

Poverty, modernization and modernity

This article explores in greater depth certain ideas about changes in gender practices and values that I raised in a previous article (Vaitsman, 1997) on the basis of research data gathered among women from a low-income community in Rio de Janeiro. In that study, I endeavored to establish links between, on the one hand, changes in attitudes to contraception and, on the other, gender practices and values.¹ One of the conclusions I reached was that fixed, comprehensive, dichotomous categories – such as “traditional” and “modern” – are of limited use in interpreting the practical and symbolic worlds these women live in, as they are unable to take in the plurality that exists within popular segments of the population, nor the fragmentation within subjects. This, among other things, because they were categories produced in a historical and theoretical context where they stood in opposition as parts of mutually exclusive realities; that is, in the sense that “modern” would mean the opposite and overcoming of things “traditional”.

The processes of modernization - entailing industrialization and urbanization - and more recently those of post-industrialization have caused new practical and symbolic contexts to emerge, thus constituting a world shot through with diverse orders of practices, values, ideas and images. Cultural changes form part of socio-economic, political and institutional processes that have differential impact on different social segments.

* Researcher, National School of Public Health (ENSP), Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (FIOCRUZ), Brazil.

¹ This study was carried out in two consecutive stages by way of the following projects: *Contracepção - o que querem as mulheres* (Contraception – what women want) and *Atitudes Contraceptivas- uma análise de mudança de valores entre mulheres de baixa renda no Rio de Janeiro* (Attitudes to contraception – an analysis of value changes among women from low-income communities in Rio de Janeiro). The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) supported the two projects and the Rio de Janeiro State Research Support Fund (FAPERJ) supported the second. The interviews were carried out by Ana Carla Souza e Silva, Marly Marques da Cruz and Maria Ximena Simpson Severo. The data in my 1997 article were obtained from the former project and those in this article, from the latter.

Nonetheless, while one aspect of the globalized world made virtually instantaneous by the power of information has been the emergence of difference and plurality, another aspect is precisely the opposite: the homogenization of certain consumption styles and habits. In addition to differentiating, change can produce similarities - albeit tangential ones - to the extent that it produce new, common universes. From the perspective of subjects, participating in different discursive contexts and interplays entails simultaneously producing similarity and difference, since they interact in new, common universes from which, at the same time, they differ. In the urban context especially, they experience simultaneously different worlds which nonetheless interpenetrate.

Particularly in Latin America, as shown by Lechner (1990), today popular strata of the population are marginal not because of their values and aspirations, but in relation to the processes of modernization, which have not managed to incorporate them owing to structural unemployment. It is no longer a question of the former duality of traditional and modern, where the traditional sector lived a life apart from the modern sector, but of a situation where the excluded sectors share in the “modern” way of life.

Part of the values and relations that characterize a tradition always continue alive and reproduce as part of the culture. However, in the social order that some call post-modern (Lyotard, 1978; Harvey, 1989) and others reflexive or post-traditional (Beck, 1995; Giddens, 1995), we are confronted by a world marked by openness and contingency where now traditions, in addition to being justified by discourse, enter into dialogue with other traditions and other ways of doing things. This process entails two situations which, although simultaneous from the subject’s point of view, may be thought of as different by theoretical discourse. The former situation would be that involving some kind of reproduction of values and behavior grounded in a given tradition. The latter would be a situation leading to the production of new values and behavior; that is, to a break with tradition.

Beck (1995) uses the image of the *babushka* – the Russian doll that contains a series of similar, ever smaller dolls within itself – to describe classic industrial society,

where collective ways of life fit with one another: class presupposes the nuclear family, which presupposes sexual roles, which presuppose the sexual division of labor in marriage. In contemporary society, things no longer fit together so well. New types of day-to-day arrangements, both in labor relations and in personal lives, are replacing the typical model of industrial society, where social classes were a kind of sum of numerous nuclear families built on the sexual division of labor and living similar situations. New arrangements developed, no longer grounded in traditional models, entailing greater individualization and the disintegration of the certainties of industrial society (Beck, 1995). Life situations no longer interrelate necessarily on the traditional model, but produce new arrangements. For example, the new sexual division of labor entails taking male and female income separately, producing a fragmentation that reorders the social structure, which can no longer be represented according to the same model of complementarity predominant in industrial society (Beck, 1995).

