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## Ethnographic approach and social intervention in the production and use of images: interview with José Roberto Novaes (Beto Novaes)

*Olhar etnográfico e intervenção social na produção e uso de imagens: entrevista com José Roberto Novaes (Beto Novaes)*

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The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

The authors inform this interview was not presented in a scientific event and was not based on a dissertation.

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## Abstract

Beto Novaes is a retired professor of the Institute of Economics of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, where he coordinates the 'Education through Images' project. Since the mid-seventies, he has undertaken research and extension activities based on the use of images about work and workers, mostly in the rural sector. Images are the means used to bring research and academic knowledge closer to society, disrupting the hierarchy of knowledge in which academic knowledge is normally considered superior. His productions arise from social demands to deal with problems of little visibility such as: the exploitation of labor and migrations in the rural domain, child and female labor, workers' resistance, agroecology and confrontation with pesticides use. Through his ethnographic approach, he acts against the exercise of domination through workers' narratives, 'giving voice to those who have no voice', and designing ways of confronting with and changing reality. His documentaries express teachings in the art of ethnography and in the practice of intervention, not only with a view to change social reality, but also to influence academic praxis. His films are also artistic pieces where beauty coexists with sensitivity, generosity, commitment and hope.

**Keywords:** university; work; health; research; community-institutional relations.

## Resumo

Beto Novaes é professor aposentado do Instituto de Economia da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, onde coordena o projeto Educação através das Imagens. Desenvolve desde meados dos anos 1970 pesquisas e atividades de extensão baseadas no uso de imagens sobre trabalho e trabalhadores, em sua maioria no setor rural. Imagens são o meio que utiliza para aproximar a pesquisa e o saber acadêmico da sociedade, desconstruindo hierarquia de saberes na qual o conhecimento acadêmico seria superior. Suas produções têm origem em demandas sociais para tratar de problemas com pouca visibilidade social, dentre eles: a exploração do trabalho e as migrações no mundo rural; trabalho infantil e das mulheres; resistências dos trabalhadores; agroecologia e enfrentamento aos agrotóxicos. Seu olhar etnográfico faz contraponto ao exercício da dominação por meio das narrativas dos trabalhadores, "dando voz para quem não têm voz" e, desenhando caminhos de enfrentamento e mudança da realidade. Seus documentários são ensinamentos da arte da etnografia e da prática de intervenção, não apenas para participar da mudança da realidade social, mas também para influenciar a práxis acadêmica. Seus filmes são também peças artísticas onde a beleza convive com a sensibilidade, generosidade, engajamento e esperança.

**Palavras-chave:** universidade; trabalho; saúde; pesquisa; relações comunidade-instituição.

**Interviewers (I): Beto, tell us about your professional and academic background.**

**Beto Novaes:** I was born in São Carlos in 1945, the year in which World War II finished. I spent all my infancy and youth in São Carlos. I graduated in the faculdade de agronomia Luiz de Queiroz, da Universidade de São Paulo (University of São Paulo, College of Agriculture), in Piracicaba (State of São Paulo). I graduated in 1970 as an agronomist specialized in Rural Economics.

I took my first job in 1970 at the Superintendência do Vale do São Francisco (Superintendency of the Valley of the São Francisco – SUVALE). As a rural economist I accompanied the implantation of cooperatives in irrigation projects on the lower middle São Francisco river, in the region of Petrolina ((State of Pernambuco) and Juazeiro (State of Bahia). That experience was an important apprenticeship in my professional training because it brought me together with the traditional farmers who occupied the banks of the river for the irrigation of their crops. The regional development model implanted by the military regime, however, did not seek to satisfy the demands of these agricultural producers, but rather to attract large national and international companies to the region. These companies occupied the lands along the river banks, expelled the river-side population, and implanted great irrigation projects for the production of fruit and vegetables.

In 1972, I left SUVALE to get my Master degree of Economics in Chile. I was unable to conclude the course because of the 1973 military coup which overthrew President Salvador Allende. Dark days...

In 1975, already back in Brazil, I returned to my academic activities to conclude my master's degree, now in COPPE (Instituto Alberto Luiz Coimbra de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa de Engenharia, da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro – UFRJ – Alberto Luiz Coimbra Institute for Graduate Studies and Research in Engineering, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro).

In 1977, after the conclusion of my master's degree, I went to work as Professor in the Departamento de Economia da Universidade Federal da Paraíba – UFPB (Department of Economics from the Federal University of Paraíba), in Campina Grande (State of Paraíba).

At that time, as a result of the political amnesty, many professors who had been exiled were hired by the university. The dean, Lynaldo Cavalcanti de Albuquerque, chose to hire those people who returned with doctorates from foreign universities due to their qualifications and their professional quality.

In that period, groups of researchers of the University sought to build bridges between theoretical development, academic research and extension work in the University, in the context of the increase of the social struggle for the re-democratization of the country, for the end of the military regime. It was in that context that I had my first experience with the use of images in education, with the production of the documentary “O que eu conto do sertão<sup>d</sup> é isso”<sup>1</sup> (“This is what I have to tell about the *sertão*”).

At the beginning of the 80s, I returned to deepen my studies, now in the doctoral program of Economics at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas – UNICAMP (State University of Campinas). After finishing, I went back to my academic activities at the UFPB and, after four years, I was hired by the Instituto de Economia (Institute of Economics) of the UFRJ where I have been coordinating, until today, despite being retired, the extension project: “Educação através das imagens” (Education by means of Images).

