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THE YOUNG MILITARY: A STUDY ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL IDENTITY IN THE BRAZILIAN ARMY

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My purpose is to present some aspects of the research I did on the process of professional socialization to which are submitted the cadets of the Brazilian army, during the four-year course at the Agulhas Negras Military Academy (AMAN), the only establishment responsible for the basic formation of career officers in Brazil. This research was carried out during a graduate course in social anthropology at the National Museum of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. The fieldwork took place in 1987-8 and included confidential oral interviews with students, former students and officers, participating observation and utilization of archival documents.

First of all, it is important to point out the key role of the military in the Brazilian history, specially during the last decades. Active participants during the whole republican period, the military were in direct control of the executive power between 1964 and 1985. Since then, the military institution in Brazil has experienced a sharp crisis in defining its social identity. Nevertheless, in spite of the importance of the subject, there are very few studies by social scientists about what one could call "the military spirit."

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I will present three aspects of that research: 1st) the way cadets apprehend symbolic mechanisms that distinguish them from the civilians, and by what means the social interaction in this "outside world" can contribute to dissolve the social identity intended to be constructed in the Academy; 2nd) a comparison between the experience of today's cadets and that of other generations of cadets, based on interviews with former students; 3rd) some practical aspects of the research in a military institution.

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At the Academy the cadets experience a process of professional socialization during which they shall learn the values, attitudes and behavior appropriate to the military life. Rather than through classes and texts, it is mainly through the daily interaction with officers and other cadets that they learn what it is like to be a soldier.

From the very beginning the new students experience a sudden and sharp rupture with their previous lives. Specially during the first year, when they are informally addressed as "animals," they suffer great pressure, both physical and psychological, from officers and senior cadets, being the verbal humiliation of the first and the hazing of the latter the main components. The course at the Academy can be seen as a ritual of passage with the objective of destroying the previous civilian identity and developing the military spirit in the individuals. The fact that the course is a full time one, in a total institution and with few periods when the cadets can leave the Academy contributes to the achievement of the institutional objectives.

The fundamental ingredient of the new world vision is a clear distinction between characteristics ascribed to the military world, the "in here," and the ones ascribed to the civilian world, or the "out there." The pejorative word informally used among military men when referring to the civilians -- *paisanos* -- immediately shows that the negative and the positive

characteristics are assigned, respectively and with no exceptions, to civilians and to the military. For example, while the military would be generally active, disciplined, respectful, altruistic and devoted to the Motherland, the *paisanos* would be generally lazy, undisciplined, individualistic and concerned only with their own interests.

All in all, the message conveyed is that, generally speaking, the military are not only different from the civilians, but also better: an **elite**, based on ethical and correct and healthy moral principles. In that point of view, the military way of life would be superior to the civilian because based on the experience of the prevalence of the society, of the whole, over the individuals. The military career is seen as a "total career," a coherent world, full of meanings and where people "have ties." This totalizing experience is the core of the new military identity, and daily reasserted through the companionship developed among the cadets in the physical education activities, in the barracks, in the military exercises and in other moments of the daily life in the Academy.

Nevertheless, the student competition for better grades, that will mean an advantage over the colleagues all over the career, sometimes contributes to threaten the ideal view of the military world. The institution makes an effort to show the image of a "healthy competition": starting with equal conditions there will be the formation of a natural scale of individual merits. However, the quotidian of an intense student competition among the cadets ends up creating an obstacle to this idealized view of a "healthy competition."

Besides student competition, another element, perhaps more dangerous, that can contradict the ideal view of the military career adopted by the institution, is the social interaction in the "outside world," the world of the *paisanos*. During the few school breaks and leaves of absence during which the cadets may go out of the Academy, they are often exposed to the suspicion, animosity or disdain coming from extensive sectors of the civilian population. An event that occurred to a cadet during the school break period gives a good example. He met a girl and soon they started dating, but he

didn't tell her that he was a student at the Academy; the long hair did not denounce him. But the day before returning to the Academy he had to have his hair cut in the military style, what revealed to the girl his military condition. She broke up immediately. Many other events, less dramatic, could be mentioned.

Most cadets express fairly clearly the discomfort and sensation of a gap between the young civilians and them. To cope with that, many cadets have the hope of entering a civilian university, after the graduation at the Academy and in parallel with the beginning of the military career. The military institution, however, does not make it easy at all for them to accomplish this goal, and only a few cadets will be able to conjugate both activities.