This process, which entails social and personal fragmentation and further individualization, had far-reaching consequences on gender relations in various parts of the world. In Brazil, particularly among the urban middle classes, the redefinition of the sexual division of labor and growing individualization meant that women came to embark on careers, earn their own money and gain autonomy. What then occurs, in terms of individualization and reflexivity, with women from poorer social strata who live in the same historical circumstances, but under other conditions? This is one of the issues raised by this article. The aim is to understand, in what way individuals from popular segments are being incorporated, in specific contexts, into the processes of modernization and are – or are not – gaining access to the institutional spheres that guarantee universal rights, and how are they reconstructing values and behaviors within the overall framework that typifies the idea of a reflexive modernity.

Another issue is the theoretical and conceptual implications attendant on this situation, given that the categories usually employed to contemplate the symbolic universe of the middle strata as modern and individualist and that of the popular strata as traditional and hierarchical are unable to grasp this situation which presupposes

social and individual fragmentation and, at the same time, interpenetrating worlds.

It is appropriate here to refer to post-structuralism one of whose sources is the criticism made by Derrida (1973) of the philosophical tradition of Western thinking, built on binary oppositions whose first terms acquire primacy over and subjugate their second terms. Derrida showed that the meaning of words or texts is not intrinsic or fixed, but rather derives from some implicit or explicit contrast, and that oppositions are not natural, but rather constructed for specific ends in given contexts. This criticism has been a powerful tool used by feminist theory to contextualize meanings and deconstruct representations that naturalize the gender hierarchies of modern society, such as those that associate, on the one hand, universality and equality with maleness and, on the other, particularity and difference with femaleness².

Criticism of fixed, dichotomous categories in analyzing the social and symbolic phenomena of contemporary societies points up one of the impasses facing the classic, “realist” conception of science according to which clarity and distinctness of ideas are elements that ensure truth expressed in concepts that “represent” an objective reality. These impasses, at the same time, are leading to a search for new ways of thinking about phenomena and of pursuing scientific endeavors. One approach that sees phenomena – both natural and social – as complexes represents an effort to overcome dichotomous thinking and to seek to understand the paradoxes and the several logics in operation in producing a single phenomenon. As Morin (1996) showed, it is a question of moving on to an approach that is no longer dialectic, but dialogic, where unity between two principles does not cause duality to disappear, so that, on the “complexity paradigm”, “the truths appear amid ambiguities and an apparent confusion” (p.183).

Ambiguity and ambivalence are certainly constituents of the condition of women who live under the historical circumstances that produced globalization, reflexivity and individualization; that is, in a world interpenetrated by modern, egalitarian institutions,

² In this regard, see the discussion by Scott, Joan. “Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference: or,

aspirations, values and conduct. At the same time, their daily lives are marked by poverty, exclusion, loss of rights and hierarchies of various orders.

In another article (Vaitsman, 1977), I discussed how the coexistence of a plurality of worlds in Brazilian society is a phenomenon amply recognized by Brazilian social thinking. Oppositions like traditional/modern, rural/urban, home/street, individualism/hierarchy, and so on, have been used as theoretical and conceptual instruments for thinking about and interpreting Brazilian social relations and institutions, even though their “hybrid” (Freyre, 1992) and “relational” (Da Matta, 1979, 1990) nature – that is, the capacity to mix elements from different practical and symbolic worlds – is considered a trait typical to the social and cultural formation of Brazil and the Brazilian way of acting in everyday life.

