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Reflections on the ethnographic method for apprehension of social policies in the field of Food and Nutrition: research notes in a community kitchen

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Abstract

This paper aims to reflect on the relevance of the ethnographic method to apprehend social policies in the field of Food and Nutrition. It is based on data from a survey conducted in a community kitchen from a Waste Sorting and Composting Unit (UTC – *Unidade de Triagem e Compostagem de Resíduos*) – popularly known as "dump" – in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil. It is argued that the merit of this research is in its traditional method, ethnography, which involves a set of concepts and procedures that will lead us to the point of view of the groups surveyed through an intensive *in situ* work. Firstly we seek to bring some definitions and characterizations of social policies that address Food and Nutrition Security (FNS; SAN – *Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional*) as well as the ethnographic context; then, based on some ethnographic notes, we will attempt to elucidate, although initially, possible appropriations that actors do on the community kitchen and on other programs there. Without intending to exhaust the debate, at the end the discussion is in favor of the relevance of the method for a deep understanding of the directions given to social programs and to the questioning of the different logics that inhabit the context studied, allowing to critically rethink the government's actions concerning FNS.

Key words: Food. Public Policies. Ethnography. Social Class. Food and Nutrition Security.

Introduction

This communication sets out to reflect on the relevance of the ethnographic method for the apprehension of the dynamics involved in the implementation of social programs in the area of Food and Nutritional Security. To this end, we start from data from research held in the months from January to October 2014 in a community kitchen based on a Waste Sorting and Composting Unit (UTC – *Unidade de Triagem e Compostagem de Resíduos*) – popularly known as "dump" – in a neighborhood on the outskirts of the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, RS.

Community kitchens are one of the Food and Nutrition Security (FNS; SAN – *Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional*) programs and make up the actions of the National Policy for Food and Nutrition Security (PNSAN – *Política Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional*), still under construction, but whose most recent legal instrument is the Organic Law on Food Safety (LOSAN – *Lei Orgânica de Segurança Alimentar*), which guides actions and defines the concepts involved in the issue.*

Taking the science of anthropology as a theoretical and methodological basis, it is argued that its merits for the research in question rests in its traditional method, ethnography, which involves a set of concepts and procedures that will lead us to the point of view of the groups surveyed through an intensive *in situ* work.

It should be noted that the methodological option is inextricably linked to the theoretical choices and positions, intimately relating to our goal of understanding the specific dynamics of a given sociocultural context and thus understanding the local forms of public policies ownership – materialized in the social space of the kitchen and in the food offered – and its symbolic dimension for the people involved. From this perspective, taking the actors' dietary practices, we wonder: what is the meaning of the government actions for the actors who experience them? And to what extent do the social programs implemented interfere with the way these actors eat?

Here we sought to explore the ethnographic method as an efficient way to think about the above issues, exploring appropriate intersections among sub-areas of Political Anthropology and Food Anthropology. In these conditions, as suggested by Abélès,[1] it is about learning the dynamics of the structures, as well as the relationships that constitute them, considering the inconsistencies, contradictions, tensions and movement inherent in all societies. Combining the food with its eaters, distributors and dispensers, we have attempted to capture the dynamics that mark the

* According to the Organic Law on Food Safety (LOSAN – *Lei Orgânica de Segurança Alimentar*) (Law no. 11346, of September 15, 2006), Food and Nutrition Security (FNS) is understood as the accomplishment of the right of all to regular and permanent access to quality food in sufficient quantity, without compromising access to other essential needs.

implementation of this program to understand not only how it effectively works, but its meaning for the people to whom it was intended.

During this textual effort, we will first seek to bring some definitions and characterizations about the programs involving the ethnographic context and the social space in which the research is developed. Then, based on some ethnographic notes, we will try to elucidate, although initially, possible appropriations that actors do on a community kitchen and on the other programs implemented there. In the end, we will argue for the relevance of the ethnographic approach to understand the issues here exposed.

