is easy to understand why there is a hurry in the production. "There's no time to lose!", said the workers in Maria's "facção". That is so that the workers often have their meals before the machine and their naps after lunch amidst the mounts of fabric and pieces of clothing in progress. Léo realized that his routine in the laundry room was not so different from that of those people in Maria's "facção". The work conditions were the same, and the workers' perception of this reality seemed to be guided by work ethics shared by all in a certain way.

Another "facção" that Léo visited to talk to the workers was the one organized by Lourdes, where "pocket heads" are put into the pieces of clothing previously sewn in Maria's facção. Working as a dressmaker since her youth, Lourdes told what made her identify herself with the work in a jeans "facção" in Toritama. She highlighted the possibility to make her own work time, instead of fulfilling a workload if she were "filed", that is, had a formal contract. She associates not having to fulfill workloads with freedom at work. She told her biggest dream is to have her own house, comfortable for her family, and the possibility to travel. In her words: "I want to have some luxury."

Lourdes explained that each piece produced has a specific value. Each "pocket head" sewed, for example, is equivalent to 10 cents, each zipper fly is equivalent to 20 cents, etc. "Our life is not bad [...] not everyone has the privilege of being healthy, working, earning money, bringing food to home", she says, comparing her condition to realities of war and extreme poverty in other countries.

During the conversation, which happened in a room next to the kitchen, in Lourdes's small house, Léo noticed that she did not stop sewing the zipper flies while she talked to him and that her husband and one of their small children were having the meal that she had prepared before "getting on the machine". The youngest son, about 3 years old, played with one of the machines until his mother told him to get himself distracted elsewhere. After the conversation, Léo was thoughtful about Lourdes's rushed time, who, in addition to work sewing, also needed to take care of her children. He started to notice, wherever he went, that it was common to see small children in these production spaces, as many dressmakers in the "facções" are mothers and combine household chores and care activities to the manufacturing of jeans. He had never stopped to think about that before talking to Lourdes.

The other people to whom he talked were Rosilda and Manoel, who live in the rural area of Toritama, on a small ranch. There, hen breeding was replaced by sewing machines and the henhouse is used as a fabric warehouse, as it happens in several neighboring ranches, which were maintained by activities directed to agriculture and animal breeding before. Rosilda, Manoel, and some of their children make the finishing of the pieces of clothing, that is, they remove the threads from the pieces and pack them as soon as they leave the laundry rooms. Léo noticed that, in these places, the workers' discourse is not very different from that one hears in the city: they say that working with jeans in Toritama makes it possible to earn more money working "for themselves" than for third parties, with a formal contract, under the Consolidated Labor Laws (CLT) regime.

In this rural context, the narrative by 55-year-old Manoel stands out. He said that, if one works "undercover", there is no social welfare and that he contributes to social security, because he is close to retiring as a farmer, but understands that younger people have some urgency to "make money."

## IT'S NOT ONLY GOING AFTER MONEY AND THE 'LAD' ENDS HIMSELF... MONEY WON'T TAKE ANYONE ANYWHERE"

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Pensive about everything he saw and heard, and affected by Rosilda and Manoel's narratives, searching for another person who could help him to understand the work developed in Toritama, Léo saw Canário passing by and realized that, although productive activities related to agriculture and animal breeding had mostly been replaced by jeans manufacturing in town, there are people who do not wish to enter the apparel world. Canário takes care of goats, which walk around the city in specific moments, in a search for pasture to eat.

The animals walking down the street, the "ave-maria" on the radio at 6 p.m., the streets with no basic infrastructure, the small and simple houses transformed into "façôdes", the people sitting in the sidewalks removing exceeding threads from the jeans pieces (the so-called "fur"), the motorcycles passing by the streets carrying jeans piles, the constant heat, the dry landscape, and the sewing machine noises made Léo think about how complex the hybrid and contradictory scenery of Toritama and so many other cities in Agreste das Confecções is.

Thinking about these aspects, he went to the fair to talk to some acquaintances who sell the pieces of clothing manufactured in the local "façôdes" for a very low price, if compared to the price charged by shopping malls or other commercial centers. The fair, which takes place on Sundays, next to highway BR104, has always been one of Léo's favorite places, where he has the opportunity to check out the pieces of clothing manufactured in the region, meet friends, and get to know people from distant places.

