

# International Journal of Human Sciences Research

## INVESTIGATING THE EXPERIENCE OF IMMIGRANTS IN THE CITY OF CASCAVEL- PR: NOTES AND THEORETICAL PROBLEMS

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**Abstract:** This article aims to state and explore some of the theoretical questions that organize our doctoral research on the presence of Haitian and Venezuelan immigrants in Cascavel-PR. Dialoguing with theoretical productions in the field of Social History of work and Workers, we seek to delimit and problematize concepts such as “experience”, and, based on this, revisit the theoretical concerns that mobilized us in the research. In this sense, it is hoped that at the end of this article the reader will find a stimulus towards constant reflection on the theoretical repertoires mobilized in the production and analysis of historical sources as well as in the writing of History itself.

**Keywords:** Experience; Immigration and workers; Social History.

## EXPERIENCE AND IMMIGRATION

In this article we propose to address some of the concerns, difficulties and challenges that we have encountered throughout the development of our doctoral research, which aims to historically investigate the experiences of Haitian and Venezuelan workers in Cascavel-PR in the last two decades (2000-2020). We understand that dealing with the complexity of these concerns and challenges is a constant exercise in the development of research and writing History. In this sense, based on the reflections proposed by Edward Palmer Thompson (quote), we will seek to develop reflections around the concept of “experience” as a relevant theoretical key for investigating the trajectories of immigrants in Western Paraná.

In this sense, a first issue that we would like to highlight concerns the debate proposed by Thompson about “historical logic”, both in his work as a whole and, in particular, in the two chapters of the book “The Misery of Theory” (1981), entitled “Interval: historical logic” and “The absent term: experience”. Here,

even if very briefly, it is necessary to mention that much of the reflection developed by the author in the chapters of “The Misery of Theory” (1981), among other points, is very much mobilized around the defense of the field of History and the making of historians, both in the face of attempts to equate the procedures specific to History with those of other areas of knowledge, and the concern to oppose structuralist readings, which insisted on a rigid and watertight understanding of the relationships between theories, social structures, and the dynamic social reality they sought to understand.

Thus, when seeking to defend historical logic as a specific way in which historians produce historical knowledge, and which implies a set of its own procedures and its own demonstration discourse, Thompson points out that the specificity of historical logic lies in the need to deal with appropriate procedures.

(...) to phenomena that are always in motion, that reveal – even in a single moment – contradictory manifestations, whose particular evidence can only find definition within particular contexts, and, furthermore, whose general terms of analysis (i.e., the questions appropriate to the interrogation of evidence) are rarely constant and, more often, are in transition, along with the movements of the historical event: just as the object of investigation changes, so do the appropriate questions (THOMPSON, 1981, p.48).

Historical logic can be understood, therefore, as a “disciplined historical discourse” conducted by historians, who place in constant dialogue the concepts and evidence that come to them from the historical process on which they focus, “in a dialogue conducted by successive hypotheses, on the one hand, and empirical research on the other” (THOMPSON, 1981, p.48). In this sense, Thompson highlights that historians do not produce historical knowledge by

dealing with isolated “facts”, but rather with “evidence of behavior (including mental, cultural behavior) happening over time” (THOMPSON, 1981, p.48).

The notions of specific procedures and the scientificity of History mobilized by Thompson when arguing in defense of historical logic indicate how, when dealing with historical sources, historians are faced with evidence of a historical process in motion and not with the entirety of this process. As researchers, we work with sources that are limited evidence, that have their own intentionality closely tied to the moment in which they were forged, and that, therefore, were not produced by the different subjects involved in a historical process for historians to later access.

In their work, historians do not propose to “reconstruct” the entirety of a historical process, but rather, as Thompson (1981) indicates, dialoguing with the idea of the “muses” of Greek antiquity, to investigate a historical process as inspiration and motivation to deal with our own issues. When we deal with a certain period and theme, this historical process encourages us to raise questions, to establish relationships, to understand who are the subjects who took and take it upon themselves to talk about this process, and, in this historical dynamic, produced different and multiple languages that they will be and are interrogated by the questions constructed by historians in their historical time (KHOURY, 2009).