Connecting policies, agencies and actors

According to the Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger (Portuguese: *Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social e Combate à Fome*, abbreviated MDS),[2] the agency responsible for implementing the Food Security and Nutrition programs, the Community Kitchens Program comprises a network of public equipment of food and nutrition whose bases are settled on the notion of Human Right to Adequate Food (DHAA – *Direito Humano à Alimentação Adequada*).** This equipment is local – among which are highlighted the popular restaurants and the community kitchens – aimed for the preparation of healthy meals, which should be distributed free of charge or at affordable prices to the socially vulnerable population. In order to serve the population in poverty and extreme poverty, the kitchens are established in socially vulnerable areas with a low Human Development Index (HDI), often in pockets of poverty situated in the outskirts of the cities and metropolitan areas.

According to the program guidelines, the target audience of community kitchens should be made up of people experiencing food insecurity and/or social vulnerability, preferably those indicated by the Social Assistance Reference Centers (CRAS – *Centros de Referência em Assistência Social*). Each unit must be committed to the minimum output of 100 meals per day for at least five days per week. Currently, there are 407 units operating in 22 Brazilian states, serving nearly 90,000 meals daily.***

Community kitchens are also part of the operational structure of the National Food Security System (SISAN – *Sistema Nacional de Segurança Alimentar*), which articulates entities and agencies working under the FNS – among them, ministries, NGOs, universities and FNS federal, state and

** For more information, see http://www.mds.gov.br/segurancaalimentar/equipamentos/cozinhascomunitarias

*** Data from the *Relatório de Informações Sociais do Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social* (Social Information Report of the Ministry of Social Development) available on: http://aplicacoes.mds.gov.br/sagi/RIv3/geral/relatorio.php

municipal councils. In line with the goal of eradicating extreme poverty proposed by the current government, SISAN attempts to enhance the dialogue with other relevant social policies to achieve this most vulnerable population, such as the Food Bank Program, the Food Acquisition Program (PAA – *Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos*), as well encouraging actions to generate employment and income in the kitchens and dining areas themselves.

Although established under the Federal Government – particularly between the Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger (Portuguese: *Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social e Combate à Fome*, abbreviated MDS) and the Ministry of Agrarian Development (Portuguese: *Ministério do Desenvolvimento Agrário*, abbreviated MDA) – the Community Kitchen Program has capillary action at the local level, insofar as its activities are performed in specific social spaces, usually well demarcated communities, such as the kitchen that supports this research.

From this predominantly local dynamics it appears that the creation of public agreements among the three levels of government – federal, state and municipal governments – to the effect that the transfer of financial resources and the payment of structures for kitchens and dining areas (stove, refrigerator, exhaust hood, tables, benches, etc.) is up to the Federal Government of Brazil. After the deployment of the units, local, municipal and state governments should structure a specific technical team to plan and monitor the actions developed in the equipment, as well as take responsibility for the management and maintenance of services and can, therefore, establish partnerships with community organizations and social entities linked to programs to generate employment and income.

The Brazilian city of Porto Alegre has 18 community kitchen units, mostly managed by religious bodies that have support and supervision from the municipal government by means of the Coordination for Sustainable Food Security and Nutrition (COSANS – *Coordenadoria de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional Sustentável*). According to the program, the city must distribute to the units the foodstuffs that contribute to the preparation of the meals offered. It does so through food distribution programs, such as the Zero Hunger Program (Portuguese: *Programa Fome Zero*) and the Food Acquisition Program (PAA – *Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos*). Although the State assist with donations of certain items, the supply must also be ensured by the managing bodies of the units.

On the stage of research

The ethnographic effort that we propose here takes place in a community kitchen of a UTC – popularly known as "dump" – in the district of Lomba do Pinheiro, in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, RS, located in the eastern area, on the border of the municipality of Viamão. Presently,

Lomba do Pinheiro is a densely populated region marked by an intense irregular occupation process, harboring villages that lack infrastructure and basic sanitation. In 2000, the town hall, by means of its Municipal Department of Urban Cleaning (DMLU – *Departamento Municipal de Limpeza Urbana*), installed in an area of ten hectares a municipality garbage transfer station. There the garbage collected from the city is given an appropriate destination, according to the master plan for municipal waste. Besides the town hall structure itself, the site houses a shed where since 2001 a UTC functions.