There, pushcarts loaded with goods passing through the fair narrow corridors, stalls and stores being supplied, mannequins being dressed in the clothes recently brought, sellers calling clients to check out the goods – denim shorts, pants, skirts, overalls of different kinds, sizes, and prices – buyers from all over Brazil, the local radio promoting the brands can be seen... This is the dynamics of the Toritama fair, which takes place in Parque das Feiras. Despite the noise and tightness, many people like to work there, such as João, a friend of Léo's and a salesman for many years.

When he met Léo, João was soon excited to answer his friend's questions. During the conversation, João said: "I am thrilled by the power of our region of manufacturing so many quality products and welcoming so many buyers! [...] What I do here is for pleasure and joy, and I become friends with the customers, who always come back here."

When he asked about how João saw himself, Léo obtained the following answer: "We who worked selling clothes in the fair were called 'sulanqueiro' before, right? But nowadays I see myself as an entrepreneur, with my own business, which is small but brings me so much joy."

When walking through the fair, Léo met Lourdes again, who, besides sewing the pieces of clothing in her "fação", also has a stall in the fair. She told Léo that she arrives at the fair on Sunday in the morning and stays until 6 a.m. of the next day selling the pieces of clothing, although she knows people who stay until 2:00 p.m. on Monday.

She also commented that, in the early hours between Sunday and Monday, it is common to see the salespeople taking naps on the fair stalls, given the intense workload in that environment. At the end of the fair, according to her, pack animals, such as donkeys, conducted by their owners, are seen carrying the improvised wooden structures that form the stalls.

Revisiting the conversation recordings, Léo realized the diversity of experiences and different views on work with jeans in Toritama, despite noticing some shared experiences, such as the degree of risk to health and hazard of such work, the lack of social guarantees, the condition of the elderly, the intense work of the dressmaker mothers, etc.

At the end of the conversations and considerations provided, he found himself questioning his own narrative about work: "Do I really work for myself?" On the day scheduled for the interview with the documentary producer, he found himself anxious for not having an answer to the question posed to him before: "What makes people work with jeans in Toritama?" All of a sudden, he felt that enjoying Carnaval was not his main concern anymore.

Based on Léo's inquiries, it is possible to reflect upon the different *ethos* of work observed in the workers' narratives in Agreste das Confecções and the effects of the fragmentation of narratives about work for the workers in that context. It is also possible to reflect upon the effects of the institutional absence of the State for the workers and the possibilities for these workers before the work conditions there. Finally, the case leads us to reflect upon what makes people work with jeans in Toritama.

## TEACHING NOTES

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### *Ethos of work at the clothing production region of Agreste*

#### *Abstract*

This teaching case, adapted from the documentary “I’m saving myself for when the carnival arrives,” directed by Marcelo Gomes and launched in July 2019 in Brazil, has the main objective of discussing the different ethos of work existing in the clothing industry in the region of Agreste Pernambucano from the narratives of male and female workers in the city of Toritama-PE. The teaching case also allows analyzing the repercussions of the absence of the government and the fragmentation of the narratives about work for men and women in the region. The narratives are gathered from Léo, the main character of the documentary. The dilemma of the case refers to the question “what makes people work with jeans in Toritama?”, which Léo seeks to answer throughout the documentary. The case can be used by professors who work in the undergraduate course in administration, in the disciplines of sociology and labor relations.

**Keywords:** *Ethos* of work. Narratives. Clothing production. Agreste. Toritama. Teaching case.

### *Ethos do trabalho no Agreste das Confecções*

#### *Resumo*

O presente caso para ensino, adaptado do documentário *Estou me guardando para quando o carnaval chegar*, dirigido por Marcelo Gomes e lançado em julho de 2019 no Brasil, tem como objetivo principal discutir os diferentes *ethos* do trabalho na atividade de confecção no Agreste Pernambucano sob as narrativas de trabalhadores e trabalhadoras da cidade de Toritama. O caso também permite analisar as repercussões da ausência do Estado e da fragmentação das narrativas sobre o trabalho para trabalhadores e trabalhadoras da região. As narrativas são reunidas com base em Léo, personagem principal. O dilema do caso se refere à pergunta “o que leva as pessoas a trabalhar com *jeans* em Toritama?”, à qual Léo busca responder ao longo do documentário. O caso pode ser utilizado por docentes que atuam no curso de graduação em administração, nas disciplinas de sociologia e relações de trabalho.

