

Brazilian Convivialities: Concepts, Experiences, Controversies

A report of a workshop held in Berlin on June 18th, 2018

Daniela Greca^{*†}

In the course of the seminar “Conviviality in Brazil”, taught by Professors Sérgio Costa, Debora Gerstenberger and Susanne Klengel in the summer semester 2018 at the Institute for Latin American Studies (LAI) of the FU Berlin, students were assigned the challenging task of organizing a subject-related workshop. With the advantage of counting on the presence in Germany of several scholars of relevance in the field, and after weeks of thorough preparation and teamwork by the students in close cooperation with the professors, the workshop finally took place on June 18th, 2018. The presented contributions, whose authors came from different disciplinary and academic backgrounds, provided a wide and very interesting variety of approaches to the concept of “conviviality”, which was considered from different perspectives and applied to a number of historical contexts. In order to enhance the presentations and the following discussions, the event was organized in three panels, each of which comprised three presentations according to their thematic affinity, and ended with a conclusion and an open round of final comments. The languages in use were both English and Portuguese, in order to offer participants and the public the possibility to express themselves in the one they felt more comfortable with, and thus attempting to make participation as inclusive as possible. It is also worth noting that the entire course of the workshop was led by the students of the seminar, who were in charge of everything from the logistics to the chairing and discussion of the different sections.

The first panel was entitled “Conviviality, Colonialism, Slavery” and was chaired by Mirjam Wüstnienhaus. It included contributions by Fernando Baldraia Sousa, Luciane Scarato, and Angela Alonso, which referred to different aspects of Brazilian history ranging from slavery to political and material experiences of conviviality between the 18th and the 20th century. In his presentation “The Black Atlantic: Resituating Colonial Slavery in the Brazilian Academic Prose”, Fernando Baldraia Sousa proposed the consideration of new epistemological perspectives regarding colonial slavery in Brazil, taking a couple of significant events in the Brazilian academic and literary fields as a starting point to look at an emergent shift

* Daniela Greca holds an undergraduate degree in History from the National University of Rosario (UNR), Argentina. She is currently a student of the MA program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, with a focus on the history of Latin America.

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in the production of knowledge about the “afro-indigenous Atlantic”. In this sense, he combined a critical analysis of renowned Western scholars and of the Brazilian historiography about slavery with a colloquial performance that related to black experiences in the periphery of the city of São Paulo. Luciane Scarato, in turn, presented “The Materiality of Conviviality in Minas Gerais – Between the Roads and the Railway (18th – 20th centuries)”, where she examined several sources from the context of the construction of the railway in Minas Gerais and showed how this process created new convivial modes within a frame of social inequalities. Considering the roads, railways and train stations as “convivial spaces” and material things as intermediaries between people, she referred to the tension between the challenge and the reproduction of those inequalities from earlier times in the local society, thus shedding light on the asymmetrical terms of conviviality in Brazil. Finally, Angela Alonso’s contribution “Political Conviviality and Violent Contentious in Brazil (1889-1915)” focused on the violent actions of the Brazilian state in the first period of the Republic. She aimed at deconstructing the myths of the supposedly conciliatory elites and peaceful people in Brazil, referring to the continuous conflicts in the political history of the period that contradict those ideas. The following discussion of the panel was introduced by the comments of Daniel Wegmann, who brought up a number of relevant issues that related to the three presentations. Those issues included, among others, the difficulties of thinking about a conciliatory society in Brazil (despite the several attempts to do so throughout history), the effects of affirmative actions in favor of black people in the Brazilian academic field, and also a discussion around the concept of “conviviality” itself and its use as a tool for academic research. This last point, which showed an interesting variety of opinions among the participants, proved to be central to the reflections on the workshop as a whole, as it came up again later on.

