

Changes in space and time and gender relations under the impact of modernization

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the relations between space, time and gender in the context of changes that affected fishing communities of Northeastern Brazil. The analysis is centered on the perspective of women and highlights the negative transformations of the female condition brought about by plantations and tourism, as well as by the modernization of fishing activities.

Key words: Gender; Time/ Space; Fishing Communities; Modernization; Tourism.

The goal of this study is to analyze the relationship between gender relations and changes in space and time in villages that identify themselves as "fishing communities". Empirical data are derived from field work carried out in the coastal area of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Norte. The process of change analyzed herein should be seen as a general tendency which reaches the shoreline villages at different moments in time. Therefore, in some villages, the process was more advanced, while others, at the time of the study, remained in near-traditional conditions.

When speaking of fishing communities, one frequently considers only the productive activities and social agents related to fishing. Furthermore, studies on these communities tend to favor the male point of view, that is, the *fisherman*. Yet it is not uncommon that these communities carry out agriculture in addition to fishing, as is the case of groups studied by Peirano (1975) in Ceará and by Beck (1981) in Santa Catarina, Dantas Carneiro (1979) and Maldonado (1991) in Paraíba, or among the groups studied by Faris (1972), Nemeç (1972), Omohundro (1985) in Canada. In several groups, such as the one studied by Maués (1977) and those that are the focus of the present work, agriculture is mainly a female activity. To favor the male point of view would thus exclude the fundamental activities that constitute women's domain.

The conjugation of planes of discourse and authority, masculine and feminine, public and private, derives from what Cronin (1977) has called the “harmony between cultural ideals and productive system”. In this work it is my intention to favor the female point of view. I attempt to show how time and space are conceived by women; how these two categories are entwined with each other, how they are related to the status/role of women

The classification of natural space is also a classification of the social spaces and dominions relevant to each gender. At a more general level, the sea is perceived as the dominion of men, in contrast to the land, dominion of women. Nevertheless, that bipolar classification is broken down into other small-scale oppositions. The sea is subdivided into *outer sea*, *high or dense sea*, male workspace par excellence, and *inner sea* (between the beach and the reefs) where men as well as women perform productive activities. The land, in turn, is traditionally subdivided into agricultural space and the beach, the former conceived as essentially female, and the latter as an intermediate space where, just as in the *inner sea*, women as well as men work. However, at the level of public discourse, the sea predominates, as when they say that “our livelihood depends on fishing” or “everybody here lives off the sea”. The community’s identity is thus based on male identity.

In the view adopted here, the feminine condition is (re)constructed in time through changes in space since it is perceived through gender-specific experiences in gender-specific spaces. Space and time are culturally-perceived categories; each society views them in its own way, in accordance with its own culture and history. On the other hand, every society consists of differentiated persons situated within social relations of various kinds of which gender is the dimension of interest to me in this paper.

Women, for example, perceived the enclosure process of the “free lands”, symbolized by the arrival of barbed wire, as the *end* of the fundamental space of their identity, while for the men it meant the beginning of a new space and a new work alternatives in sugar cane plantations, albeit a negatively valued one. Women do not fail to include the male space, the sea, in their conception of time, but they do it by contrasting the sea that has remained unchanged, to the land that has changed. The men, in turn, do not fail to include the land in their conception of time, yet they construct it fundamentally by what takes place at sea.

People are historical, and for that very reason their conception of time today is probably not the same as that of yesterday. *Formerly*, with the meaning it holds today, only exists today. The perception of historical time is itself historical, as it is constituted in specific moments of history – and no less historical, certainly, is the perception of the anthropologist who speaks about the time of others. Not long ago, anthropologists were not concerned with distinguishing between the temporality of men and that of women.

The representation of time is the result of a temporality. For the women studied herein, *formerly* seems to be a time frozen “backwards”, its movement beginning from a point of rupture “forwards”. In the perception of the women with whom I spoke, memory begins in a past that “always was”, leading to a present that “ought not to be”.