In this direction, Thompson’s defense of historical logic in opposition to structuralism goes a long way towards questioning the validity of the construction of theoretical models in which the historical process needs to be fitted, forcing the framing of complex reality into abstract structures. From this perspective, once the models that structure societies have been built, there would be nothing more to be said about them,

because within these structures there would not even be room for the unpredictable, for contingencies, for the construction of alternatives. By bringing notions such as those of historical dynamics and historical process into historical logic, and even by locating the construction of our questions also within the dynamics and historical process, as Thompson indicates, these become notions that are very dear to historians. because they allow us to revisit the historical moments we focus on with questions and controversies that are also constructed and reconstructed in the historical process.

Here, we understand that important reflections are raised and that we take as important provocations for the development of research on the historical experience of Haitian and Venezuelan immigrants in Cascavel. Because, once we recognize that we historians work with questions and problems, it remains a constant challenge to think about them and explain them in a way that makes clear the construction and weight they assume in organizing the dialogue between theory and evidence, as well as how they will appear to our interlocutors/readers.

The importance of this reflection has placed us in the position of questioning what until then we perceived as a “natural” statement of our research: investigating the experience of Haitian and Venezuelan immigrant workers in Cascavel-PR. In this sense, the historical logic proposed by Thompson (1981) has led us to try to deal with the concepts that this statement brings more as questions and/or problems than as answers given a priori. For example, what do we understand from experience? Or by immigrants?

When Thompson coins the concept of social experience, he is concerned with bringing to the understanding of the historical process the subjects who ended up being homogenized and standardized by structuralist theoretical

constructions, but with understanding them in their relationship with the complex totality of these relationships. In this sense, the notion of experience is a key to access this totality. It is not just about bringing individual experiences and trajectories, but also what these subjects share, what they absorb from this contact with relationships and the broader social universe in which they are inserted. When thinking about the notion of experience as the “missing term” in structuralist models:

Men and women also return as subjects within this term – not as autonomous subjects, “free individuals”, but as people who experience their situations and productive relationships determined as needs and interests and as antagonisms, and then “treat” this experience in their consciousness and their culture (the two other expressions excluded by theoretical practice) in the most complex (yes, relatively autonomous) ways and then (often, but not always, through the resulting class structures) act, in turn, upon certain situations (THOMPSON, 1981, p. 182. Highlights were made in the original file)

Talking about experience cannot, therefore, lead to dealing with the individual trajectories of the subjects we propose to investigate. More than that, thinking about the experience of Haitians and Venezuelans in Cascavel-PR must also mean taking on the challenge of seeking to establish how these trajectories connect with the entire historical process in which these workers are inserted. These relationships, however, are not given and need to be constructed based on the formulation and reformulation of questions that allow the evidence to be interrogated and organized. Because without concern and explanation of these issues, there is a huge risk that our research, aiming to talk about experience in the sense given by Thompson (1981), ends up talking about cut-up and fragmented aspects of the lives of Haitian and Venezuelan subjects.

During the research, we have created some

opportunities to talk to these subjects. We meet at the schools where we teach and some of them have enrolled in Youth and Adult Education (EJA) courses. There were times when we were able to visit them in their homes and neighborhoods. On these occasions, they talked about the places they left and where some of their family and friends still remain. They told us about the places they had visited before arriving in Cascavel-PR and settling down with other families and friends. Besides, when they commented on many other places where they know each other and which could present themselves as possibilities for new journeys. Finally, in this dialogue with us as researchers (and in some cases, we are also teachers/neighbors...) they did not just produce cut-up narratives about “what it is to be an immigrant”. Much more than that, they produced narratives that were and are deeply marked by intentionality and their own questions to talk about themselves. It was and is to talk about themselves and how they see themselves in the historical process in which they are inserted at a given moment that these subjects organize narratives that bring the dimensions of the geographic displacements they made, the difficulties they face with the language, the situations experienced in the work space, the places of sociability they frequent, in short.

To understand that these narratives organized by workers are social languages produced and loaded with elements of the dynamic and dialectical historical movement, also raises the possibility and need, in the constant dialogue with these languages, to highlight how these relationships, intentionalities, tensions, affections and elements of moral conduct are expressed (KHOURY, 2009). In this sense, as Thompson (1981) indicated, the moral values constructed in the historical process cannot be taken as minor or less important elements

in the assessments that subjects make in their analyzes of their own historical dynamics. Production relations are important, but they are never experienced only as production relations, they do not exist without also being moral relations (THOMPSON, 1981, p.194).