**I: How did your interest in university extension and [scientific] diffusion arise?**

**Beto Novaes:** My interest in extension work arose at the end of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s, in the context of the advance of the social struggle for the re-democratization of the country. In those decades, the workers created various entities to represent them on the various fronts of the struggle: Comissão Pastoral<sup>e</sup> da Terra – CPT (Pastoral Commission of the Land), Central Única dos Trabalhadores – CUT (Unified Workers' Center), Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra – MST (Landless Workers' Movement), Movimento dos Atingidos pelas Barragens – MAB (Movement of those affected by the Dams), Conselho Nacional de Seringueiros – CNS (Rubber Extractors' National Council), among others.

The master's programs in Economics and Sociology of the UFPB, Campina Grande, faced that situation. The social movements moved closer to academia and were welcomed by these programs. Many meetings and seminars were held in academic spaces in partnership with the social, trade-unionist and ecclesial movements. Many pastoral and militant agents of the social and pastoral movements came to attend the UFP's master courses in Economics and Sociology. Thus the theoretical studies came to be based on the social praxis, by the integration of the teaching, research and extension activities.

Within this context, academic research came to reconstruct the relation researcher – researched. The challenge was to de-construct the value accorded to academic knowledge over that of other fields of

<sup>d</sup> TN (Translator's note), Beto Novaes uses the word “sertão”, which we have maintained in this text, to refer to the arid, sparsely populated interior of the northeastern region of Brazil.

<sup>e</sup> TN, Pastoral is a branch of the Roman Catholic Church action aiming to change reality according Jesus principles.

knowledge, to find mechanisms of returning to society the results of academic investigation. These questions contributed to the value given to the extension activities of the universities.

A group of professors of the UFPB Master's course in Economics (I, João Otávio Paes de Barros, Francisco Alves and Maria Rita Assumpção) decided to deal with the need to return the research results to the organizations that collaborated with the research development.

In 1978, a research project was undertaken in the *sertão* of Paraíba. The objective of the investigation consisted of the analysis of the changes in the relations of production in the great land-holdings and the migratory process of the rural workers to the cities of the State of Paraíba. It was a process visible in various regions of the State of Paraíba, though not only limited to this, state. It was a national question, a consequence of the policy implementation process of the technological modernization of agriculture and, also, of the appropriation of public and private lands by the great business groups.

We undertook the research project interviewing rural workers, trade union leaders, and great landowners in the deep *sertão* of Paraíba and dwellers, migrants, on the outskirts of the city of Campina Grande. Thus, the research project was concluded with the drawing up of a report.

This report was not, however, adequate for the return of the research results to the trade-union leaders and workers of the region. Beyond its complex academic language, there were many illiterate workers with little reading ability.

This concern was shared with colleagues of the movie clubs' movement of Campina Grande. In our meetings for reflection and discussion, the idea of feeding back the results of the research by a documentary in which the argument and the plot would be constructed based in the results of academic research progressively gained ground. We drew up a project and went on to transform our research into images.

### **I: How was your first filming experience?**

**Beto Novaes:** We, of academia, had no experience of cinematographic language; we thought we would use the resource of the image as an illustration of the academic language. It would be sufficient to produce a text with beginning, middle and end and cover it with images...

It was necessary to learn how to work with images. Bráulio Tavares, Romero de Azevedo and José Humbelino, all linked to cultural activities in Campina Grande (State of Paraíba), contributed greatly to the materialization of our project. That occurred in 1978 and 1979. Finally it fell to the group to elaborate the argument, undertake the production and direct the documentary.

Our idea of the documentary was to bring out the interpretations of the land-owners and of the workers on the questions relating to the working conditions on the great land-holdings, to bring out the breakdown of the relationship of partnership and the migration of workers from the country to the cities. In the city of Pombal, in the deep interior of Paraíba state, we found a character to expound the thought of the great land-holders: Priest Levi, who was a great landowner in the region, a priest and candidate for the position of state deputy. He offered to collaborate in the documentary production. We were invited to his residence to hold the interview. He lay in a hammock on the varanda of his house and began his narrative. Afterwards, we went to film on his property. The priest had a way with words, his speech was concise in its argument and convincing in its narrative.

Later we sought out a union leader. Our involvement in the union movement facilitated our contact with a leader, who made one single demand to participate in the documentary: he did not wish to be filmed, he did not wish to be identified. This person gave us an interview and was not identified in the film.

Then our team travelled to the outskirts of Campina Grande, to the shanty town of Pedregal, in the suburb of Bodocongó. Pedregal was a shanty town which grew up beside a residential housing estate for teachers, which was under construction, opposite to the university. There we interviewed a woman who came from the *sertão*. She lived in a shack with relatives who also came from the *sertão*, expelled from the land. She had no objection to giving an interview, she wanted to talk about her life story. At the end of her talk, she said: 'That is what I have to tell about the *sertão*'. A sentence that became the title of the film<sup>1</sup>.

At the same time the documentary feeds on academic research for the elaboration of the argument and of the plot, it becomes an instrument for publicizing contemporary themes from the Brazilian rural situation, to be exploited by academic research. We noticed that it is the way academic language interacts with the language of images.

### **I: How was the return, the feed-back to the workers and unions? How was the documentary distributed at that time?**

**Beto Novaes:** The documentary was produced on 16 mm, in the years 1978/79. Digital technology was not available at that time. The difficulties involved in the production and presentation were immense. At the UFPB, on the Campina Grande campus, there was only one 16mm projector, which was frequently out of order. Its maintenance took a long time because of the bureaucratic procedures.