**Palavras-chave:** *Ethos* do trabalho. Narrativas. Agreste das Confecções. Toritama. Caso para ensino.

### *Ethos del trabajo en el agreste de las confecciones*

#### *Resumen*

El presente caso de enseñanza, adaptado del documental “Me reservo para cuando llegue el carnaval”, dirigido por Marcelo Gomes y lanzado en julio de 2019 en Brasil, tiene como objetivo principal discutir los diferentes *ethos* laborales existentes en un centro de confecciones en la región del agreste de Pernambuco a partir de las narrativas de trabajadores de la ciudad de Toritama-PE. El caso también permite analizar las repercusiones de la ausencia del Estado y de la fragmentación de las narrativas sobre el trabajo para los trabajadores de la región. Las narrativas se recogen de Léo, protagonista principal del documental. El dilema del caso se refiere a la pregunta “¿qué hace que la gente trabaje con *jeans* en Toritama?”, a la que Léo busca responder a lo largo del documental. El caso puede ser utilizado por profesores que se desempeñen en la carrera de grado en Administración, en las disciplinas de Sociología y Relaciones Laborales.

**Palabras clave:** *Ethos* del trabajo. Narrativas. Agreste de las confecciones. Toritama. Caso de enseñanza.

## Objective of the case

Discussing the different *ethos* of work in the apparel manufacturing activity in Agreste Pernambucano based on the narratives of workers from the city of Toritama, gathered by Léo, for creation of a documentary. As developments, this teaching case also makes it possible to analyze the effects of the absence of the State and the fragmentation of the narratives about work for the local workers.

Thus, it is understood that the case is interdisciplinary when it brings the debate on work, contextualizing the institutional regulatory frameworks for the apparel manufacturing activity in Agreste Pernambucano and the effects of the State actions (and/or its lack) and the fragmentation of the narratives about work in the construction of workers' subjectivities and identities, historically permeated by precarious and informal work in that region. The case may be used by professors working in the undergraduate course in Administration, in the courses of Sociology and Work Relations.

## Source of data

Data for preparation of the case were extracted and adapted from the documentary *I'm saving myself for when the Carnival arrives*, directed by Marcelo Gomes and released in July 2019 in Brazil. In our view, the pedagogical practice may be based on film content when we mobilize film as a new learning-mediating language (Napolitano, 2003).

Thus, the accounts of real stories embodied by the characters bring to debate in class a certain problem, starred by actors and characters that, at that moment, represent peripheral social groups, which are many times made invisible and silenced in academic texts.

Simultaneously, the specialized bibliography was consulted in order to contextualize the origin, development, and modernization of the apparel manufacturing activity in Agreste Pernambucano, thus supporting the workers' narratives about the *ethos* of work in this segment.

## Pedagogical aspects

For the start, at the 1st meeting scheduled for the teaching case activity, we suggest organizing the class in 3 moments. First, briefly display excerpts from the documentary to introduce Léo, the main character, and introduce the class to the context of apparel manufacturing in Agreste. Subsequently, we suggest recollecting the dilemma brought by Léo and collectively reading the case, with the participation of all. Based on the dilemma, the students are asked to gather in sub-groups and reflect upon the dilemma brought by Léo based on the workers' narratives.

In the second part of the class, they are asked to briefly share the first impressions of the dilemma. In the third and last moment, the questions to be answered are announced to the class and the central position of the debate on *ethos* of work is informed to analyze the case. The professor may ask the students to take the case home, in order to read it individually and in-depth, further researching online about the region and the socio-productive dynamics in it, as well as reading academic texts on ethos of work, as to individually answer the proposed questions.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting, the professor may begin introducing the theoretical content in dialogue with the students, based on their readings. Another important point in this collective construction is highlighting some basic concepts that may help to analyze the case, such as the notions of modernity, institutional thinning, fragmentation of the public metanarrative about work and the different *ethos* of work, etc. The professor may also select other excerpts from the documentary, such as Léo's statements, which are rich in elements for discussion.

After this introduction, it is possible to begin discussing the questions and consequently analyzing the case. We suggest 2 possibilities therefor. In the first one, the professor may resume the format of small groups and ask the groups to discuss the individual answers they prepared between themselves, deepening the reflections of the 1<sup>st</sup> meeting and developing group answers to the questions.

After the end of this collective construction, the professor may dismantle the small groups and gather the students in a circle so that each group presents the answers developed. This possibility is interesting for the students to discuss the individual answers to the questions between themselves, in a more relaxed way, in the sub-groups. It is also more interesting for classes with a longer duration.

For shorter classes, we suggest discussing the case directly asking the students to present the answers made at home for the whole class, considering the initial reflection made in the sub-groups with other colleagues. In this case, it is important that the professor takes the role of mediator, raising other questions based on the answers presented, pointing out paths, and recovering the focus of the debate whenever necessary. To do so, we suggest teaching resources such as using the blackboard, constructing mental maps, etc.