Prompted by the classic work of Dumont (1966; 1977) on egalitarian and hierarchical values as the defining elements of modern and non-modern societies, there developed, particularly in Rio de Janeiro, a whole interdisciplinary tradition of studies on the symbolic universe of urban population segments, involving Anthropology, Sociology and Psychology, and going on to a kind of class division, a socio-cultural stratification. On the one hand, were studies targeting modern, egalitarian segments of the urban, middle strata; among these – although the hierarchies did not disappear – what predominated were aspirations, identities and life projects defined within an individualist symbolic frame of reference (Velho, 1986; Figueira, 1981, 1987). On the other hand, were those who highlighted the traditional and hierarchical aspects of the world view of popular population strata and “suburban” middle segments (Duarte, 1984, 1986; Heilborn; 1984).

Studies of gender practices and values proceeded with this theoretical tradition to which the categories of individualism and hierarchy were central. Despite conflicts and internal fragmentation, as well as incongruities between practices and discourses, women from the upper strata, considering domestic life a prison and/or turning to

affective and sexual behavior which departed from standards typical of the modern conjugal family, had broken with roles restricted to the private sphere and were seeking one dimension of their personal fulfillment in the public world of career and paid work (Salém, 1987; Almeida, 1987; Dauster, 1990, Vaitsman, 1994). In another direction, the identity of women with little income or education was seen to remain traditional. Among these latter, the roles of wife and housewife were valued due to the fact that, in addition to the double workload, the only activities they had access to in the world of paid work were underpaid, repetitive and offered no perspective of personal fulfillment – a situation heightened, in the case of heads of family, by the absence of their male partner (Salém, 1981).

Other research in urban contexts, although focusing on different aspects and with different theoretical approaches, have also pointed out that acceptance for women working away from home, by both men and women, is a consequence of poverty and dependent on the options offered by the labor market (Macedo, 1979; Durham, 1980; Prandi, 1982, Sarti, 1983, Xavier, 1987). The female identity is constructed on the basis of the reproductive roles in the family, while the higher fertility rate among the popular segments than among the urban middle strata indicated a structural correspondence among gender, class and values – or ideology.

Although more recent studies have been detecting changes in gender relations also among the popular segments, there are different interpretations of what these changes mean for the values of the individuals involved. That is, what is being discussed is to what extent changes in the family and in gender practices – women heads of families, instability in conjugal relations, plural forms of family, women's participating in the labor force, birth control, etc. – imply changes in values or, putting it differently, whether popular segments are incorporating individualism in some way. This is a discussion of how processes of modernization and values considered proper to modernity are experienced, appropriated and translated by different individuals in specific socio-cultural contexts (Giffin, 1994; Goldani, 1991; Faria, 1989; Oliveira, 1992).

Gender Values and Practices among Urban Low-Income Women

Living in precarious conditions and in unstable conjugal relationships, poor women are – in different contexts and increasingly – taking responsibility for not only the education and socialization of their children, but also for the economic income of the family nucleus. In cases where they become heads of families, this situation generally serves to aggravate the conditions of their lives – what has been termed the “feminization of poverty” (Stacey, 1990; Pearce, 1979; Ehrenreich and Piven, 1984). In Brazil, families with women at their head – the number of which increased during the 1980s and among which child labor rates are higher – are also those which encounter greatest difficulties in surmounting the situation of poverty (Cervini e Burger, 1991).

In 1996, women were the chief providers for 20% of Brazilian families. Of this total, 21.6% were in urban areas and 13.7% in rural areas (National Population and Health Survey/ *Pesquisa Nacional sobre Demografia e Saúde*, PNAD, 1997). Particularly in Rio de Janeiro municipality, in 1996, 29,9% of families were headed by women (Population Count/*Contagem da População*, IBGE, 1997).

Although the nuclear family still constitutes the predominant residential setup Brazil, in both town and countryside, the increase in rates of divorce and separation and the growing numbers of single-parent families, especially those headed by women, have given women a central role not only in socialization, but as economic providers (Berquó and Oliveira, 1990; Bilac, 1991; Bruschini, 1989-1990; Goldani, 1991; Oliveira, 1992; Xavier, 1987; Vaitsman, 1993; Bilac, 1991). As certain studies have even shown, in migration from the countryside to the town, it is very often the women who manage to “salvage” the family economically (Bruhl, 1988).