Time is perceived by women through oppositional pairs. *Formerly* was a time of abundance, of unpolluted mangroves, a time of respect, a time when people "lived like people". Today is perceived as a "weird time", a time of *need*, of violence resulting from ambition, a time in which "we must live half-buried like crabs" ("*se mora que nem caranguejo*").

In the idealized past there was no violence against women. The fisherman, upon returning from the sea, always gets drunk. In the past, however, "the men drank a lot but never touched even one hair of the women"... "My father drank all his life, but never raised a hand at us when we were little girls, or at Mama either.". The violence that existed in the past was between men, due to disagreements, or as a collective act against those who infringed upon moral rules, as in the case of one man from outside the community, who was lynched for having stolen fish from his buddy, a crime which was less against the individual than against the values central to the group. The violence that exists today against women, perceived as something new, is attributed by them to the *ambition* that must have "assailed" the men, but also to the loss of the traditional productive spaces of women, a loss that made them seem "lazy", resulting in a loss of *respect*. It is worth noting that today's violence against women is an individual act (although condemned by the community), while in the past, as already mentioned it was a collective act which could include lynching.

Time is always contextual. Thus, women may perceive time in different ways, depending on what they have in mind. There is a daily time, in which they conduct their varied activities, including the care of their children. From this viewpoint, women "have less time" than men. Women also measure time, in a manner specific to their gender, by generations: "in the time of my grandmother", when they refer to periods which were not lived by the speaker and, notably, when speaking of spaces that no longer exist. Events are situated in time by reference to the births of their children. The arrival of barbed wire was an event that marked history, by the removal of their productive spaces; delimiting spaces it delimited time as well. But it is marked by the lifecycle of the woman. From the point of view of one woman it arrived "shortly after João was born"; another event occurred "just before Maria was born". From the viewpoint of another woman, the barbed wire arrived when "I was expecting Antonio". If a woman didn't know when something occurred, she asked another one, who pinpointed the event in relation to her own succession of births, or to other life events, such as marriages and deaths: "that was when I got married"; "that was when my father died". Or then "that was when Mama got married", when the event is passed on from one generation to another. To translate that perception of time into the one that is familiar to us, I had to transform the temporality lived by those women into our abstract chronology imprisoning time in dates and decades.

Thus, to situate something in time women do it through their life cycles. But to think about time as a process of change, they do it through space, or rather through the presence/absence of a space fundamental for the gender condition of women.

Time in this latter sense was not spoken of by the women as something by itself, but rather as a

means for speaking/thinking about themselves. They did not speak of time but about women over time. To see themselves in the present, they looked to themselves in the past. Time was like a mirror that shows an inverted image, as present and past have opposing indicators. In this case, paraphrasing the well-known anthropological image, time is a *mirror for women*. As mentioned before, time, as it relates to the women's representations of themselves, emerges through space, a gendered space. In contrast to the present, there was a time in the past that “was always that way”, a time of abundance and of respect, characterized by access to the *soltas* (free land) where women carried out their agricultural activities, and thus by a complementary relation with men: from a male point of view in the past, in the days of men's mothers or grandmothers, women were “women that worked”; nowadays they become “lazy women”. Respected in the past; today under assault.

Historical time, irreversible, is here constructed as a process of *subtractions*, perceived as the successive loss not only of the *soltas* but also of other spaces where female activities were carried out, such as mangroves. It is interesting to observe that both free lands and mangroves were only referred to when their loss was spoken of, whether due to privatization or pollution. If time is a mirror through which women see themselves, so is space. For women, the passing of time meant the loss of specific spaces (mangroves, free lands, etc) that they articulated through their various activities so as to form a “total space”. Men's space, on the other hand, remained constant: if the land had fallen *captive*, the sea remained *free*. It is interesting to note that throughout the Northeastern coast the sea is seen as *terra liberta* (free land). For them there was no loss of space; what occurred was a change among the men themselves. They were caught by *ambition*, brought about by a change from fishing to the catching of lobsters. They make more money, but individual greed took the place of a former pattern of reciprocity when fish was sold but also redistributed among families.