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One of the most significant results of the research was the discovery that the pattern of professional socialization in the Military Academy has remained practically unchanged since the beginning of the 30's. A phenomenon with such a long duration is with no doubt unique among the Brazilian professional institutions. That could be perceived by consulting archives (both private and institutional), reading memoirs of former students and, mainly, interviewing former cadets from the 30's, 40's and 50's, nowadays colonels and generals already retired.

I asked these old cadets the same questions as I asked today's cadets, about daily subjects like studies, hazing, punishments, competition and companionship among students. As a result, I found out that experiences so distant in time are almost immediately convertible one to another; their continuity is a fact that, I believe, would be obvious to any researcher.

However, there is an important exception: different experiences **out** of the Academy. As a

rule, all those old cadets point to a sharp loss of status and social prestige in the civilian world nowadays, unlike what would happen at their time. Stories about how the cadets were popular with girls, how they enjoyed walking and going to balls in uniform etc., may be nostalgic exaggerations, but they certainly make a clear contrast with the often unpleasant experiences that cadets face nowadays in the civilian world. This difference is important. If there is today a stratum of generals and colonels -- chiefs and commanders in high positions -- which entered the Academy and shaped their "military spirit" still in a time of "prestige of the uniform," there is another stratum of young officers which began their military socialization experiencing situations of "lack of prestige of the uniform" among civilians.

To explain that, the older cadets sometimes point out general changes in social values, sometimes a decline in the socioeconomic standard of the candidates to the officer corps. I believe that the role of the military in the government from 1964 to 1985 also contributed strikingly to that loss of status and social prestige of the profession among civilians. I would like, however, to highlight an impressive historical trend in the composition of the army's officer corps: the increasing recruitment among sons of military men. In 1941-3, 21.2% of the new students had military fathers; in 1962-6 this number rose to 34.9% and, in 1984-5, it reached 51.9%. A closer look reveals that, at least since the 70's, nearly two thirds of these cadets are sons of non-commissioned officers. The data characterize a progressive closing and isolation of the military institution in relation to the civilian society -- which, added to the political isolation following the end of the military governments, form the basis of the crisis of social identity experienced by the institution nowadays.

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When I obtained permission to research in the Academy, I was prepared to face an attempt,

on the part of the institution, to control the process or the results of the research, or, on the part of cadets and officers, the lack of interest or suspicion. Nothing like that happened. Since the beginning I had great freedom of action; I could, for instance, hold confidential interviews and watch school activities, including the participation in a war exercise. The only objection was to my staying at the cadets' barracks; I had to stay at the Academy's internal lodge, except for a period in the house of an officer.

The contact with the cadets for arranging interviews was generally made through captains and lieutenants, who thus became responsible for notifying their cadets about the research and for recruiting volunteers to be interviewed. However, since the very first interviews it became clear that, although the majority had really volunteered to talk to me, some of them had been chosen by the officers. Besides, at the beginning I was often addressed in a formal way by both officers and cadets. I insisted many times with the officers that the cadets should be **really** volunteers, but that was not always effective. It is important to say, however, that not only cadets considered "good" were chosen, often officers suggested cadets that had, as they said, "weak military spirit," so as to give me a general view representative of the whole of the cadet corps.

That situation was altered after my participation in a war exercise, in uniform and as part of a "patrol" of ten cadets during two days. The event was largely commented in the Academy, always in a positive way. In spite of the fact I was not aware of that, this event meant a rite of passage for me. Since then, the number of authentic volunteers increased, officers offered spontaneously to cooperate, the formalism with which I had been treated ended.

During the research I did interviews with cadets in different situations: in and out of the Academy (in their homes, during the school breaks), individually and in group. Doing so, I was trying to detect differences in the interviews. The result was negative. I also did interviews with ex-cadets that did not finish the course, either because they dropped out or because they were expelled.

Again, I did not find differences between these interviews and the others I did with cadets at the Academy, volunteers or not. In a social environment where the individual is always "apparent," the interview became a rare opportunity of anonymity. As in the ideal type of "stranger" portrayed by George Simmel, I often received confidences that would be diligently kept from the closest colleagues.

To the cadets, the most important was to know that they were authorized by their superiors to talk about their experiences, and that the contents of the interviews would be known by nobody else. To keep the secrecy of the interviews, I couldn't use the powerful methodological resource of the life histories. One of the basic characteristics of the military institution is the control and knowledge of the individuals' lives, by both the superiors and colleagues, and the mentioning of a few biographical characteristics of the interviewed cadets, although disguised, could easily lead to their identification. I did prefer not to take that risk.