The students may be evaluated through the individual answers to the questions, their participation in the reflection, and the construction of collective answers in the sub-groups and/or in the discussion in class.

## Questions

1. Which are the different *ethos* of work observed, based on the workers' narratives gathered by Léo?
2. Which are the effects of the institutional absence of the State for the Toritama workers?
3. Which are the effects of the fragmentation of narratives about work for the Toritama workers?
4. Which are the possibilities for these workers, given the work conditions imposed?
5. If you were in Léo's place, how would you answer the question "what makes people work with jeans in Toritama?"

## THEORETICAL GUIDE FOR ANALYSIS

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### The Agreste das Confecções and the city of Toritama

Agreste das Confecções is how one of the largest apparel manufacturing clusters in Brazil, based in the Northern Agreste of the State of Pernambuco, became known (Souza, 2012) It refers to an agglomeration of productive, commercial, and service activities, specialized in apparel manufacturing, which involves different players, places, spaces, and dynamics. Despite its expansion throughout the years, 10 cities stand out as the most important in this activity, and Caruaru, Toritama, and Santa Cruz do Capibaribe maintain themselves as the major ones, for being responsible for 77% of the GDP produced by the whole cluster and concentrating 66% of the total population (Sebrae, 2013).

In the past, this cluster was first outlined due to the production of "sulanca", pieces of clothing made, especially by mothers who could not buy clothes for their children, with patches of fabric (especialmente helanca) initially coming from the waste of factories from the State capital, Recife, and later from the South region of the country. Given the rural context and the predominance of dry stretches of land in the region, agriculture soon lost its place to apparel, manufactured in the domestic and family environment and for livelihood, attracting purchasers due to the low prices (Burnett, 2014).

The main place of marketing of these productions was the sulanca fairs, which already took the streets of Caruaru and Santa Cruz do Capibaribe in the 1960s. Nevertheless, there was a strong production of leather footwear in Toritama since 1930, which started to be replaced by synthetic materials in 1970. Given the emergency of developing some apparel manufacturing activity that integrated Toritama to the neighboring cities, the machinery used for the production of footwear was adapted to the manufacturing of jeans. Therefore, the Toritama sulanca fair only started to grow in the mid-1980s, after some frustrated attempts, and some Toritama inhabitants kept selling their productions at the fairs in the neighboring cities, Caruaru and Santa Cruz (Oliveira & Braga, 2014).

In the 2000s, there were movements as to modernizing the sulanca territory, mobilized by several players, such as the Clothing Industry Union (Sindivest), Brazilian Micro and Small Enterprises' Support Service (Sebrae), and the State. Discursive re-elaborations were made to name such territory, in the sense that it started to be named Agreste Apparel Manufacturing Cluster, transforming "sulanca" into "fashion" and the "sulaqueiro" into "entrepreneur" (Oliveira, 2013).

Together with these modernization movements, commercial centers emerged, and the first of them – Parque das Feiras –, was inaugurated in Toritama as a result of negotiations between local private companies and the State. Soon after, the Caruaru Commercial Center and Moda Center Santa Cruz were also inaugurated.

In these commercial centers, there are boxes – rented by street merchants to sell their products – and the stores – more formalized than the boxes –, some larger than others. Despite these spaces, the *sulanca* fairs persist. In the case of Toritama, it is currently located at Parque das Feiras, which increased public inspection, although family and informal dynamics have not significantly been changed. This fair is basically constituted by 3 “*sulanqueiro*” profiles: those who work in the stalls, those who sell the goods on canvas (on the floor), and street salesmen (Oliveira & Braga, 2014)

In addition to the fairs and commercial centers, other spaces are important to these dynamics of apparel manufacturing: the “*fabricos*” and “*facções*”, in which clothes are manufactured to be marketed after. The “*fabricos*” are factories not registered as companies or manufacturing spaces, often inside houses, whose owners assume the risks posed by the business when they become responsible for purchasing the inputs and selling the finished pieces of clothing. The “*facções*” are a type of manufacturing facility, also based in houses, which provide specialized services in a step or task of the manufacturing of a certain piece of clothing, in connection with the “*fabrico*” and the factories as subcontractors, “informally outsourced” (Pereira & Oliveira, 2013).