There were only 3 copies of the documentary on rolls: one was deposited in the film library of the Museum of

Modern Art, in Rio de Janeiro, because of the adequate conditions they could offer to store celluloid films and, therefore, to preserve them. The second one was delivered to the cineclub associations of Campina Grande for exhibition on circuits and film festivals. In 1979, the film was awarded by the Jury of the *Jornal do Brasil*/Shell Film Festival held in Rio de Janeiro.

The third remained with the coordination of the UFPB master's program in Economics to comply with the demands of the social movements and for being presented at the Unions. As soon as we received the requests, we planned the place, day and time for the performance, which, when occurred in small cities of the interior, was held at the Unions.

When the workers arrived at the unions they thought they would watch another slide presentation about new technologies for rural producers promoted by the technicians of the *Empresa de Assistência Técnica e Extensão* (State Technical Assistance and Rural Extension Company- EMATER).

When the documentary began being shown, the audience were taken aback by seeing a confrontation of contradictory opinions between the great landowner (the priest) and the workers, about the working conditions on the land-holdings and the the violent way rural workers were expelled from the country to the city, without any payment or legal right. Evidently the audience took the side of the union leader and criticized the narrative of the landowner on the film. To criticize the opinion of a priest/ landowner on the *sertão* was no small matter under the military regime.

Thus, I travelled to many union offices in Paraíba state showing the film, observing the workers' reaction and hearing the stories they told. After all the documentary presentations that I followed, the workers continued to discuss the film at the union and at the local street markets, merging the plot of the film with the narratives of their own stories of life, denouncing the injustices in a region where it was "the boss law" and not the "nation law" that prevailed.

Due to the technological advances, it was necessary to convert the documentary matrix of 16 mm to DVD. This change increased the possibility of the documentary distribution as it permitted the large-scale production of copies. Thus the copies were distributed to research groups at universities and to unions and similar institutions.

"O que eu conto do sertão é isso" was re-launched at UFPB, in Campina Grande, in the beginning of the 2000s.

After this experience, we made two more documentaries about conflicts in Paraíba: "Campo de Batalha" ("Battle Field"), on the occupations of urban

areas in Campina Grande<sup>2</sup>, and "Até Quando?" ("Until when?"), on the increasing precariousness of working conditions in sugarcane plantations<sup>3</sup>.

On the basis of this work, which made use of the results of academic research for the construction of plot and script for documentaries, we integrated the activities of teaching, research and extension at the UFPB. Thus, the increasing value given to extension work in this project permitted strengthening the relationships of the university with the social movements. A Nucleus for the counseling of social movements was created, bringing together students and professors of the master's programs of Economy and Sociology and undergraduate students.

That experience of feeding-back the results of academic research through images reoriented my work in the University. It was the beginning of the project "Educação através das Imagens" (Education through images) which I still coordinate as a retired professor, at the UFRJ.

In 1989, immediately after the approval of the new Brazilian Constitution, I was transferred to the UFRJ Institute of Economics e, in Rio de Janeiro.

### **I: How did you give continuity to your project at the UFRJ?**

**Beto Novaes:** The resumption of the project at the UFRJ occurred at the beginning of the 90s, at the time of the enactment of the *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente* (Child and the Adolescent Statute)<sup>4</sup> and of the Candelária slaughter in Rio de Janeiro (23/6/1993), when eight children were shot by policemen. According to news published at that time, it was suspected that it was ordered by local shop-keepers. That shooting made it into a national and international news, giving greater visibility to the problem of street children in the great cities.

Associated with these lamentable facts, the theme of child labor became news in both the national and international press. The exhibition of a BBC documentary on the work of children in charcoal kilns at Mato Grosso had great repercussion both in Brazil and abroad. Within that context, several institutions contacted us at UFRJ asking us to produce documentaries on child labor in agriculture. Thus, we went back to the project, at this time on the theme of child labor and of the increasing precariousness of working conditions on sugarcane plantations.

On the theme of child labor, we produced four documentaries in the 90s: "Meninos da Roça"<sup>f</sup> ("Boys of the Farm"-1994), about children working in sugar cane harvest in the municipality of Campos (RJ)<sup>5</sup>; "Sonhos de Criança" ("Children's Dreams") about

f Beto Novaes wrote the argument and the plot of this documentary.

children working in cotton and tomato harvests in the state of Goiás<sup>6</sup>; “Conversas de Crianças” (“Children’s Conversations”) about the situation of the children in MST encampments in two regions of the states of Paraná and São Paulo<sup>7</sup>, and “Meninas Mulheres” (“Young Women”) filmed in the community of São Marcos on the outskirts of Campinas (SP)<sup>8</sup>.

When part of this production was completed, we planned the project, “Trabalho Infantil: Saúde, Direito e Trabalho” (“Child Labor: Health, Right and Work”) to make the problems of child labor on farms visible among students and teachers of public and private schools and to Universities research groups. The project consisted of photographic expositions and documentaries. The first presentation was in the UFRJ Science and Culture Forum, in 1995, and had the support of UNICEF. Each group participating in the event received the documentaries to show them in complementary activities organized by the teachers in the schools and in the research groups. The event lasted 10 days. Forty schools and about 2,000 students participated.

The event became itinerant with the support of the International Labor Organization (ILO). Activities were held over a period of five years (1995 to 2000), in all Brazilian regions, from Belém (North) to Porto Alegre (South), organized in partnership with local entities.

We constructed and improved a methodology for the use of images in education aiming at integrating, teaching, research and extension activities in the universities, providing greater visibility to the problem of child labor on farms.