In addition to the irreversible time of history, there is yet another time, a cyclical one, relative to the space of men and resulting from the conjugation of the nature of the sea and men's activities. In a general way, the year is divided between the season of fishing and another one, that of an absence of fish; that is, into periods defined by the specificity of fishing activity. In the past, the time of *abundance*, two cyclical, complementary activities existed: one, relative to agriculture and another one relative to fishing. But the cycles were not coincident: the time of scarcity of fish was also the time of plenty relative to agricultural products. In fact, the latter were of fundamental importance as concerns the nutritional standards of the communities, although fishing has always been ideologically hegemonic in what concerns public discourse and the identities of those communities. It is possible that in the days in which everything was “as it always was”, a time of *histoire immobile* and of simple reproduction when cyclical time always repeated itself in the same way, it had been dominant. This could be similar to the perception of time of Algerian peasants analyzed by Bourdieu (1977), prior to the “disenchantment” of their world by the history introduced by colonialism. The notions of historical and cyclical time

approximate those of structural time and ecological time formulated by Evans-Pritchard (2002). By ecological time he means temporal sequences that emerge from relations with the natural environment, not as an immediate imposition of nature, but rather as a socially constructed representation, because, in social terms, nature does not exist in and of itself, but rather as a culturally-learned nature.

Structural time is based on points of reference that hold meanings for specific groups, projecting present social relations onto the past, and related to group identity. Nonetheless, my study suggests that if there are points in history perceived as significant for the construction of group identity, the groups as a whole are frequently defined according to the male point of view – the communities are “fishing communities”. Structural time thus becomes gendered.

Women see themselves in face of men as undergoing a process in which complementary relations give way to dependence – they no longer contribute to the family’s well being by providing products (mainly food) that result from agricultural activities. They no longer organize specific spaces into an environment. The history of these women is, in large part, the history of disconnection of those spaces.

If space is an environment, it is not simply a natural environment, but a cognitively-learned and culturally constructed one. As a constructed environment, it is a “signified” space whose social use gives it meaning. An environment includes the social relations and the culture which turn the "population" into a society. New changes have affected the meanings given to space with the arrival of new social actors displacing the traditional population: summer residents and tourists.

With them a new cyclical rhythm was juxtaposed to the one constituted by the interaction with the sea.. They became now a new part of the environment In addition to fishing, there is now a “harvest” of tourists. They have also contributed to changing the social condition of women, in addition to altering the annual cycle of community activities as a whole.

The tourism industry joined agribusiness in the process of expropriating women’s basic spaces . Rediscovering the “paradise lost” in their cities, or “discovering” the sunshine absent in their countries of origin, they run the risk of constructing a hell for the "authentic people" of the locality, repeating what has already occurred in other "*paradises*" In spite of how many "alternatives" they believe themselves to offer, they are part of the process that has altered the traditional organization of space. It should be noted that several Norwegian families have bought houses built by real-estate speculators at the beaches I studied and that a famous British football player is investing millions of dollars in a luxury resort located in one of these beaches.

One might say that the processes that changes time by changing space can be seen as something similar on a local scale, and with its own specificity, of a "great transformation" which Polanyi (2007) speaks of, casting people into a new order governed by “monetary connections”. In these localities a market was “invented” when land and work – to which we can add the homes of local families – gain new a meaning in the form of commodities. Beginning with the *enclosure* of the former *soltas* and proceeding to

the privatization (and pollution) of mangroves; to the growing hegemony of lobster catch over fishing; to the transformation of fishing due to new technologies, and with them, the transformation of the sea which ceased to be *terra liberta*, and finally through tourism, the former relative autonomy of these communities as well as the principles of reciprocity and non-economic time (Bourdieu, 1977) have been handed over to the *ambition* that marks a new time in which time is money – a *weird* time.