With respect to the manufacturing of denim clothes, another facility was introduced to the manufacturing chain, the laundry rooms, which provide services to the factories, “*fabricos*”, and “*facções*” in the clothing finishing stage. In this socio-productive space, the clothes are processed in consecutive washings and rinsings with chemicals under high temperatures in industrial washing machines (between 15 and 350 kg), subject to basic operations in order to remove the gum from the fabric (ungluing) and the excess of chemicals (reduction), making the jeans whitish (bleaching) and introducing softeners (softening), among others. In the laundry rooms, several distinguishing effects are manually applied to the clothes, with the aid of sandpaper, pins, grinders, sponges/pistols with chemicals: the so-called “*sanded*”, “*crumples*”, “*worn outs*”, “*whiskers*”, respectively, among others, which aim at wear the pieces of clothing out. In the Agreste region, some laundry rooms, those most structured, have been acquiring laser machines for application of the “*whisker*” effect because, out of the abovementioned effects, it is the one which exposes the workers to inhalation of toxic chemical substances the most (Pereira, 2018).

Particularly for manufacturing of denim clothing, Toritama is responsible for 15% of the national, production, being positioned as the second main manufacturer, after the Brás-Bom Retiro Apparel Manufacturing Cluster, in São Paulo (Sebrae, 2013).

However, nowadays, the activity still keeps informal, family-based, unprotected work backing it.

## Ethos of work

The contemporary world, in which workers are inserted, is marked by a strong uncertainty in the relation between work and identity. In other words, the current context is not characterized by modern certainties anymore, but by instability, flexibility, and fluidity, which reach all spheres of human life, including work. In this context, modern institutions lose the strength they once had and also the metanarratives which guided the construction of one’s identity.

The State is an example of an institution that is in crisis in the contemporary postmodern era. And work, an important public metanarrative supported by a solid institutional base in the modern world, also is declining, ceasing to play a central role in the construction of one’s identity. This is the context of “*institutional thinning*”, about which Bendassolli (2007) speaks.

The context observed in the city of Toritama and reported in the narrative of the case is marked by the institutional thinning mentioned by Bendassolli (2007), as the State, an important modern institution, had little participation in the initial organization of this socio-productive experience. As mentioned in the description of the teaching case, Agreste das Confecções emerged out of the need of the people who lived there to find livelihoods, since state investment in that region has always been minimal. Hence, they found alternatives using the residues of textile production from large urban centers, such as São Paulo and Recife, thus developing a specific form of production, with problems typical of a productive activity lacking proper work conditions.



It is also worth highlighting that, in peripheral contexts, such as Brazil, modernity seems to assume a selective nature (Souza, 2000), keeping social structures in which some are privileged, to the prejudice of others. Thus, modern institutions such as the State, through its deliberate absence or occasional actions, may construct and/or maintain *status quo*, causing historically disadvantaged areas, as is the case of Toritama and the Agreste Pernambucano region, to continue to be in a subordinate position.

Hence, we may infer that institutional absence, especially of the State in that region, created a situation of strong precariousness in work, with informality as its main foundation. Among production units, informality is persistent and shows itself in multiple dimensions, according to the model proposed by Pereira (2018), both in the lack of registration of the business as a company – in “fabricos”, “facções”, and clandestine laundry rooms – and in the forms of management, but especially in work relations outside the legal apparatus, based on family ties, close relationships, and trust.

These social bonds, historically created in the region described in the documentary, conceal exploitation relationships, and workers are subject to degrading labor conditions and crossed by extrapolated working hours, intense pace, repetitive movements, and environments inadequate to the development of the activities, which characterize continuous exposure to risks to the health and safety in the workplace, a situation aggravated on the days before the local apparel fairs, as it is necessary to increase productivity (Pereira, 2018).

It is possible to note, therefore, that institutional thinning marks experience with work in modern times (Bendassolli, 2007) and shows itself in a particular way in the context of Agreste das Confecções, through the absence of the State, leading to strong informality. In order to problematize the institutional thinning phenomenon, Bendassolli (2007) makes an important historical recovery of several *ethos* of work throughout history, showing how it started to be seen as a central activity based on classic economics, protestant ethics, employer doctrines, the view of work as the exteriorization of the individual widespread in Marx and Engels, and on Émile Durkheim’s view about the moral value of the division of work.

For the author, it is in the second half of the 20th century that work, which had become a central issue from the economic, moral, ideological, philosophical, and contractual point of view, starts to be deconstructed in all these aspects. Thus, there is a crisis of work as a source of value; a transformation of the protestant and traditional work ethics, which starts to base itself on instrumental values and consumption; a crisis of the subject of work and a loss of meaning, a discussion strongly marked by symbolic interactionism; and a de-institutionalization of work, leading to individualization.