**I: It is evident that projects like that helps to improve the university extension programs. What repercussions that would allow us to assess their impact could you observe?**

**Beto Novaes:** Of course. It is important, however, to draw attention to the characteristics of the organization that was planned to favor themes dissemination, since its impacts on local society depend on the way in which the activities are organized.

In the event “The Child on the Farm: Education, Rights and Work” (held from 1995 to 1998), visits were organized to intermediate level schools, research groups, university students; university and intermediate level students were trained to monitor the project; debates with specialists were held and the launching of books and other cultural activities were organized in the same space (**Figure 1**).

Supported by ILO, the project became itinerant and, was carried out in partnership with various local institutions Ministério Público do Trabalho (Public Ministry of Work), Universities, Conselho Tutelar (Tutulary Council), Conselho de Direitos (Council of

Rights), social and union movements. We went all over the country, from Belém (North) to Porto Alegre, (South) conducting activities related to child labor, in more than 40 municipalities. Thus, we contributed to bring visibility to this problem.

I can quote some examples of the project effects resulted from the initiatives of the local teams that organized the expositions. In Rio de Janeiro, immediately after the event was held, an opportunity was created to incorporate the use of images in education in teachers’ training workshops, through the project called “School which Protects”, that was coordinated by the UFRJ professors. We conducted workshops in several municipalities.

In the city of Campos (Rio de Janeiro), using the photos of the exposition, the local organizers created a writing competition for students, about child labor. A committee, consisting of the local school teachers, was appointed to choose and give the prizes for the three best compositions: a bicycle and cameras. This competition mobilized pupils and teachers to research the topic.

In João Pessoa (Paraíba), the teachers organized a poetry competition for their pupils based on the photographs’ exposition. A commission made up of students of the UFPB Communications course selected some of the poems for publication. UNICEF organized a collection of these poems which was later used as teaching material in the classroom. Thus the theme of child labor was disseminated by society because of the local entities’ initiatives.



**Figure 1** Photo exhibition poster



The photos also had an impact in the students' personal lives. We can make use of the experience of the lecturer Leile Silvia Cândido Teixeira, from the Escola de Serviço Social (School of Social Service) of UFRJ. Recently, while I was showing her some photos from my personal file of the child labor exposition, she immediately recognized some of the images which she had seen in a photographic exposition she had visited when she was a student in a local school, in Goiânia; a visit which she considered a determining factor for her professional choice, leading on to her university career. The event to which she referred was the project called "Criança no campo: educação, direito, trabalho" (The child on the Farm: Education, Rights, Work). The picture which impressed her was the photo of a squalid little boy working inside a furnace in a charcoal production plant in Mato Grosso do Sul (Figure 2).

Thus, the project has its effects in different ways, opening up new horizons in the life stories and in the practices of various professionals.



**Figure 2** Boy working in a kilns furnace  
Photographer: João Roberto Ripper.

### **I: Wasn't the question of work on the land held in suspension in the 90s?**

**Beto Novaes:** No, at the same time to this theme of child labor, we had been, ever since Paraíba, undertaking academic research into the working conditions and the struggles of the sugar-cane workers, in close relationship with CUT's Departamento Nacional dos Trabalhadores Rurais (Workers' Central Union, National Department for Rural Workers), with the Centro Ecumênico de Documentação e Informação (Ecumenical Center for Documentation and Information), with local workers' unions and Non-Governmental Organizations.

Thus we faced new challenges by having to transform academic language into images, by bringing the demands of the social movements to the academia.

In the beginning of the 90s, we produced two documentaries on the increasing precariousness of working conditions in the sugarcane plantations: "Ribeirão Preto: Califórnia à Brasileira" ("Ribeirão Preto: the Californian Brazilian-style"), about life and working conditions of the migrant workers who arrived from the valley of the Jequitinhonha (Minas Gerais) to work on sugar-cane plantations and in the mills of Ribeirão Preto region (State of São Paulo)<sup>9</sup>. A production undertaken in partnership with CEDI (Ecumenic Center for Documentyation and information). "Os rurais da CUT – Imagens e Memórias" ("The Rural Workers of CUT: Images and Memories"), about the congress which led to the creation of the DNTR- CUT's National Department for Rural workers<sup>10</sup>. This production resulted from the partnership between CUT and CEDI.

We participated in various research projects and organized meetings on the increasing precariousness and intensification of the work on the sugarcane plantations. At the beginning of the 2000s, there arose a new demand for our project of images, now related to the memory recovery of the workers' struggles in sugar-cane plantations, in the 80s. A theme already present in the documentary "Os Rurais da CUT: Imagens e Memória" ("The Rural Workers of CUT: Images and Memories"), The demand consisted in recovering the memory of the Guariba strike (1984), a dormitory town located in Ribeirão Preto region, was made by the Federação dos Trabalhadores Assalariados do Estado de São Paulo (Salaried Workers Federation of the State of São Paulo) and undertaken with the support of UNITRABALHO<sup>g</sup>.

We made two documentaries: "Guariba 84", on the Guariba strike<sup>11</sup> and "A Memória em Nossas Mãos" ("The Memory in Our Hands"), on the basis of the

<sup>g</sup> UNITRABALHO is a national university network (Rede Nacional de Universidades) which supports workers in their struggle for better living and working conditions, which brings together academic knowledge and the knowledge elaborated in social practice.

workers' memories and interpretations relating to that strike<sup>12</sup>. In both of them, the narrative of the strike was constructed on the basis of interviews with workers and union leaders, and images ceded by the TV Cultura and the TV Manchete<sup>h</sup>.