In Brazil, in addition to reconfiguring norms and institutions, modernization led not only to a new kind of urban poverty, but to the emergence of new symbolic configurations among popular urban segments. While the 1980s were notable for worsening inequality and social crisis, they were also, paradoxically, a period when different social movements took shape and/or expanded in a context where society continued undergo significant structural change. The growth of social and popular

movements, the electoral campaigns that politicized the different forms of social inequality, the generalized spreading of values and behavior associated with the idea of “modernity”, above all by television, also reached the popular urban strata which incorporated them and retranslated them according to the specific meanings of their own symbolic world (Vaitsman, 1997).

The action of the feminist movement and the creation of Councils for Women’s Rights, at both the state and national levels, as well as the institutionalization of policies directed to women, in the spheres of safety and protection from domestic violence (the Special Women’s Police Stations) and in reproductive health (the Ministry of Health’s Comprehensive Women’s Health Care Program, PAISM) came to provide popular strata with certain legal instruments to guarantee their rights. Even with the hindrances of various kinds and the innumerable barriers to accessing these instruments in practice, the fact that they were institutionalized has contributed in institutional and symbolic terms, to building a more democratic order as concerns women’s rights.

Meanwhile, in Brazil, the process of modernization has had particularly perverse consequences. In Rio de Janeiro, as observed by Velho (1996), modernization accompanied by social inequality has drained cultural – particularly ethical – content from the system of social relations. The patronage relations of the traditional system made possible the existence of shared cultural expectations for reciprocity, which is seen to have been seriously prejudiced by modernization.

This analysis could also be applied to gender practices and values. In the traditional universe, the cultural expectation was for men to provide for their families and even if women had to go out to work to complement their man’s income, there were greater mutual expectations as regards the roles that each sex should play. Specific individuals in different social strata gave their own meanings to this more general frame of reference, but gender roles were oriented by normative patterns rooted in an earlier moment of the sexual division of labor in Brazilian society and also in another socio-cultural context.

Another aspect of the present situation in Rio de Janeiro is the territorial sway

that the drug traffic holds over the *favela* shantytowns. The State is absent, public schools precarious, and difficult access to education means poor teenagers and young people live under conditions that produce consumer aspirations and, at the same time, social exclusion. The diverse forms of connection with the drug traffic very often constitute a more attractive route in financial and local power terms than the precarious working and wage conditions encountered on the legal employment market.

As regards gender relations and values, the same characteristics of the process of modernization – its producing very unstable conditions for living, marrying and working, all in a context of spreading individualism – did not tend to crystallize female identities anchored exclusively in the private sphere. These circumstances produced a culture in which, in the midst of poverty, women acquired the moral conditions and social acceptance to survive without a male presence – which, in turn, resulted in less substantial barriers to maintaining and raising children in the absence of a male.

Changes in the family and in gender practices constitute phenomena associated with processes of modernization experienced, appropriated and translated by different individuals in specific socio-cultural contexts, with different meanings and consequences for differentiated personal and social existence.

Women in Manguinhos

The following analysis is based on one hundred interviews carried out in 1996, with closed and open-ended questions put to women from two generations. The first, born between 1935 and 1945 and the second, between 1955 and 1965. The interviewees are residents of Manguinhos, a low-income community in Rio de Janeiro with a population of around 21,000 inhabitants, distributed among three *favela* shantytowns and two housing developments. About half the women interviewed came originally from non-urban areas elsewhere in Brazil, generally from the Northeast. More than half survived on family incomes of between 1 and 2 minimum wages (US\$110-220/month); 66% had not completed junior high school.

The condition of low income and academic achievement does not preclude individualist or modern aspirations. On the contrary, in a context characterized by strong appeals to consumption, the notion of the individual – encompassing values of privacy, autonomy, self-development and equality – could not fail to be present in the women's identities and social imaginations, albeit with expectations of fulfillment for the following generation. A “project” – which constitutes one of the frames of reference for the individual and individualism, and is thus one of the mainstays of what might be considered a modern world-view – has been associated with the middle strata (Velho, 1986; Vaitsman, 1994). However, this typically individualist notion is present in these women's values and actions. It is to be found among those who migrated to Rio de Janeiro in the hope of building a better life and is updated in their aspirations for their children – particularly in action taken to keep them in school so that they will graduate and have a profession, as an alternative to prostitution or drug abuse and traffic.

