

Entrepreneurial management, labor, and a disputed urban market

Gestão empresarial, trabalho e um mercado urbano em disputa

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Abstract

This article retraces the conflicts that emerged during the Parliamentary Inquiry Committee (PIC) of Feira da Madrugada to discuss the expansion of the entrepreneurial management of popular trade areas, as well as changes in workers' experiences. Considering the PIC event as an arena in which the management of this commercial area was viewed as a "public problem", it is argued that the center of the conflict was marked by tensions between two distinct perspectives on popular markets and legitimate uses of urban space: a perspective that recognizes a "social function" in these activities, and a market rationale that identifies urban popular trade areas as favorable for investment and to foster entrepreneurship.

Keywords: urban popular markets; entrepreneurial management; labor; neoliberal urbanism.

Resumo

Este artigo recupera os conflitos emergentes durante a Comissão Parlamentar de Inquérito (CPI) da Feira da Madrugada, para discutir articuladamente a expansão de um modelo de gestão empresarial dos espaços de comércio popular e as mudanças nas experiências dos trabalhadores. Considerando o evento da CPI como uma arena em que o processo de gestão desse espaço comercial foi tematizado enquanto um "problema público", argumenta-se que o centro do conflito esteve marcado pela tensão entre duas perspectivas distintas sobre os mercados populares e os usos legítimos do espaço urbano: uma perspectiva que reconhece, nessas atividades, uma espécie de "função social" e uma razão de mercado que identifica os espaços urbanos de comércio popular como promissores para investimento e fomento ao empreendedorismo.

Palavras-chave: mercados populares urbanos; gestão empresarial; trabalho; urbanismo neoliberal.



Introduction¹

That fair, Mr. Councilors, was created to remove street vendors from 25 de Março St., Oriente St., Rodrigues dos Santos St., Maria Marcolina St., Concórdia Square, and impose a designated working space for the traders. And we built it with a lot of struggles. We used to share meals because there was nobody in that area, that was worthless. [...] And we developed commerce in that area. As we engaged in commerce, a lot of attention was drawn to that space that we built, which I believe is a right of the microentrepreneur, the small business owner, in this city. (Alex Cabral, trader at the Feira da Madrugada – stenographic notes of the CPI on the Feira da Madrugada).

The excerpt that opens this text is part of a speech given by a trader during one of the sessions of the Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry (CPI) on the Feira da Madrugada (Dawn Fair). These few lines encapsulate important aspects of the changes that have been affecting popular commerce spaces and the lives of its workers, not only in the city of São Paulo but in various urban centers throughout Brazil. Two fundamental issues stand out in this speech: the increasing interest of large investors in popular commerce markets, which "draws a lot of attention" to spaces that "were worthless" years ago; and the process of converting street vendors into microentrepreneurs, identity category that is being mobilized by the agents themselves.²

In 2015, the Feirinha da Madrugada,³ an important space for popular clothing commerce in downtown São Paulo, had its management

granted to a business consortium through a bidding process. In the first year of the consortium's administration, conflicts between the managers and the traders started to arise, with reports of harassment, worker expulsions, and arbitrary allocation of commercial spots. These situations led the traders to take to the streets in protest and lodge formal complaints with the authorities, which resulted in the establishment of a Parliamentary Inquiry Commission (CPI) called "CPI da Feira da Madrugada" (CPI on the Dawn Fair). The CPI conducted its investigations between May and December 2017 at the São Paulo City Council.

This text aims to revisit the event of the CPI to discuss the expansion of business management in popular commerce spaces and the changes in the experiences of workers as interconnected dimensions. Empirically, I will examine the disputes between the consortium managing the Feirinha da Madrugada and the traders, based on how the conflict emerged in the context of the CPI. I consider the CPI event as an arena where the process of entrepreneurial management of this popular market was thematized as a "public problem" (Cefai, 2017), gaining heuristic relevance for reflecting on the discourses surrounding work in these occupations and its categories of identification and recognition.

In the "critical moment" (Boltanski; Thévenot, 1991) of the CPI, actors were compelled to reflectively express their perceptions about the work, their expectations regarding it, and normative orientations concerning its organization. In this sense, revisiting the conflicts as they emerged at that moment allows us to reflect on the bases of legitimization of an entrepreneurial

management model for urban popular economies, increasingly identified as investment and accumulation frontiers, in tension with ideals of inclusion and the right to work in the city that marked the very origins of the Feirinha da Madrugada (Hirata, 2015) and still persist in the political repertoire of organizations representing workers in popular commerce.

The analysis of the CPI event was conducted based on the stenographic notes and videos of the public sessions. This material was examined in the light of ethnographic research on the transformations of work in popular commerce in downtown São Paulo, carried out between 2016 and 2018. This research discussed a process of "enterprisation" of these markets, characterized by increased investments in the construction of popular shopping malls, the formalization of activities under an entrepreneurial logic, and changes in perceptions of work (Rangel 2019; 2021). The experience gained from this broader research will be utilized to provide a better context for understanding the disputes within the CPI, paying attention to the heterogeneity that characterizes the contemporary dynamics of work in popular commerce.