The recycling unit employs about 100 waste pickers who have organized themselves – since the granting of the shed – around a formalized association: the Solid Waste Sorting Household Association of Lomba do Pinheiro (*Associação de Triagem de Resíduos Sólidos Domiciliares Lomba do Pinheiro*). The working day starts at 6 am and ends at around 4 pm. Daily work activity revolves around the selection on two conveyor belts of home, organic and dry waste, which is collected in the city. In the event that they locate a recyclable material, the product is intended for marketing by the UTC workers. The rest is used to produce compost (fertilizer), which is also sold on the spot. In the sheds the recyclable material is categorized according to preestablished parameters governing the National Policy on Solid Waste (PNRS – *Política Nacional sobre Resíduos Sólidos*): glass, paper, plastic, iron, PET (polyethylene terephthalate), cardboard, etc. The materials have a hierarchy as to the sales value and are sold in sheds to companies that use them as raw material.

Most workers are women. Although there are young ones, most are over 40 years old and have begun working with recycling after retiring. Men are mostly young and children of the associates, except for a few older men who have followed the women's same route: they have registered to work in the association after retirement. There are many rumors about problems with the use of drugs, especially crack cocaine. For this reason, mothers end up signing their children to work at UTC, thus being under permanent care. There are also many reports of alcohol use disorder (AUD), especially among the elderly.

Although there are some people who have migrated from rural areas, most have been living in the city for long, in villages adjacent to UTC. Most people are illiterate. Among the young people, there are a few who have completed secondary school. Reading and writing are a distinction with regard to the possibility of being part of the coordination management, while not a prerequisite to participate in trade negotiations, after all many do not recognize the letters of the alphabet but know how to calculate. Together with the social intimacy, it is clear that there are many working at UTC who are related to each other. Among the workers, it is possible to identify parents and children, spouses, siblings, cousins and whole families, as they were added to the association over time.

Each of the 94 waste pickers receives a monthly average of 750 reais (the present-day currency of Brazil). The amount of compensation will depend on what is effectively sold and this, in turn, depends on how much is screened at the unit. Following this logic, the more they recycle, the more sales opportunities there are. Anyway, the full amount is equally divided among all members, notwithstanding their positions – on the conveyor belts screening the materials, in supervision, coordination, sales or kitchen.

In this structure, in addition to the sheds that house the recycling activities, in 2004 a community kitchen was installed that – unlike most kitchens in Porto Alegre, which are managed by religious bodies – is managed by the workers' very unity, which daily have lunch and breakfast there.

Three members work in the kitchen, who are appointed at a general meeting. Two of them – Ms. Helena and her daughter Martha – are responsible for preparing meals while Cláudia**** is who daily does the dishes from breakfast and lunch. According to the initial project, the kitchen supplying should be through other social programs coordinated by the city, among which the Food Acquisition Program (PAA – *Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos*) – where food is purchased from small farmers in the area and donated to the kitchens – and the Zero Hunger Program (Portuguese: *Programa Fome Zero*) – which distributes market baskets to the units so that they transfer them to households for domestic consumption.

In anthropology, which has in fieldwork the main symbol of its research activities, the very object of the research is negotiated: both in the interaction plane with the actors, as in the construction plan or the definition of the problem researched by the anthropologist. As suggested by Comaroff & Comaroff,[3] we intend to have the research going from, above all, the "situated effects of seeing or hearing," rather than a metanarrative or totalizing theory about the object in question. Accordingly, the theoretical frameworks adopted served more as tool boxes, as shown by Foucault,[4] which allowed to forge analytical tools on the reality experienced in the field and on the anthropologist's practice. This means that "it is about building not one explanatory system but a tool pertinent to a specific logic, able to capture the relationships and dynamics that are engaged around them" (p. 251).[4]