The Guariba strike had wide repercussion both in the national and in the international press. The workers succeeded in obtaining important economic concessions, despite the violence and the repression of the strike. In the course of time, the mill owners' interpretation about the strike became dominant. For them, the movement had been caused by ruffians (migrants) who wanted to destroy the town. The new generations and the workers themselves incorporated this narrative, associating the strike with lawlessness. The workers narratives, which exalted the economic conquests arising from the stoppage, were restricted to academic language, to the research undertaken by academia. The recovery of the strike memory by means of documentaries sought to rescue these narratives<sup>11,12</sup>.

In 2006, as a consequence of a consultation directed to the Sindicato dos Empregados Rurais de Cosmópolis (Union of rural workers of Cosmópolis, a municipality in the State of São Paulo), the documentary "Quadra Fechada" ("Closed court") was produced as the result of the research project we undertook about the control by the union of the measurement and weighing of the cane cut by each worker<sup>13</sup>. This type of control avoided the distortion of the weighing of the cane cut and the "mistakes" in the measurements made by sugar mills' inspectors. The gains in salary, with this kind of control, were immediate.

Our project went ahead, opening up the possibility of adding new themes brought by the research groups of the universities, by the social movements, by the public research institutions and by government ministries.

### **I: Tell us a little about the project that you carried out on the question of migrant workers.**

**Beto Novaes:** In 2007, we concluded a study requested by the Ministry of Education. The project meant that we should undertake the research, produce a book and a documentary. The theme related to young migrant

workers who came from the Northeast (States of Maranhão and Piauí) to work in the sugar-cane harvest in the sugar-mills of São Paulo. The migration theme came up again in our project.

The research was transformed into the book "Migrantes, trabalho e trabalhadores no complexo agroindustrial canavieiro" ("Migrants, work and workers in the agroindustrial sugar-cane complex")<sup>14</sup>. The documentary<sup>i</sup>, "Migrantes" ("Migrants")<sup>15</sup>, distributed by the UFRJ publishing house, was awarded at the "Terceira Mostra Cine Trabalho" (Third Exhibition on labor and cinema), held by the Universidade Estadual Paulista – UNESP (São Paulo State University) in 2008.

The project was developed by means of cooperation between researchers of four federal universities [I, from UFRJ; Francisco Alves, from the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar); Maria Dione Carvalho de Moraes, from the Federal University of Piauí; Marcelo Sampaio Carneiro, from the Federal University of Maranhão], and with the participation of the Union Movement, the Labor Attorney from Piauí, the Migrant Pastoral and the Land Pastoral Commission – CPT.

At that time, 2006/7, there were 200-300 thousand young people who arrived in the state of São Paulo to work in the sugar-cane harvest. They left their homes in search of work. It was forced migration, as there was no jobs for them in their hometowns. On the basis of the results of the research, we produced the plot and the script for the documentary<sup>15</sup>.

The first shooting took place in the Northeast region of the country: in towns from the states of Maranhão and Piauí. In Teresina, the capital city of Maranhão, we had the participation of two popular actors, Marcos Valle and Pedro Costa, who, by means of the techniques applied in the popular theatre "mamulengo" and "repente"<sup>j</sup>, told stories about the young people migration from the Northeast to the sugar-cane plantations and to the "modern" sugar-mills in the interior of São Paulo state<sup>k</sup>. The set for the second stage of the production, was the interior of the state of São Paulo, where we could register the heavy labor on the sugarcane plantations and the life of the migrants in their lodgings and in the lanes of the dormitory towns of the region.

h This strike was violently repressed during the period of the re-democratization of the country, by the police of the state of São Paulo, whose governor was Franco Montoro of the PMDB party. At that time, the Ministers of Justice and of Work were Michel Temer and Almir Pazianoto, respectively. This latter a lawyer with a long history of involvement in the unions struggle.

i Some films listed in the references have English subtitles: "migrantes", "Expedido: em busca de outros nortes", "Nuvens de veneno", "linha de corte", "Mulheres das águas", "As sementes" e "Agrofloresta é mais".

j NT, "Mamulengo" is a puppet show popular in the; "Repente" is an artistic expression based of improvised song lyrics also popular in Northeast of Brazil.

k The works of the popular artists may be found in the extras of the DVD "MIGRANTES" and are available on the *Youtube* in the filmography dedicated to Beto Novaes: mamulengo e violão.



**I: You haven't yet commented on Expedito's film, which received the "Margarida de Prata" (Silver Daisy) award in 2007<sup>l</sup>. What was its objective and plot?**

**Beto Novaes:** In 2006, we produced a documentary related to the recovery of life histories. It dealt with the life and death of the union worker Expedito Ribeiro de Souza. The request came through the Movimento Humanos Direitos (Human Rights Movement)<sup>m</sup> and through the Grupo de Pesquisa de Trabalho Escravo Contemporâneo (Research Group into Contemporary Slave Labor – GPTEC) of the UFRJ, coordinated by Ricardo Rezende Figueira, professor at the Escola de Serviço Social (School of Social Service).

"Expedito: em busca de outros nortes" ("Expedito: In the search for other horizons")<sup>16</sup> registers the life course, the struggles, of a person committed to the construction of a juster, more human and solidary society. Expedito Ribeiro de Souza, the main character of the documentary, was a worker, a trade-unionist, a black man, a poet, a popular writer, a political crusader.

