

Sugarcane employment: Daily precariousness or precariousness of daily life?

Trabajos en la caña de azúcar ¿Cotidianidad de lo precario o precariedad de lo cotidiano?

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Background

In Colombia, during 2008, one of the most significant strikes of the 20th century took place, organized by labour and social movement of sugarcane agricultural workers. This strike revealed the labour flexibility derived from the 90's labour reforms, as a result of the installation of neoliberalism, which affected the socio-economic conditions of this type of workers and which configured their precarious condition.

Aims

This study aims to analyze how actors have assembled to produce precariousness as a daily condition of sugarcane agricultural workers in the Cauca river of the valley geographical area in Colombia.

Method & procedures

We conducted a qualitative research with an ethnographic design. Using a multilocal ethnography, we tracked different actors in the territories of Valle del Cauca and Cauca (Colombian departments) and collected information through semi structured interviews, focus group and, participant observation. Collected information was analyzed through three categories: natural landscape, materiality and agency and, power and subjectivity, considering a content analysis.

Results & discussion

Precariousness corresponds to a sociotechnical assembly, which accounts for political, legal, social, subjective and, economic effects. In the colonial period, the natural landscape (valley geographic area's Cauca river) was the scenery to install the exploitation of sugarcane. In the 90s, this economic activity was consolidated as a monopoly, as well as the country's sugar industry. In this context, there is overexploitation of agricultural workers, who historically come from the practices of slavery and, in the framework of neoliberalism, they were configured as informal workers or precarious workers.

Agricultural workers maintain a relationship with sugarcane, which configures in them individual identities concerning their work occupations, and collective identities in the communities where they live. In this relationship, knowledge and knowledge have been built on how to work with the cane, but also it configures in them a precarious condition by making their bodies vulnerable and insecure due to the material mediation in which instruments such as machetes or curves intervene, the climatic conditions that they must face and the threat of the end of their trajectories represented by the automation processes and the use of the machine in the agricultural phase of the sugarcane exploitation.

The above is also assembled with legal elements, where the absence of a legal contract that represents a direct link with the companies in the sector, and the guarantee of labour rights and protection systems, position them as subjects of informality and therefore, of precariousness. This precarious condition is evidenced in their daily practices where they not only face long hours of work, a product of the times involved in preparation and travel to the workplace, but also the experience of instability, insecurity, vulnerability, and especially, the circles of poverty that have historically characterized them. In this context, contracts and their symbolic burden of stability and labour rights constitutes an element that for

informal workers could solve their precarious condition, which must be managed in their daily lives by accepting and naturalizing precarious and informal jobs for them.

Conclusion

A centrality of work is evidenced as a practice that mediates the precarious condition, which has been shared historically, only with new nuances in the framework of neoliberalism. Likewise, the current conditions to enter this labour market of precarious and informal workers correspond to those of their slave ancestors or population without access to land: the strength and resistance that in turn, determine the income to manage the precarious condition. As a consequence, living with certain precarious income and having to submit to the regimes before and after work, establish a daily life of the precarious in the subjects, which is shared in the families and communities, and although there are some variations with the actors with which they are assembled, it is temporarily sustained as a precarious condition, that is, living under vulnerability and uncertainty.

Keywords: agriculture, assembly, daily life, network-actor theory, precariousness

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