Throughout this process, as we have shown, the relations between men and women have changed from complementarity to the dependency of women on men. If *formerly* women were equally responsible for *abundance*, today they “eat from the hand of the husband”, as one wife told me.

Subsistence agriculture was substituted by a commodity-based one when the space of women’s agriculture oriented basically toward family consumption and circuits of reciprocity, was taken over by *plantations*. Traditional rafts were substituted by motor boats, increasing the productivity of work. In both cases, an expansion of the productive forces took place, but *plantations* became the place of cheap labor for men and the new fishing technology left many men without access to the sea. The lobster catch brought with it a new “work ethic”, based on individualism and the spirit of monetary gain. The “monetary connection” came to govern expanding spheres of social relations. In summary, these communities passed through a process of “modernization”.

Finally, it is necessary to establish certain relativities. From the point of view of the peasant family as a whole, even when the woman is exclusively or mainly a housewife and not a producer, the male-female relationship is still complementary. The activity of the housewife is central to the reproduction of the family and the work force, as it also is in the urban working class. Furthermore, in most of Brazil, peasants are usually small scale farmers and agricultural production – pertaining to the male domain - is the main component of their identity. In these communities the very honor of the *pai de família* (the husband/father) is contingent on a woman’s “non-worker” status. *Trabalho* (work) is a category that refers only to the activity carried on at the *roça* (cultivated field), the space of men. If women would carry on such *trabalho* the husband would suffer a loss of respect (in fact women do participate in some agricultural activities but their role is conceived as *ajuda* – help – always subordinated to the husband’s *governo* - government. Men’s honor would also be threatened if they would take part in the activities of the house. The balance lies in the complementarity between the *roça* and the *casa* (home), and in women’s absence from the former and men’s absence from the latter.

In fishing communities an equivalent (but in a sense inverted) opposition takes place, for here fishing is the male *trabalho* while agriculture corresponds to the female activity conceived as secondary although in fact agriculture has been fundamental from the point of view of the family’s nutritional conditions (Cf. Woortmann, 1992). Gender roles and their complementary relations are thus contextual but always related to the group’s identity, which, as was seen, is always based on the male activity. It is in the context studied here that the change from balanced complementarity to subordinate dependency brought

about by the loss of the *soltas* should be understood, even if agriculture has always been conceived as a less important activity

Market relations have always existed, for fish, besides consumed by the community were also sold. But a “monetary orientation” became more important . The transformations that turned land and labor into commodities, affecting the worlds of both men and the women, cannot be ignored. Still, people are not unchangeable; new circumstances create new practices, new dispositions and a new *habitus*, which at once both structures and is structured by history (Bourdieu, 1980).

Some men left fishing to catch lobsters, thus adjusting themselves to the new time.

Some women have become managers of profit-oriented small scale family businesses that offer food, beer and soft drinks to tourists , thus adjusting traditional domestic abilities such as cooking to the new cyclical time of tourism and giving a new meaning to space (now reduced to the beach). This reorientation can be seen as an adaptive social response to the new ecological-social environment, which is also a new moment in their history. Women had always administered family consumption and they also carried out the production of food as well as of raw materials for fishing. Now they find themselves, for the most part, outside the labor market or reduced to poorly paid jobs as domestic servants, and such new opportunities do not reestablish *abundance* nor bring back *respect*.

These villages continue to perceive themselves as fishing communities. Their identity, from this point of view, did not change. But gender relations and the self-image of women have undergone substantial changes.

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1 This is a condensed and actualized version of the paper *Degradación ambiental/degradación social femenina*, unpublished, 51 pages, presented at the 12º International Economic History Congress, in Madrid, 1998.

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