Involvement with drugs and violence is the mothers' biggest concern in relation to their sons. Of the interviewees, 40% mentioned drugs and 30% violence. These were followed by education (17%), sex (2%) and others (11%). The frequency is inverted in relation to their daughters: the biggest concern is over sex (27%), followed by violence (21%); then come drugs (19%), education (15%) and others (18%).

These figures reveal the different consequences that being born boy or girl can have for young people with little income or schooling in poor communities. The mothers see their children's becoming involved with the drug traffic as the great danger, with all its attendant violence and death related to the gang warfare or clashes with the police. Concern over the girls' sexuality has to do with teenage pregnancy and prostitution.

In a situation where “workers” and “delinquents” live together in the same community – and very often in the same family – mothers' expectations of a better life for their children of both sexes are associated with studying and vocational preparedness. The roles intended for the girls are no longer exclusively those of wife and mother, even though marriage is an aspiration for 86% of the women in the older generation and 62% in the younger. However, even though marriage is an aspiration,

they do not believe in its being stable: 32% of all the women thought that their children would stay married for life, while 48% did not know and 20% responded that they did not believe in that.

Education is seen as the main legitimate channel allowing some kind of social ascension and a better life. 79% thought their children would have a better life than their own. Work and education were the items most desired for the sons of 44% and 38%, respectively, of all the interviewees. In relation to their daughters, 38% considered education most important and 31%, work; marriage came third with 2%. If one differentiates between the generations, education was the younger interviewees' main aspiration for their sons (43%), while the older group most aspired for work (49%). There is thus a generational change in perceptions of the significance of education and the opportunities it brings.

At the time of the study, 51% of the women interviewed were doing some kind of paid work outside the home. Participation in paid activities, even when not regular, is today an integral part of not only the everyday lives, but the aspirations, of women in low-income urban communities. Of the interviewees, 90% asserted that they liked going out to work and 96% declared they were in favor of women in general doing so. However, 70% considered maintaining the family economically a man's attribution and 72% stated that housework should be done by women. By generation, the responses differed by only 1%.

Although the women work in paid activities and very often are the mainstays of the family economy, they consider themselves responsible for the housework, and the men for providing for the family financially. In the context of the home, they thus accept the gender-based sexual division of labor; that is, "traditional" values and practices. On the other hand, in a context where fathers are commonly remiss in maintaining their children, what these figures show is that the women do not want to take responsibility for maintaining the family – despite their often doing so – when they also feel responsible for the housework and for socializing the children. In this respect, the affirmation that "providing for the family" should be seen as a man's task is a call for greater equity between the sexes.

Nonetheless, the discourses on the sexual division of labor reveal values proper to a modern, individualist universe, as apart from economic reasons, going out to work is recurrently associated with permitting “freedom” and “independence”. That is, the women see working in the world outside the home as a not merely economic, but existential, necessity, even under conditions of low qualifications and pay. It must be remembered that for many of these women arriving in the big city already constituted a move towards satisfying expectations and aspirations for consumption and certain rights.

When asked why women should go out to work, 42 interviewees mentioned among the reasons the word “independence”, 4 “freedom” and 1 “privacy”. Only 10 women considered women’s going out to work as “helping”, “out of necessity”. For example:

“For them to stay in step with society. Not just be dependent, where only men can do anything”.

“Because we have to be independent. This business of men wanting to give orders is out (...) you can’t be a slave”.

“It’s because, if not, things don’t improve. Without a woman, men don’t exist. Before, poor people didn’t have anything. Not today. Women are doing more than men. Because the men aren’t coping. Women only have men so as to say they’ve got company, right?”

”Because a person has to have freedom.”

“Because women get more liberal and if they only stay at home they become their husbands’ slaves”.