Therefore, our entering and acceptance in the field were a slow and gradual process, in which establishing solid ties with the informants was sought, although the focus ware on the ethnographic observation, which presupposes a subjective recording of the field diary and the "hard" facts of reality. During the research, it was decided to carry out semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in order to surround ourselves with the historical processes and environments of

**** Although there are consents from our interlocutors, the names here transcribed were exchanged due to an ethical issue. The same will happen with the other names mentioned throughout the text.

that scenario, including the very granting of the community kitchen. The interviews were guided by issues such as (1) the creation of the association, (2) "accomplishing the community kitchen," (3) the ways of eating and preparing food that prevailed before, (4) in addition to the life stories by each respondent.

The tasty mixture: first ethnographic note

Although an extensive documentary work had initially been done, surveying data on official definitions and regulatory authorities with respect to the programs, given the ethnographic approach we started contacting the people directly involved in the cooking activities. Then we could gradually identify mismatches between what is established in terms of a policy proposal and what actually happens in its daily execution.

One point seems critical to understanding the local dynamics and meanings about the kitchen facility and dining hall: the food supply irregularity from the state for the preparation of meals. Although the distribution through other social programs aimed at FNS is envisaged as a means of supply, which can be seen from those who work in the kitchen are flaws in frequency and knowledge about which will actually be received.

During consecutive months, only rice and beans reach the kitchen, or as we had the opportunity to witness, a few kilos of orange or cassava in large burlap bags. Completely unexpectedly, the cooks had to separate the items in working condition – as many were rotten – and distribute the rest. In this scenario, an immediate logic around what to do for lunch seems to be imposed. They prepare what they have, by default towards what may arrive at any time.

Moreover, people tend to carry out the programs from past experiences. In this logic, when they "worked" with periodicity in the delivery and a variety of foods was distributed, such as rice, beans, wheat flour, corn flour, oil, as well as fresh products, in a not so distant time, why wouldn't it be working equally? What is apparent in these dynamics is a big gap between the food that one thinks – or wants – and the food that actually arrives as public donation. Below is transcribed the response from one of the cooks, when asked about what foods come into the kitchen from the city hall:

> *[...] PAA is not working due to bureaucracy, they haven't signed some papers... Then we don't even expect it because eating is a daily activity, it is necessary... if we were to wait... The solution is to bring our side dishes and count on rice and beans from the government. There is no point in sending just a lot of potatoes or a lot of cassava. And to top, they send it all at once and without warning. We get anxious by not knowing what to do. Also no one wants to eat every day the same thing, only rice and beans.*

So, what is currently being observed is that due to a delay in the agreements signed between the city hall and small farmers, few foods have been passed on to the community kitchen by the State. Faced with the bureaucracy involved, only rice, beans and powdered milk are ensured. Sporadically some vegetables such as cassava, oranges, potatoes, are delivered, although in the logic of uncertainty. Although some women repeatedly bring from the conveyor belts bottles containing used oil thrown in the trash, oil, sugar, salt and coffee, considered items of prime necessity, they are purchased by the association.

Many workers recognize the flaws by the State with regard to the delivery of food. But a sense of gratitude regarding the physical space given is also realized. The meaning and relevance of the program seem to be related to the physical structure of the kitchen and the possibility of having a place to dine, more than the donated food.

These inconsistencies due to the need to eat have led to the redefinition of the social dynamics that mark the time of the meal and its preparation. One of the strategies was to bring the "side dishes," a native category to designate the supplement to rice and beans. Each worker brings the ingredients to be prepared by the cooks and individually served in order to increase the lunch. The ingredients are in most cases purchased in small markets around the UTC before starting the work day or a few times, as noted, in the short break for rest already during the morning shift.

Martha – Ms. Helena's daughter and also a cook – daily takes notes on a notebook of a person's name and what must be prepared. For each one a different preparation is made, but in all cases rice and beans will be accompanied by: eggs, meat chop, instant noodles, chicken nuggets, chicken thigh, etc. Few people buy salad as an increment. Those who do it are some older women, who say they are "taking care of their health." As the dining room is small, workers are divided into two groups at lunchtime, according to the conveyor belts where they work. Near lunchtime, the cooks put the individual pots containing each side dish, properly labeled with names on a hot meal cart. As the waste pickers arrive at the cafeteria, they form a queue. The cooks serve dishes with rice and beans and then each one searches their "side dish" placed in the the hot meal cart.