Antunes, based on the Marxist tradition, strongly criticizes capital and its destructive nature, denouncing the increase in the exploitation of workers by the intensification of work time and pace. For him, workers in modern times are devoid of rights and meaning by a system that not only degrades nature but also puts on a precarious condition “the human force that works, unemploying or underemploying it.” Therefore, by observing all transformations work has been going through, it is possible to note a significant “heterogenization, complexification, and fragmentation of work” in current days (Antunes, 2009).

Among the aspects that compose this heterogenization and complexification of work in current days, it is possible to highlight outsourcing and sub-proletarianization, occurring in precarious, partial, informal, among other types of work, which have been affecting the female population in an impressive way (Antunes, 2009). In this debate, the notion of informality is gaining emphasis for being strongly present in the context of Agreste das Confecções and is understood as a multidimensional notion, based on Pereira (2018), by simultaneously combining the legal-institutional – related to the employment bonds and registration of business – and socio-economic dimensions – which are related to the salaried employment relationship, organization of production, and management of work – to the sociocultural – related to the social bonds between individuals – and contextual dimensions – historical and current relations between local and global-national-regional factors.

In a more subjective dimension, it is possible to say that this fragmentation of work strongly presents itself in the individualization phenomenon. On this phenomenon, in a context of institutional thinning, an action seems to be increasingly demanded of individuals, but not so well supported by the institutions, with their references and models, as it was before. Experience with work is privatized, and the individual is responsible for defining his/her career, which reflects his/her style and preferences, and ensures him/her a certain status or not. The mobile, autonomous, independent individual, who is capable of finding his/her references by himself/herself and reaching self-fulfillment by his/her own actions, is valued, which involves increasingly greater risks and uncertainties.

Thus, the watchwords in the construction of the meaning of work and one's own identity seem to be "risk" and "uncertainty". It is what Bendassolli (2007) demonstrates by highlighting that, from the mid-20th century onward, the then public work metanarrative – a large discursive system that explained the particularities of the experiences with work, absorbing them into collectively shared "plots" – was diluted into smaller narratives with an institutionally fragile basis.

Therefore, it is this plurality of experiences with work, expressed by different narratives, which Léo realizes through the conversations he had for preparation of the documentary. Thus, different answers to the question "what makes people work with jeans in Toritama?" are possible, and they may be related to the dreams of the characters introduced, such as the rise of the business, narrated by Maria, or the homeownership and some comfort for the family, as told by Lourdes. The answer to the question that is the theme of the documentary may also be related to the need to overcome the unemployment condition by becoming an "entrepreneur", as presented by Maria, as well to the opportunity of dealing with different people, as pointed out by João.

The possibility of greater flexibility, as emphasized in the narrative presented by Lourdes in order to combine the work with apparel manufacturing and domestic chores, has drawn Léo's attention to the situation of the female workers, who, in most cases, have double working hours, as they are responsible for the activities related to care. Such reality experienced by women is something evidenced by the literature, which indicates the permanence of women in the performance of reproductive work, reinforcing the distinction between "men's work" and "women's work" and creating an overload situation for female workers (Bezerra, 2018; Bezerra, Corteletti, & Araújo, 2020; Heleno, 2013).

It is possible to note, therefore, that these different narratives presented to Léo are collectively constructed, evidencing plural dreams, needs, and realities within the same productive system. Despite this discursive plurality, based on the conversations for the documentary, Léo realized that almost all interviewees share the same reality of a high number of hours worked, low wages, a high degree of risk, and lack of social guarantees.

These perceptions about the work developed in Toritama corroborate what the literature says about the conditions of the work developed in Agreste das Confecções, as the studies by Santos (2017), Souza (2012), and Pereira (2018), for example, point out.

The different narratives about work perceived by Léo in Toritama, constructed by individuals throughout the years and expressing their subjectivities, are aligned with what Bendassolli (2007) calls *ethos*, which aims at providing a means for the individual to construct and organize the meaning of his/her existence and deal with his/her social relationships (Bendassolli, 2007).

Which, however, would be these diluted narratives about work? Bendassolli describes them as moral-disciplinary, romantic-expressive, instrumental, consumerist, and managerial. In the first *ethos*, work is understood as a duty, a social and public role to be performed, separated from pleasure, and typically masculine. In this *ethos*, "the reproductive nature and the social meaning of work" (Bendassolli, 2007) are reinforced, and work is seen with rigidity, in which rules, times, and production should be obeyed and faithfully complied with.