The second panel, “Nation, Migration”, was chaired by Daniela Greca and integrated by Rafael Cardoso, Susanne Klengel and Derek Pardue. In this case, the contributions focused on a symbolic and cultural perspective, addressing questions such as the construction of ideas of nation and national identity, the relations and contacts between different cultures and the movements of people through countries and cultures, including migration as well as other sorts of displacement. The first presentation by Rafael Cardoso was called “Brasilidade, homogeneidade e o apagamento das margens”, and proposed an analysis of several images from the first half of the 20th century to trace the process of creation of a Brazilian stereotype through national art. In this way, he showed how discourses of the period highlighted certain traits that were supposed to constitute the typical Brazilian subject, thus excluding the forms of diversity that did not comply with this model. The focus on artistic forms of expression and representation was, in fact, a common feature of all the contributions in this panel. For her part, Susanne Klengel presented a literary perspective in her work entitled “‘Express Love Affairs’ – A Literary Utopia of Global Conviviality”. She referred there to the emergence of a new form of literature in the first decades of the 21st

century in Brazil, which opposed to the predominance of “national” topics and instead privileged personal approaches, including the reference to complex ways of living together. More specifically, she considered the literary project “Express Love Affairs” as the point of departure for a reflection on the relation and entanglements between national and international literature, as well as on the ideas of a transcultural aesthetic and of a utopic global conviviality. Lastly, Derek Pardue talked about the recent immigration “boom” of Africans in São Paulo in his contribution “How high will we pour the tea?”, which was also marked by a literary approach. Through a “mix of urban theory, migration history and experimental writing” and transitioning from an analytical to a narrative form, he represented experiences of conviviality that shape not only the identities of the subjects involved, but also the city itself. The discussion within this panel was in charge of Pedro Pires, who contributed with interesting remarks about the different presentations. On the one hand, he linked Rafael Cardoso’s contribution to other works of the author, commenting on their connection regarding social and spatial segregation and oppression in different contexts. On the other hand, he inquired about the way in which literature was approached and used in the other two presentations, aiming at emphasizing its possibilities and limits.

The third panel was entitled “Living With(in) Difference”, chaired by Orsolya Zilahy and constituted by Maya Manzi, Nicolas Wasser, and Sérgio Costa. With a focus on everyday practices, identities and the visions of the “other” in different historical and spatial contexts in Brazil, all the contributions addressed the question of conviviality and its development into the present time. First, Maya Manzi presented her work “Convivial (Hi)stories: Structures, Representations and Practices of Conviviality in Latin America”, where she introduced an original perspective of understanding conviviality as the everyday coexistence with difference including both the human and non-human dimension. Thus, by analyzing contrasting approaches to nature-society relations and moral economies within the context of Northeastern Brazil and its semi-arid climate, she aimed at showing how these different understandings were at the base of discourses and state interventions that contributed to the definition of convivial regimes while reproducing cultural differences and social inequalities. The following presentation by Nicolas Wasser was entitled “Commercializing Diversity through Affective Labor: On Neoliberal Identity Regimes in Contemporary Brazil”. The author considered conviviality in close relation to neoliberal logics and to the construction of identity in a work environment of promised sexual and racial liberation and diversity. In particular, he examined the case of the Brazilian brand “Visibly Hot”, highlighting its influence on the constitution of the identity of its sales employees within the precarity imposed by the neoliberal profit orientation and the unfulfilled promises of safeguarding the right to “be different”. Finally, Sérgio Costa presented his contribution “Conviviality em Ouro Preto: quatro tempos”, in which he considered the relations among different ethnic and social groups in the area of Ouro Preto from the colonial period to the present through the analysis of secondary literature. Within that frame, he

distinguished what he defined as four successive moments or regimes of inequality, claiming that the relations between black and white people in Brazil changed historically according to the inherent logic of each of these regimes, as well as emphasizing the tension between the emergence of convivial relations and the reproduction of oppression and inequality. The discussion about this panel was introduced by Ramona Markmiller, who recapped the main points of each of the presentations and pointed out their similarities and differences. Focusing precisely on the relation between inequality and conviviality and drawing on the various perspectives presented in the three contributions, she highlighted the strong link between those two concepts, proposing a reflection about the way in which they actually relate (or could relate) to each other.

As a conclusion of the entire workshop, Susana Yunis Boatto went back to some of the main issues raised throughout the day, proving the usefulness of this event to enhance further discussions about the topics in question. Among those issues, she referred to the wide variety of disciplinary and methodological approaches presented, the discussion about the actual meaning of the term “conviviality” and the importance of producing further knowledge on this field in order to work towards a more positive balance between conviviality and inequality. Afterwards, there was time for some further comments about the workshop as a whole by some of the students and the invited scholars, all of whom expressed their satisfaction with both the contents of the contributions and the outcome of the organizational process. All in all, this experience was not only a valuable opportunity for students to get actively involved in the preparation of an academic activity but also hopefully a starting point for many more productive discussions to come.