In these dynamics, in which only rice and beans are prepared for the "collective," major appliances that are specific of an industrial kitchen end up being idle, and frying pans and small pots are used to make the different "side dishes." The cooks themselves bring pots from home and "donate" them to the kitchen, or when the waste pickers collect from the conveyor belts pots that have been discarded they take them for use in the kitchen.

At times – usually around payday – some waste pickers are organized in small groups to eat something more elaborate, like pancakes, sardine pizza, pasta with white sauce. In this case, each contributes some amount of money, someone buys the ingredients at a market nearby and the cook prepares as desired.

Food – natural to the survival of the human species – is highlighted by the social action, demonstrating what is a characteristic meal for these workers' lunch: it has to have meat or at least egg, potato, cassava, salad. Something "*for sustenance, but varied. [...] When poor people have money, they want meat, they want plenty*" – *said one of the site regulars*. Although the State helps with rice and beans, with the basics in terms of food structure, the agency here is mobilized when bringing the individual food by adding something else to the rice and beans donated.

These dynamics, although pointing gaps in the social programs performed, end up making subjectivities emerge – treated here as suggested by Ortner.[5] By means of this rearrangement of ingredients, desires, wishes and tastes of each are appointed, demonstrating satisfaction linked to a full meal that is commonly neglected or poorly understood in the case of people at social and economic margins. Action is taken on the gaps left by public policies. Bureaucracy is ignored and the problem of lack of food delivery is faced. In any case, what is at stake is the need for the satisfaction mentioned by Garine,[6] achieved by food, something below the fact that they are assisted by the State or characterized as being a "vulnerable social group."

However, although there are complaints by the cooks and the group that coordinate the association, most of the workers do not seem to be shaken by the lack of delivery by PAA, since in such cases they can individually choose what they will eat for lunch. According to De Garine,[6] "side dishes" here represent a chance to externalize, to exercise in a way their social position in the microcontext in question. Furthermore, approaching Bourdieu,[7] bringing or not the the daily supplement and sharing it with others are signs of prestige and distinction within the group.

The personalization of giving: second ethnographic note

After a certain period in the field, we began to carry out in-depth interviews with some people attending the cafeteria. In an attempt to reconstruct the history of the association and the process that led to following through with the community kitchen, we interviewed the current cooks and some workers who participated in those past times.

It was from simple questions like, "Where does the food come from?" that we began to grasp the lack of knowledge about the arsenal of acronyms that make up the semantic field of the food distribution programs, and the programs themselves. Aside from the (social welfare program of the Brazilian government, part of the *Fome Zero* network of federal assistance programs) *Bolsa Família* (Family Allowance), no other social program was cited by people. In their explanation about the origin of rice and beans, it was always stated that the city had sent them. However, the people who came to deliver the food and request signatures after checking the donated items were always given prominence.

In an interview with the oldest associate of UTC, who eats every day in the kitchen, he enlightened us:

Ms. Rejane – the woman with the pen – is the one who would give us kilos of pork and even sometimes fish. She would come in a van and leave it all here [...] it was plenty, but there is some time that she stopped coming!

At lunchtime in the UTC kitchen, we heard the following sarcastic comment:

(36th President of Brazil) Dilma (Vana Rousseff) is trying to fix things... she is annoying, but it is all right. One must have NIS (Social Identification Number – Número de Identificação Social), you have to be well registered in the single registry (to earn the food). I'm not the one saying it, okay!? That comes from above... we can not do anything... Otherwise we will be banned.

The speeches transcribed here allow us to rethink the State or the programs it represents not as something inert or suprastructural,[8] but as something ingrained in everyday life, away from large abstractions, especially when it comes to food-related policies. In this sense, it has a face, a figure against which to claim or to turn to, or simply to think about social actions.