The argument of the documentary was constructed on the basis of the narratives by the members of Expedito's family. During the military regime, his family migrated from Minas Gerais to Amazonia, to the south of Para, to the municipality of Rio Maria, in the quest for land and work. On the way, the family separated. His daughters married on the way and were left behind. The members who arrived in Rio Maria were: Expedito, his wife, his parents, a sister and a nephew. The region became violent because of land conflicts. Expedito, a leading figure of the rural workers union movement in Amazonia, became involved in the struggle for the agrarian reform<sup>16</sup>.

The documentary aimed at giving visibility to his history of life and to place him as a subject in the construction of the country history, thus counterbalancing the official historiography which, generally, attributes to the workers a secondary role in the historical process.

For the elaboration of the project and the construction of the argument, we created a group of researchers and film producers which counted on the participation of Rosilene Alvim, I, and Ricardo Resende of the UFRJ, Adonia Prado and Aida Marques of the Universidade Federal Fluminense (Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro – UFF).

As the narrative was constructed on the basis of the reports of Expedito's relatives and companions, the first task was to locate them. It was thus possible to reconstruct the moments in which they had lived with Expedito, on the basis of the interviews of three sisters in Espírito Santo, of a nephew in Minas Gerais, of his widow, a daughter and a sister in Rio Maria, of his companions in Conceição do Araguaia, in the south of Pará. The poems produced by Expedito were recited in the film by Chico Buarque<sup>n16</sup>.

Thus, by means of Expedito's story, we were able to tell the story of thousands of Brazilian workers who moved to Amazonia during the military regime, in search of work and land. Their disillusion was great: the experience that thousands of workers came through in the frontier of the country was disastrous, because the land was being distributed to the big business men.

**I: What were the repercussions of the film? How was it distributed?**

**Beto Novaes:** The documentary was subtitled in several languages and was selected for presentation in Cinema festivals in France, in the ethnographic films festival at the Museu da República (Museum of the Republic) in Rio de Janeiro and was exhibited at many meetings, both academic and of social movements.

The first public presentation of the documentary was for Expedito's relatives in partnership with the municipal administration of the town called Cariacica, in the state of Espírito Santo, where one of his sisters lived. With the support of the mayor of the city, we made the coming of his brother and nephew from Minas Gerais possible. The presentation was a family re-union. Countless copies in DVD were distributed at the launching.

Another interesting launching occurred in the municipal chamber of Rio Maria with the presence of the priest Ricardo Rezende and many people from the town. Copies were also distributed during the event.

**I: Could you say something about the documentary "Conflito"<sup>17</sup> (Conflict): what were the details of its production?**

**Beto Novaes:** The production demonstrated workers' easiness to access and use mobile phones and to

l Beyond the Margarida de Prata prize of the CNBB for the best documentary in 2007, the documentary received an award at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Festival of Ethnographic Films, in 2006, in Rio de Janeiro, and was selected for presentation at the International Cinema Festivals of Rio de Janeiro and of São Paulo and in the International Show of documentaries in France – *Brésil en mouvements 2<sup>e</sup> édition – Films documentaires, Débats sur les droits humains et les questions sociales au Brésil*, in 2006.

m Movement dedicated to the defense of human rights, which involves known activist television artists... <http://www.humanosdireitos.org/quem-somos/>.

n Chico Buarque is one of the best known musicians and songwriters in Brazilian popular music.

register and disseminate images. An important detail is that “Conflito” was only produced thanks to the images registered and conceded by the workers.

In 2011, the Union committee of Cosmópolis was asked by the sugar-cane workers of a sugar-mill located in the municipality of Itapeva (SP) to mediate in a strike. The workers’ list of demands consisted of their collective dismissal. The workers no longer wished to work at the sugar-mill because of the precarious working conditions there. But only 45 days remained to finish the sugar-cane harvest, which meant a great loss for the company which would be unable to hire a new batch of workers to finish the harvest.

The Union’s woman president, Carlita Costa, was accompanied by a cameraman to record the assembly. Everything was filmed: the bad conditions of the lodgings the precarious conditions of both the buses which transported the workers, and the Personal Protective Equipment made available by the mill, among other aspects. The images and the interviews were passed on for editing. With this single filming, it was impossible to portray a strike which lasted seven days.

We returned to the mill aiming at producing images about the facts that the workers had described during the first filming. On that occasion Gustavo Rizzo Ricardo, the government labor attorney, and Carlita Costa were interviewed. Both in charge of mediating the strike, between the workers and the company.

Even with these new images, it was impossible to construct the plot and the script of the documentary. Images of the strike daily happenings, of its beginning and end, were still missing. Looking closer at the images produced during the first shooting, we perceived that many of the workers had followed the cameraman and had made their own films using their mobile phones cameras. Thus, we felt they must have filmed the whole strike. So we went in search of those images.

We made contact with the leaders of the São José de Piranhas Workers’ Union, located in the remote *sertão* of Paraíba, because we knew that many workers from that region had left their homes, at the beginning of the harvest, to work at the sugar-mill. The Union leaders sought out the workers and recovered their images of the strike. After a fortnight, I received all those images recorded on a DVD. With them we were able to edit the documentary.

The film was sent to the workers’ union of São José de Piranhas and was distributed to other rural workers’ unions located in municipalities where those workers had come from.

## **I: What did you learn from that production?**

**Beto Novaes:** As a result of that experience the board of the Cosmópolis union for Rural workers went on to distribute mobile phones to all the union’s representatives. Why?