“Because, besides being one more help, working never hurt anyone and women who only live at home get neurotic”.

Values that could be considered to belong to the traditional and modern universes coexist and run through social and gender relations. On the one hand, when they refer to paid work, the women do not set up the man-woman opposition in any fixed, normative sense, but they do value women’s participating in the labor market. At the same time, when they talk about housework, they generally confirm values that lie

in the realm of “social representations” which express a whole symbolic hierarchy built up by social practices, albeit reworked and modified by individuals.

Also, identity has become more plastic and open-ended among these women. Certainly the activities that offer any opportunity for greater control over their own lives and a certain sense of “independence” are not the same as middle class women consider as affording “autonomy”, generally connected with a career entailing technical know-how specific to a given vocational field. More than control over one’s own behavior, independence may even take on other meanings for poor women. One of these is ridding oneself of an alcoholic or violent husband. Another is being able to buy the things one wants without depending on one’s husband’s money, which is already tight; or even sustaining a family without any contribution from an absentee father.

Although going out to work may be a necessity for maintaining the household, these women do not see the domestic life as an identity ideal that in itself would exclude other activities. Even given working and payment conditions quite unlike those visualized in the vocational projects of middle class women, these women place value on participating in activities that generate income as a means of asserting themselves in the world – which, at the same time, has not eliminated the traditional gender constructions in relation to domestic activities. Subjects may think, speak or act in ways that theoretical discourse would consider as “traditional” in one given situation and “modern” in another. The requirement of sustaining children by paid work coexists with the wish to be independent, with individualism and reflexivity, and with the tradition of the culture of female domesticity. The subject, as well put by Laclau (1986), is not a unified, homogeneous entity, able to give coherent, totalizing sense to the world, but forms a plurality dependent on the various positions it occupies in constituting itself as an individual in the ambit of various discursive formations. From both the social point of view and from that of the subject, we are confronted not only by continuity and rupture, but also by the coexistence of several worlds. There is no unified discourse with a single frame of reference on the “place of the sexes”, since this single frame of reference, sustained by the legitimacy of tradition, is today in headlong disintegration.

As regards patterns of conjugality, in the older generation, 54% of the women were legally married, 16% lived in common law unions, 16% were widows and 14% were separated and lived with no partner. Of the younger generation, 45% of the women were legally married, 36% lived in common law unions, 2% were widows and 17% were separated and lived with no partner.

In 92% of all the legal marriages, the husbands were the principal providers for the family. Of all the women, 58% had had one partner, 31% two, 9% three and 2% more than three. In the case of the separated women, 24% had taken the initiative at the time of the separation.

Fathers were found to contribute most frequently to sustaining the children among the legally married women and the widows – the latter generally older women. Among the legally married women, 85% of the fathers contributed to maintaining the children and 87% participated to some extent in socialization activities. In the case of the separated women, only 21% of the ex-partners contributed economically to maintaining the children and 28% participated in activities related to socializing them.

In a way confirming the theories on the feminization of poverty, the women in less stable marriages and families had smaller incomes and responded for a greater workload and more responsibilities; that is, they were less favorably placed to overcome the condition of poverty. 50% of the separated women living without any partner, 25% of the widows, 25% of those living in common law unions and 18% of those legally married were in families with income of up to 1 minimum wage (US\$110). In the family wage bracket of 1 to 2 minimum wages, we encountered the following distribution: 22% of the legally married women, 62% of the widows, 7% of those separated living without any partner, 36% of those in common law unions. In the 2-3 minimum wage family income bracket, we found 30% of those legally married, 13% of the widows, 36% of those separated living without any partner, 25% of those in common law unions. With family income in excess of 3 minimum wages were 30% of the legally married women, none of the widows, 7% those separated living without any partner and 14% of those in common law unions. 60% of the legally married women reported the highest income levels (over 2 and 3 minimum wages), while 50% of the

separated women without partners had the lowest levels of income (up to 1 minimum wage).

Although only 21% of the ex-partners of separated women contributed to maintaining the children, only 9% of these women had sought the courts to guarantee some kind of alimony- this for various reasons, among which figured the difficulty of accessing and discredit in the justice system.