Another strategy to get food was by searching donations in the food bank coordinated by the *Federação das Indústrias do Rio Grande do Sul* (FIERGS – Federation of Industries of the State of Rio Grande do Sul). Walquíria, the worker who coordinates the kitchen, tells us that she discovered this opportunity at a community meeting in the neighborhood, but not everyone accomplishes it, for it is necessary to have a car and a "regularized" institution which is able to get the food. With the help of a DMLU car, the association, once registered in the bank, can receive food that is donated by the private sector companies and it is stocked and distributed by the bank. Organizing the delivery with partners from the landfill site, and some workers, including Mrs. Joares, they unload various groceries from the van to the kitchen – including corn flour, powdered milk, grape juice, rice, beans, oil and sugar.

In this case, recognition is done by Mr. Antônio, a former waste collector from DMLU, but due to his age he has been removed and now provides administrative services. He is responsible for bringing the donations from the FIERGS Food Bank and in the logic of personalization of the donations, he has become the central figure, sometimes the benevolent one who "donates" the food. While there is a huge organizational structure and logistics, standards and norms that are part of the functioning of this entrepreneurship, it is ultimately Mr. Antônio who gets the prestige and admiration when he arrives with the van full and supplies the cafeteria.

Although the kitchen is indeed an important State action and a broad framework for the fight against hunger, in the logic of the community studied the social programs are reduced to the food arriving (or not) and recognized by the very people who are more directly linked with its delivery. In this scenario, with the lack of food delivery frequency, it seems that some logic translated in the speech from the kitchen coordinator is prevalent: "*If it came (the food), it is OK; otherwise we handle it among ourselves.*" Mr. José ends up not even caring about the fact that Ms. "*Rejane from PAA*" *doesn't come*, "*You can eat what you want, you eat what you like [...] hence French fries reign*."

Whether local, state and federal managers are guided by a bureaucratic-normative perspective in the formulation and implementation of the program***** – which is not our intention to discuss here – in the daily life of the ones working in the community kitchen the space ends up becoming an extension of their homes, a place of sociability. This allows us to rethink the very practices observed with respect to the preparation and consumption of food. And the ways of spicing up food, serving diners, drying and storing the dishes, sweeping the cafeteria. Such gestures comply with technical and sanitary standards, but in a specifically family environment, they acquire a rather domestic tone. Other approaches to the dimensions of what could pose as a home are also captured in small actions such as the meeting to gossip after lunch, the place where they go to have a daily medicine, where something valuable found on the conveyor belts is kept.

On the relevance of ethnography for the field of food public policies

Research activity is marked, throughout its achievement, by the theoretical framework that the researcher adopts, by their world view and social commitment, as well as the limits of knowledge of their own time.

The data briefly exposed seek to contribute to the discussion about the relevance of ethnography, especially in its power to detect divergent perspectives and alternative interpretations. This merit is possible only by taking the very approach generated in the field as a rich material for rethinking the social reality. If the question that arises is the identification of the dynamics and interactions underlying the social order, we argue how the ethnographic practice favors us, capturing the subjective dimensions of the actions related to eating – usually left in the background in quantitative studies. Approaching Florence Weber,[9] it is about understanding what the people observed do, and also to understand what they believe they do. In the author's words:

***** By a bureaucratic and normative perspective, we follow the notion by Mudanó,[16] which indicates it to be a perspective that partly conforms the ways of doing and also thinking about public policies as objective entities, the result of rational decisions adopted by governments, technical staff, formal institutions – which organize actions based on an equally rational knowledge, focused on accurate and immediate results.

> *[...] this ethnographic requirement (to return the categories of negative thinking), although vastly a result of the Durkheimians' interest by language and classifications, also goes back to a Weberian definition that matters at the same time by what the actors think, what they do and for what they are (p. 152).*[9]

By following the guidelines by Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira,[10] when he stresses the importance of a disciplined and watchful eye to notice the nuances and peculiarities of this "other way of being in the world," the ethnographic method has allowed us to explore our own sensitivity to apprehend realities and choices that are different from our own. It is in this complex interaction produced in the search field that we are reaching the answers to our first question, which is: What is the meaning of the Community Kitchens Program for the actors?