In the second one, work is seen as creation, emphasizing the creating individual's expertise and talent and enabling articulation between work and pleasure. This *ethos* "highlights the expressive nature of work, its potential to materialize the true human essence through the mastery over the work. Here, emphasis is on the 'expert' dimension of work, i.e., on something that someone masters or executes with mastery" (Bendassolli, 2007)

In the third one, the subjective features of work, which is understood as an exchange resource, "subject to the capitalist logic of efficiency and productivity", are not emphasized. Bendassolli, here, "emphasizes the liberal dimension of work, i.e., its employment characteristic; it is possible to say that this *ethos* is a result of the economic thinking matrix in which work is an exchange, subject to the capitalist logic of efficiency and productivity" (Bendassolli, 2007) On this instrumental ethos, attention is called to 3 dimensions of work: individual meritocracy, the pursuit of income, and the pursuit of social status.

In the fourth one, the meaning of work is directly linked to the satisfaction that it is capable of offering to the worker, in terms of visibility, status, or prestige. Work is only a means for getting pleasure and the satisfaction that it brings. According to Bendassolli (2007), in this *ethos*, "it is believed that the greater the satisfaction, the better the professional's chance of achieving high performance and productivity levels."

Finally, the managerial *ethos* is based on the cult of excellence and performance, in addition to the business, management, and entrepreneurship cultures. It is focused on the professional's individual characteristics, indicating that he/she must "create a company out of himself/herself, with no dependency on institutions, confident only of his/her own social, human, or intellectual capital" (Bendassolli, 2007).

Here, work starts to be privatized and is confused with each one's own expression, each one's own identity. Thus, the individual must see himself/herself as his/her own entrepreneur, obtain high performance, maximize his/her pleasure. "The concept of employment is replaced by the one of project. Working is, therefore, having a personal project in which the professional reflect his/her tastes, needs, desires, competencies, and potential" (Bendassolli, 2007).

With that, it is possible to perceive, in the case presented, different narratives for the work developed in the productive context of the city of Toritama and retrieved during the conversations. The moral-disciplinary *ethos*, for example, can be observed especially in Léo's initial speech, who sees work as an obligation and must be performed with no diversions, separated from pleasure. For him, his name is "work" and his surname is "overtime hours", clarifying the importance he attributes to this activity.

Something similar to the romantic-expressive *ethos* can be seen in João's speech, a salesman at the fair, who says, showing enthusiasm, that he does his work with joy and pleasure. Thus, he emphasizes a subjective nature attributed to work, so that the one who develops it does so with some mastery, evidencing its expressive nature.

The instrumental *ethos*, in which work is understood as an exchange resource, can be found in Lourdes and Maria's opinion when they emphasize that they work so much to earn more, since they get paid per production. We note the importance of efficiency and productivity in order to ensure essentially economic gains, made possible through work.

In Lourdes's speech, we also note the consumerist *ethos*, associated with the meaning of "having some luxury" when she projects the future trips and the house of the "comfortable" kind for the family. This is because, through work, it is possible to occupy a certain social status or obtain satisfaction with the consumption of goods or services socially validated, such as a house or a car.

The managerial *ethos* is perceived especially in Maria's and João's narratives, who see themselves as owners of their own business, "companies" of themselves, "entrepreneurs" when envisioning this way of social inclusion through work. These related narratives have been driven by modern institutions, which recently started to operate in Agreste das Confecções, promoting the discourse of entrepreneurship, seeing the "sulanqueiro" as an entrepreneur. For Negreiros, the appreciation of the idea of entrepreneurship in the region "follows the trend of passing on the responsibility for his/her employability potential and satisfactory employment and income conditions to the worker, ignoring the historical process of selectivity in the labor market, reducing the intervention responsibility of the State" (Negreiros, 2010).

Thus, in a more critical reading, managerial *ethos* seems to hold workers accountable for the structural issues experienced by them.

Bendassolli (2007) points out that this fragmentation of a public metanarrative of work reflects the failure of a modern model of aggregating the individual, the society, and the State. This model was not effective in contexts that have gone through the process of colonization, as emphasized by the literature on the topic (Quijano, 2009), since modernity was used as rhetoric for subordinating territories and peoples. It is possible to say, therefore, that, in general, modernization takes place selectively in Brazil; after all, according to the thesis by Souza (2000), it maintains "social order", in which some groups are benefited to the prejudice of others.