Most of the women (61%) considered it difficult to maintain a household without a man's help. The reasons given were the importance of the financial contribution, the father's role in bringing children up and imposing respect and in protecting the family. 39% of the women responded that they did not consider it difficult to maintain a home without a man. Some women considered the absence of a man a kind of given, since they had raised their children on their own, with no help from a father. Others still associated the presence of a man in the house with violence, aggressiveness, drugs and alcoholism: *"because I have the ability and physical conditions to work. What do I want a man about the house for? (...) Men don't respect us now (...) physical aggression, I suffered from both of them (...) Place my life at risk (...) my disappointment was caused by drugs and alcohol."*

Although, in certain cases of separations, the children remained with the father's family, it is generally the mothers who come to take on the greater – if not total – responsibility for their upbringing. Most often, the man leaves the woman after arranging another woman, although it does also happen that the woman leave the man, abandoning the home or throwing him out for womanizing, drinking, violence and/or not paying the upkeep. Despite the physical control that men usually exert over women during marriage, the latter also take the initiative of dissolving unsatisfactory unions.

Marital instability is occurring in a context that reinforces the centrality of women's domestic role, as they are now responsible for maintaining the family. The woman's need to take decisions in order to maintain the family counters and places concrete limits on the possibility of building a self-image of dependence as something proper to women's nature. However, although women may be strengthened and take on a "strong" role in the family, women who "go it alone" may feel more the consequences

of poverty and the absence of a man. At the same time as many of them feel they are “independent” and enjoy personal “freedom”, the context is one of a perverse modernity combining permissiveness, social exclusion and gender inequity.

Conclusions

The socio-cultural processes of which individuals form part entail multiple fields of action and institutional spheres and, in this respect, meanings constructed at given moments or in given contexts and defined by theoretical discourse as belonging to the traditional realm, may be reconstructed by subjects themselves, in other situations and discursive interactions, as modern. To return to our initial question: certainly the women interviewed are reconstructing their gender values and practices, but one can see that the dualities, ambiguities – in short, the plurality – are built into their practices and discourses. Only by contextualizing the situations these women experience can one understand the specific content of their gender practices and values.

The women interviewed – who participate in a plurality of practical and symbolic worlds and live social lives marked by fragmentation, instability, uncertainty, by tradition and modernity – have world views and gender values that cannot be explained by dichotomous categories. This plurality of symbolic worlds – both external and internal – brings with it ambivalence, in relation not only to roles, but also to values, which are not only “incorporated” into socialization processes and socially “reproduced”. The singular relationship that each individual maintains with received values, with socially constructed “representations”, entails permanently reconstructing these same values in everyday life.

The meanings that would be typical of a traditional universe have not disappeared, but are losing social legitimacy, to the extent that gender practices and values grounded in the dichotomous sexual division of labor have modified. This is a process of reproduction, rupture and production of new meanings, where the diversity of interacting contexts produces permanent experimentation with new social roles and

relationships.

Certainly, in a society as heterogeneous socially and culturally as Brazil's, individualist values, initially incorporated by the educated urban middle strata – and, even then, retranslated in the framework of a specific cultural tradition – are not expressed in the same way among popular segments of the population. These latter, however, do not live apart from the historical circumstances that entail greater flexibility in identities and reflexivity. In Brazil, individualism is not longer a phenomenon restricted to the upper and middle urban strata, but has also become part of the universe of the popular strata. It is here, more than anywhere, however, that modernity transmutes into paradox, in that the related aspirations – in response to consumer appeal and promised rights – tend to be experienced as absence and exclusion.

In Brazil, “modernity” has come in a particularly perverse manner, because the society holds out the promise of consumption and rights, but closes off the avenues that would put low-income groups in a position to access them. As in a kaleidoscope, every new angle, every movement, presents the eye with a different shape. One moment, traditional and modern separate, the next, they are fused, confused, as part not of one single thing, but of ambiguous, paradoxical, fleeting, plural realities that defy any attempt to grasp them as single totalities.

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