In a meta-analytical effort – as suggested by Magnani[11] in his work with urban populations –, the ethnographic effort should be thought of as a continuous and orderly practice, but also on the experiential, discontinuous aspect, in which different rationales and feelings are confronted in the field, which take into account what occurs and happens with the researched and the researcher. Accordingly, which enables us to capture how people think, act and react to the dynamics involved in the implementation of a public policy turns out to be a close and inside look, about which Magnani tells us.[12]

In a scenario where public policies on food are implemented, the methodology leads us to a constant questioning about the social and political logic that guides the settings and actions taken by the State, starting from the native point of view. Thus a systematic effort to redesign and review assumptions taken for granted in social life is undertaken in the light of an intense dialogic confrontation with the categories of the field itself.

Therefore, the particularity of ethnography lays in a look that departs from the native point of view, considering for that the specifics of the socio-cultural context in which it is performed, without underestimating the broader dynamics that surround an urban capitalistic society marked by social and economic inequalities.

Such perspective leads us to consider that an analysis based on values of the dominant groups would not bear the situations experienced by marginalized groups. This is because such an analysis used to reduce the group studied to extreme poverty, the survival tactics and a passive adaptation to the dominant mode of life, not realizing the positivity and creativity of the groups in question. Here the phenomenon of food – so private, but carrying dimensions of sociability and commensality about which Fischler tells us[13] – starts to be faced, as already suggested by Fonseca,[14] by being "careful not to completely miss possible differences in symbolic matrices that highlight the specificities of subaltern groups" (p. 15).

When proposing an analysis that lies on public policies that impact the people's daily lives – in this case such a common practice as eating –, we do not seek to limit ourselves to a mere differentiation between what is written and what actually occurs, nor even propose an analysis focusing the study of the State, the government and their practices.[15]

The interest is in understanding how people think and to what extent such programs impact their daily lives, starting from their own point of view and the researcher/researched interaction given in the field. As suggested by Franzé Mudanó[16] (p. 233), one must realize "the social actors' position and their actions with regard to public policies [...] in the symbolic and practical microprocesses."

Another point that is worth being highlighted is that, given the highly political terrain – of constant confrontations and tensions around the distribution and donation of food – especially at election time, it seemed to us very fruitful to adopt the perspective by Florence Weber[17] (p. 27), for whom the ethnographer must first of all, "observe and listen to people, and not interrogate them, to preserve their classification initiatives and mastery over words."

Also with respect to the eating behavior, it seems that an observation that is deeper than the use of rigid questionnaires regarding the pragmatic responses to objectively forged answers is more efficient. We understand that this could lead to embarrassment and/or omission by the interlocutors, since in the case of what they eat people tend to confuse the real with the ideal, especially under the current influences from the media and the biomedical discourse about what healthy and adequate eating is.

It is necessary to consider how public policies act and impact the people's lives, mobilizing them for action and reaction towards their contingencies. These agencies, especially in the case of donation and distribution of food, are manifested in daily life and in eating behaviors: what to eat, what to prepare, what to serve and what to claim.

Final thoughts

Far from seeking a conclusion for the problem in question, we hope to contribute to a field of knowledge based on a critical reflection on the structuring and expansion of social policies aimed at fighting hunger. We have focused, above all, the cultural heterogeneity that involves eating and the tensions established in its daily execution from a point of view that problematizes how politics and the State are experienced by social actors.

If on the one hand, we have tried to demonstrate that government programs are not something inert or abstract, but represented by real people who daily manage them, at the same time it is by people that the programs are perceived and owned by the population.

In that sense, we have sought to demonstrate, with this ethnographic exercise, how much anthropology can add to the field of public policies from its methodology, which may entail a qualitative assessment based not on what the policies must be, but on what they effectively represent for the actors who experience their implementation in everyday life.

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