

2 Workers' Perceptions and Practices in Algeria: The Cases of the El Hadjar Iron and Steel Works and the Rouiba Industrial Motor Car Plant*

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The concept of *strategy* from which the focus of this volume emanates (and of which it occupies a central part), seems to us to be problematic enough to justify some preliminary epistemological and methodological reflections.

This concept, borrowed from military art and from mathematical game theory, has had a considerable success in sociology, particularly the sociology of organization and *ethno-méthodologie*. Today, in Algiers, as probably at other universities around the world, small circles of social science researchers often use the term 'strategy'. The state, the parties, but also groups, individuals, classes, all who can be identified as subjects of determined action, are said to have a strategy; the peasants, but also smaller groups within the class, like small or large peasants. The same goes for the workers, the middle class and so on. Even family strategies, women's strategies are mentioned. The sociologists, having lately discovered military art, have begun to see society as soldiers, a battlefield, where 'actors', tactics, means and ends are facing one another.

* This study summarizes a series of results of surveys carried out by us in the two industrial plants. In the study we used the method of participant observation as well as interviews and documentation – statistical and other – on the work collectives (cf. references).

In this use of military science, sometimes legitimate but often exaggerated, for our part we tend to see an epistemological acquisition by sociology, which can be partly explained by the theoretical weakness of the sociological scientific foundation, and in particular by the still very limited empirical understanding of its object.

The concept of strategy is certainly pertinent when referring to a battlefield, where armies, provided with staffs and troops, perform movements according to a plan, set up in advance; it is pertinent because it is used about equivalent historical subjects or social actors.

It is still justified when referring to the commercial or technological action plans of large enterprises, electoral projects of organized parties, or the social and economic struggles of powerful unions, with an organic social base of their own, solidly structured and carrying on stable activities.

Occasionally it is justified when referring to collective units (groups, classes, social entities) characterized by a strong sense of common identity, resulting from a common history. It is also a prerequisite for collective action of a strategic kind; that is, with a collective consciousness of means and ends, capable of elaborating and carrying out a *social calculus*.

These conditions are more or less present among the working classes in western societies today. As Gramsci has noted, this leads to a 'war of positions', where well defined social adversaries, who recognize themselves as such, face each other.

But there is nothing of the kind in third-world countries, certainly not in Algeria, where the working class, as we will show in more detail has hardly been constituted, and where it is still immature, with a weak sense of identity. Among other things, it is characterized by a weak 'identification with industrial work', by the frequent subordination of class solidarity to regional, ethnic and other inter-class solidarity, and by cultural fragmentation in society as a whole.

All these things certainly do not prevent actions, but they do prevent strategically and collectively conceived actions by workers, with a common *social calculus* where means, ends and reactions of adversaries and other protagonists are taken into consideration.

To call their actions a strategy seems to us to transfer a western matrix onto societies and classes which do not yet, or perhaps never will, fit into such a matrix. It would prevent us from understanding other practices, other forms of action and other social movements which are specific to the social structures of the third world.