The representatives accompanied the bands of workers during the cutting of the cane, when they negotiated the price of the cane with the inspector of the mill. The fixing of this price depended on the type of cane to be cut. It was, negotiated on the cane plantation, between the union representative of the workers group and the inspector of the mill, and was, generally conflicting. With the mobile phones, they photographed the cane and sent the picture to the board of the union, which permitted the participation of new agents and reduced the margin for maneuver of the mill inspectors in the determining the price of the cane.

In many situations, the union’s inspector requested, using his mobile phone, the presence of the board of the union on the cane plantation to overcome impasses in the negotiation. These group stoppages had no visibility in society, they were limited to the territory of the mill.

In this way, living through this and other experiences, our project at the UFRJ absorbed and transmitted experiences, multiplying them in a decentralized and creative way. The use of images in education came to be an important tool in the dissemination of academic research as also a pedagogical instrument.

## **I: As regards workers’ health, when did this come to be a concern for you?**

**Beto Novaes:** The theme of occupational health and workers arose as a result of the surveys undertaken on the increasing precariousness and intensification of the work in the sugar-cane agro-business. To go deeper into the matter, the meeting: “Sugar-cane workers of the Southeastern region: health, rights, work” was organized at UFSCar in 2004.

The intention was to understand how the institutions were acting on the questions related to health, the Law (rights) and the working conditions in sugar-cane plantations in the states of São Paulo, Paraná and Minas Gerais. The idea was to socialize work experiences with a view to bringing the institutions closer together.

This activity was organized in articulation between several different entities: UFRJ, UFSCar, FUNDACENTRO (Brazilian Institute for Safety and Health at work), FERAESP, social movements,

The denunciation of Pastoral of Migrant was that the cause of deaths was the exploitation of the workers during the cutting of the sugar cane and the speed of the work, which exceeded the limit of the workers' physical strength who had to achieve the mill's production target, which was to cut, at least, eight to ten tons of cane per work day. According to the Pastoral, this demand harmed the workers' health either making them incapable to work at an early age or leading to their death. Our project allowed us to accompany the denunciations repercussions by means of the public hearings held by the MPT.

**Beto Novaes:** It was in 2010, when Carlos Minayo, of the Centro de Estudos em Saúde do Trabalhador e Ecologia Humana, da Fundação Oswaldo Cruz – CESTEH-FIOCRUZ (Center of Studies for Workers’ Health and Human Ecology of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation–), invited us to participate in a project he was coordinating “Public Health and the Agrobusiness Workers’ Health”. Our participation sought to produce documentaries aimed at giving greater visibility to the results of the research held in the project and that would be used in the continued training of the social control agents in workers’ health.

The first of these was “Nuvem de Veneno (“Cloud of Poison”)<sup>18</sup> (**Figure 3**), the argument of which was based on the results of the research undertaken in Mato Grosso, coordinated by Wanderley Pignatti, on the consequences of the intensive use of pesticides in the cultivation of grains (soya, corn and cotton), on workers’ collective health, and on the environment<sup>19</sup>.



The second documentary, “Linha de Corte” (“Cut-off Point”)<sup>20</sup>, deals with the intensification and increasing working precariousness in sugarcane-cutting and its consequences for workers’ health (**Figure 4**), on the basis of research<sup>21</sup> coordinated by Rodolfo Vilela, of the Faculdade de Saúde Pública da Universidade de São Paulo (School of Public Health of the University of São Paulo).



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The third documentary “Mulheres das Águas” (“Women of the Waters”), registers the impact that the environmental pollution of the great companies which are installed in the fishing regions caused on the health of the fisher-women in the mangrove swamps of the Northeast<sup>22</sup> (Figure 5). The argument of the documentary was constructed on the basis of the research coordinated by Paulo Pena, of the Faculdade de Medicina da Universidade Federal da Bahia (Medical School of the Federal University of Bahia) in the mangrove swamps of the Northeast<sup>23</sup>.



Figure 5 Shell-fish catcher during the shooting of “Mulheres das águas” (Water women)  
Photographer: Flávio Condé

**I: While the argument of the first two is based on the results of academic research, in the case of Women of the Waters, there is a distancing of the perspective from the research of Paulo Pena, who sought to understand the prevalence of musculoskeletal problems in the mangrove-swamp workers, isn't that true? What was it that led to the change in the point of view of the documentary?**

**Beto Novaes:** True. The three documentaries were conceived with the objective of translating into images the knowledge produced by the research but, in “Mulheres das águas” the narrative gradually changed to fit the problems of the fishing regions, or that is to say, going beyond the research<sup>23</sup> undertaken by Paulo Pena. This because the shell-fish harvesters preferred to deal with the health question within a context of environmental pollution and of the threats which the traditional communities faced as their territories were invaded by the great business groups<sup>22</sup>.

In the documentaries “Nuvem de Veneno”<sup>18</sup> and “Linha de Corte”<sup>20</sup> the narrative was focused on the results of the academic research.

**I: “Mulheres das águas” shows, from my point of view, the quest for the emancipation of these women**

**in the face of the irrationality of development and its official perspective. Emancipation and Minority did not become other themes of your work?**

**Beto Novaes:** My project was conceived as a documentary focused on the narrative “of those who have no voice”, of those who are unable to make their daily struggle visible, who have no access to the formal means of communication. To “give a voice to those who have no voice”, we need to present the narratives of the struggles to counter-balance the official narrative, the narrative of the dominant segments of society. For example, in the documentary “O que eu conto do sertão é isso”<sup>1</sup>, we bring out the confrontation of the two contradictory narratives (that of the big landowner and that of the trade unionist) on the same questions. The documentary films about the recovery of the social struggles memory f: “A Memória em nossas mãos”<sup>11</sup>, “Guariba 84”<sup>12</sup>, “Expedito: em busca de outros nortes”<sup>16</sup> follow this line, without bringing the counter-point out explicitly in the narratives. The workers’ narrative predominates in them.