Additionally, this dilution of the metanarrative of work presents a misalignment between social institutions, social and individual expectations with respect to work, i.e., an ambiguity that seems to mark the current experience with work and consequently causes a state of ontological uncertainty in the individual. This uncertainty would be marked, above all, by the individual's difficulty to find a sense of biographical continuity in his/her contact with work, the excessive concern with risks to his/her own existence as a professional, and the lack of confidence and certainty in the capability of personal self-integrity, a situation in which the individual cannot justify his/her actions, does not know why he/she takes them, and, even when he/she knows, cannot acknowledge a meaning, a coherence in them (Souza, 2000).

Thus, it is possible to note that the narrative of the case presents examples of the ontological uncertainty experienced by individuals as a result of the fragmentation of the narrative of work. This uncertainty is made clear in the speech of Léo's friend, Dior, which reflects the experience of those who desperately sell their equipment in order to enjoy Carnival. According to the character, there is no certainty about tomorrow, that is why it is necessary to live today, to have fun. In general, this state of uncertainty and risk has always been present in the region, as its main economic activity arises from improvisation and urgency to ensure people's livelihood, such as the mothers who could not buy clothes for their children and started to manufacture them at home.

This was Maria's case, who saw herself unemployed after working in a factory for years and was impelled to open her own "façção" in order to survive and take care of her children and her family. In Léo's trajectory, it is also possible to perceive this uncertainty, given that he was led to have different employments during his life to ensure his survival, many of them risky and without guarantees, such as cutting tree stumps, digging holes, and working with chemicals harmful to health. Thus, it is possible to note that the ontological uncertainty condition of these workers ends up subjecting them to poor work conditions, in which there are no boundaries other than physical, and it is common to see people working exhaustive workloads, such as the dressmakers who work several hours a day and have double workloads, accumulating household chores, caring tasks, and manufacturing of jeans.

On this topic, the study by Lira, Gurgel, Albuquerque, and Amaral (2020) raises awareness about the early distress of the workforce working in the apparel manufacturing industry in the Agreste of Pernambuco region, given the super-exploitation of workers observed in the increased workloads in the "façções", for example. This situation is aggravated by the social unprotection condition experienced by such individuals, making a proper recovery of the workforce impossible, leading to increasingly early invalidity cases, considering that the entry into this labor market takes place in youth, and it is possible to evidence child labor in many cases (Lira et al., 2020).

Moreover, it is important to note that the discourse of many characters is that these work conditions are interesting for ensuring them some freedom in comparison with formalized work. What seems to exist in these discursive elaborations is an internalization of the poor work conditions due to the lack of decent work alternatives for these individuals. Using the terms of Antunes (2009), this discourse seems to indicate effects of the crisis of this century in subjectivities and ways of being.

As responses to this ontological uncertainty, individuals may, according to Bendassolli (2007), adopt an ironic view, being capable of discharging from institutions and jobs easily, understanding the world as something changeable, flexible, without authority; elect a reflexive view, aware of their conceptual bases and the consequences of their actions, monitoring and controlling themselves, seeking protection from the processes of defragmentation individually and uncertainly; constructing false "selves", adapting to any situation to be accepted, but incapable of being who they are, leading to feelings such as emptiness, falsehood, futility, etc.

Thus, for Bendassolli, given the several descriptions and ideas about the meaning and value of work with a fragile institutional basis, it is left to the individual only "an individual action without assistance", which leads to restrictions of accesses, ensured by institutions, or to an "impotence" situation, ideal for the action of opportunists, such as self-help gurus (Bendassolli, 2007).

Given the uncertainties and risks in which the workers in the case analyzed live, it is possible to think about the alternative envisioned by Bendassolli (2007) of the creation of reflexive individuals who seek protection from defragmentation processes. This search for protection may be carried out individually, as the author points out, but also collectively, which is more difficult to construct, given the great encouragement of individual action without guarantees in the contemporary world. Anyway, with the awareness of individuals through reflection processes, it is believed to be possible to think about alternatives such as the creation of associations, communities, social movements, etc., which, in an organized manner, raise demands from workers, think of collective solutions, and press the government.

The documentary elaborated based on the narratives gathered by Léo, which explore the different narratives about work in Toritama, may be seen as a potential tool for raising awareness among workers, to the extent that they are led to reflect upon their condition, as it happens to Léo throughout the narrative of the case. By participating in the documentary, gathering information in conversations with different players, Léo assumes a more questioning attitude towards his work reality, important for construction of reflexive individuals.

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