In this sense, one of the questions that mobilize us in the investigation about the experience of Haitian and Venezuelan men and women in Cascavel-PR concerns thinking about these subjects and the relationships that are established between the work space and the spaces of housing, leisure, sociability and religiosity constituted and frequented by them. However, establishing as a research question “understanding the housing conditions and spaces in the city occupied by immigrants” cannot imply building in advance the places where, theoretically, these workers must be and, then, simply seeking to confirm this mapping in the interviews and conversations with them. When talking about their living conditions in a certain space in the city, it is necessary to keep in mind that these subjects are narrating these conditions to talk about their social experience as a whole. In experience, these dimensions are not separate, they are not even separated from the moral evaluations and dilemmas themselves. Such subjects deal with work relationships that are also moral and not just economic (THOMPSON, 1987). Likewise, they live, have fun and deal with their religions in ways that are also moral. They experience all these dimensions in their entirety and in contradictory ways within a historical process. Moral issues make up workers’ possibilities and, in this sense, also inform how they deal with dilemmas related to their lives.

Dealing with this diversity of dimensions brought by the subjects we investigated in their entirety, composing a social universe of relationships built in the historical process, remains a challenge within the research. And

here we understand that recent contributions in the area of Social History of Labor and Workers provide us with very rich references to help measure this challenge. Works such as that by Paulo Roberto de Almeida (2006) are thought-provoking readings in this direction.

Investigating and focusing on the experiences of men and women involved in land struggle movements in Minas Gerais in the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, the text by Paulo Almeida (2006) is an interesting reference about the dialogue with the many languages constructed by the different subjects involved in this process. Bringing into discussion the narratives produced by men and women who participated in this movement fighting for land, but who were not necessarily leaders or cadres authorized to speak on behalf of the social movement, Almeida sought to reflect on how these multiple social languages produced by the subjects that he questioned pointed to the diverse and conflicting ways in which these men and women interacted within the same movement from different worldviews and perspectives (ALMEIDA, 2006). In this sense, instead of simply dismissing the issues brought up by the subjects and their languages, the author maintained the concern of questioning how these issues influenced the dynamics of the movement itself, often highlighting issues, projects and perspectives of struggle that could remain silenced. If only the most general and, therefore, more homogenizing narratives were taken, both from the movement’s leaders and its opponents (ALMEIDA, 2006).

From this point of view, one of the contributions that most instigated us in readings such as those proposed by Paulo Almeida (2006) was recognizing that there is an arduous, but possible and necessary, challenge in the sense of dealing with and interrogating the diversity of experiences produced by historical subjects who we investigate, so as

not to homogenize them and, at the same time, worry about making all these ambiguities and contradictions brought up make up the whole of the historical scene. To a large extent, Thompson's (1981) provocations are thought-provoking in this challenge of dealing with the contradictory concerns and dynamics of the historical movement. It is in this constant and challenging exercise, in which historians raise questions and test hypotheses in dialogue with the evidence, that we can locate the validity of historical knowledge (THOMPSON, 1981). Not in the sense of reconstructing any historical process exactly as it happened, but rather in the direction of launching and giving visibility to questions that intrigue us about this historical process, and, in this dynamic, instigating reflection and dialogue with our readers and interlocutors in a way to be able to contribute to other issues, struggles and challenges that arise in the present.

In this effort to dialogue with the languages

produced by Haitian and Venezuelan immigrants in Cascavel-PR, those that we considered our initial questions for the research have also been rethought based on the questions – difficulties and dilemmas – that the dialogue itself brings. Considering the concerns and provocations that we have exposed so far, we think that this process, precisely because it takes the researcher away from certain “comfort zones”, is also an important part of the production of historical knowledge. Therefore, obviously, we do not aim to present ready-made answers to provocations and dilemmas, but rather to try to highlight how they have appeared in the development of the research. It seems to us rather that the writing of a Social History about immigration in Western Paraná has much to be enriched by constantly confronting the questions posed to the practice of historians, taken as an object of attentive and diligent reflection.

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