We chose to produce documentaries based on the social movements’ and the workers’ narratives because the dominant classes have all the media mechanisms on their hands to make their interpretation of the facts visible. We opted to make the counter-point to that narrative. The documentaries “Nuvem de Veneno”<sup>18</sup>, “Linha de Corte”<sup>20</sup>, “Mulheres das águas”<sup>22</sup> raise the problem of health taking as reference not only the narrative of academic research that is committed to the social movements, but also the point of view of the workers.

The documentary “Ribeirão Preto: Califórnia à Brasileira”<sup>9</sup> presents the counter-point to the triumphalist vision of the progress and the economic dynamism of the region of Ribeirão Preto, of the advanced technology employed by the local business investments. Countless television programs present the region as the “Brazilian California”. We regard it as “Brazilian- style California” when we fit it into the narratives of the migrant workers coming from the valley of the Jequitinhonha (Minas Gerais) and the Northeast of the country to work on the sugar-cane plantations of the “modern” sugar-mills of the region. Looking at progress from the point of view of the workers brings out deep social inequality, concentration of income and of wealth<sup>9</sup>. When we speak of progress and development on the basis of this view of things it allows us to relativize the concepts of progress and development. Of what progress and development are we talking? For whom? We need to debate them by holding this counter argument.

Another conception of the documentaries which we are producing relates to the value given to the struggles and the concrete experiences underway at present. For example, the documentaries, “Mulheres das Águas”<sup>22</sup> and “As Sementes” (“The Seeds”)<sup>24</sup>, give value to the women’s struggles for the preservation of the fishing areas and for the strengthening of agro-ecological production. The

gender theme is thus incorporated into our project due to the women's organization, struggles and achievements.

The argument of the documentary "As Sementes" was constructed taking as a reference the results of Emma Siliprandis doctoral research, which portrayed the struggle of the women on the land and in agroecology<sup>21</sup>. With the support of the Ministério do Desenvolvimento Agrário (Ministry of Agrarian Development), in 2015, a book based on Emma's thesis<sup>25</sup> was published containing the documentary "As Sementes" in the wrapping, and a photographic exposition was held.

Another theme which we came to incorporate was the racial question. In partnership with the Universidade do Rio de Janeiro (University of Rio de Janeiro – UNIRIO), the UFRJ and the Secretaria Nacional de Juventude (National Youth Secretariat) we produced the documentary "Uma árvore bonita" ("A beautiful tree") which tells the life story of four young Afro-Brazilians of the city of Salvador<sup>26</sup>.

Thus the demands of the social movements came to include new themes in our production: agro-ecology<sup>o</sup>, women, blackness, youth, pesticides, recovery of the social struggles memory as well as of the individual life stories.

**I: Would you like to make any other commentary about your work, about the point of view you adopted, about our future?**

**Beto Novaes:** I think it's necessary to be aware of the contradictions in the development model and improve the forms of intervention to avoid retreats in the rights achieved by Society and expressed in the Brazilian 1988 Constitution. I understand that the work related to education by means of images can contribute to this prospect as it allows recovering the memory of the past achievements so that one may re-interpret the present and point the way towards the utopias of the future.

**I: Then how can we overcome these difficulties – which are not small at all?**

**Beto Novaes:** I think that the greatest challenge lies in the construction of a dialectic relationship between theoretical studies and social practice with a view to consolidating a critical education with the student's physical presence in which the formation of knowledge is processed within a relationship of the exchange of knowledge.

Another important challenge is to search for the time for reflection, for solidarity, to contrast with the time of productivity, of individualism, of alienation which the capitalist market establishes as life values. Because of this we have preferred to have the workers' presence in our meetings and in the group discussions marked by the building of a collective solidarity knowledge. We have organized image workshops to train workers who will reproduce these workshops on their jobs, schools, churches, social movements, research groups and other places. In the image workshops, we have discussed the concept of visual production, the reasons for producing it and the methodology for using images in education. So, by operating on a network, in a decentralized way, we have been able to solve the distribution problem.

There is another important question to emphasize in our work. It is how to face the forms of violence in the workplace. Violence is part and parcel of the exploitation of the workers. It is necessary to show to the society that a mill that produces sugar and alcohol is violent when it establishes a production target for the manual cutting of the cane, of more than 10 tons of cane/day for worker.

This type of violence at work, which is already seen as customary in society, even among the workers themselves, does not generate indignation. Finally, the image project in its essence to react against this usual view of violence – which is not restricted to the question of public safety. The whole project is based on this foundation: how can we transform these customary forms of violence, which are so impregnated in the minds of society, into indignation that will provoke reflection, generate indignation, movement and nurture social control over the State and governments' public policies?

We are treading along these paths...

## Authors' contribution

Novaes J.R.P. was the interviewee and revised the version to be published. Jackson Filho, J.M. and Simonelli A.P. were the interviewers and reviewed the transcriptions. All the authors approved the final version and assumed responsibility for the whole content of the interview.

o Following the line of the value given to the struggles and the social movements the documentary "Agroforest is more" ("Agrofloresta é mais") was launched in September 2018 telling of an experience of environmental recovery by means of the agroforest system implanted by the MST in the José Lutzenberger encampment, in an Atlantic Forest region in the municipality of Antonina (PR)<sup>27</sup>.



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