This approach is important because, as will be observed later, the workers who actively participated in the CPI sessions were those most affected by the ongoing transformations. However, they do not necessarily represent the perceptions of many other traders who are more materially and subjectively aligned with the process of enterprisation. The evidence of

this heterogeneity allows us to observe that the legitimization of processes of exclusion and subordination is not limited to the practices and discourse of the State or large companies and investors, but can also be reproduced in everyday life by the individuals themselves who are differentially involved in marginalized activities (Cossa, 2006; Hayden, 2017).

Given that the sessions of the CPI were marked by populist speeches, lengthy debates on legal aspects of the management of the fair and technical issues related to traffic systems, historical heritage, soil characteristics, among others, the focus here will be on situations and discourses that support reflection on the changes in experiences and expectations of workers in popular commerce and the process of entrepreneurial-oriented transformation in these markets.

Regarding the organization of the text, I will start by providing context to the creation of the CPI, briefly recounting the historical origins of the Feirinha da Madrugada, key characteristics of its location and operations, the process of granting it to the private sector, and the new configuration of resulting conflicts. Following this contextualization, I will delve into the CPI event itself, presenting the main points of conflict and the actors involved. From these discussions, I will extract the categories of recognition and normative frameworks that allow us to analyze the changes in work and proposed management approaches for popular commerce in São Paulo, which are connected to transformations affecting various marginalized economies.

Feira da Madrugada: origins, disputes, and the concession process

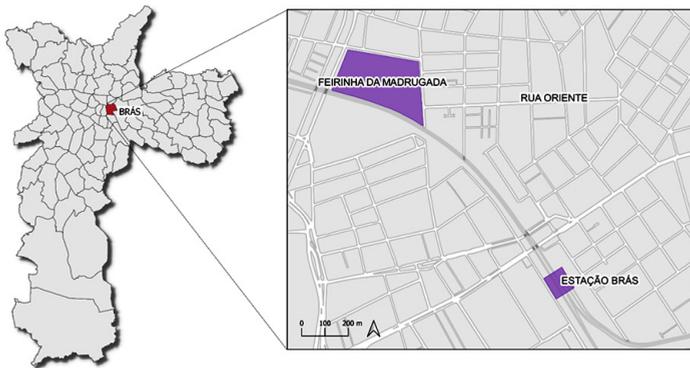
The origin of the Feirinha da Madrugada dates back to the commerce that used to take place during the early hours of the morning on 25 de Março Street in downtown São Paulo, which was later transferred to Brás neighborhood in the early 2000s. Brás is a region nationally recognized for its production and commerce of affordable clothing items. Daily, there is a significant flow of people in the area particularly wholesale buyers from different states in the country and even from abroad - along with the circulation of merchandise from various origins, generating billions of reais in annual revenue.⁴

According to Odloak (2013),⁵ who was the sub-mayor of the Mooca region⁶ at the time, during its early years, the fair stretched for over 1km. Approximately 2,600 stalls were

set up on tripod stands, and this number could reach 4,000 during the period leading up to Christmas. Buses carrying buyers would park on the streets near the fair, causing traffic problems in the early morning. Additionally, the local authorities received numerous complaints from store owners who, upon opening their shops early in the day, accused the street vendors of blocking the entrances to their establishments and producing unfair competition.

In 2005, there was a process of relocating these traders to a space known as Pátio do Pari (Pari Courtyard), a public area owned by the Union and connected to the Federal Railway Network (RFFSA). With the establishment in this space, there was a greater institutionalization of the fair, and the name "Feirinha da Madrugada"⁷ gained even more notoriety throughout the country. To work in the Feira, street vendors started paying a monthly fee to the administration, which would be used for the maintenance of the space.

Location of Brás district in the city of São Paulo and the Midnight Market at Pari Courtyard



Source: Livia Fioravanti.

By the end of 2010, the municipal government officially took over the management of the Feirinha. Additionally, a registration process was carried out for the traders, and approximately 4,200 stalls were recorded. According to long-time vendors, this number would be much higher, indicating that the Term of Permission for Use (TPU) granted by the municipality to legalize the presence of the traders in the space was lower than the demand.

In May 2013, the City Hall initiated a major renovation of the space. The fire department had presented a report pointing out safety concerns due to narrow corridors and blocked emergency exits. Initially, the Feira was supposed to be closed for just over two months for the renovations. However, it remained closed for seven months and only reopened in December 2013. During this period, several other popular commercial centers were opened in the Brás district, attracting the clientele that used to visit the Feira. When it reopened, the buyer traffic was not the same, and many traders had lost customers and accumulated debts.

At the time when the Feirinha da Madrugada was no longer the main commercial center of Brás, which saw the multiplication of popular shopping malls and galleries in the area, the City Hall proceeded with a modernization project for popular commerce in the city center, which had been developed years before. This project became known as "Circuito das Compras" (Shopping Circuit),⁸ and with its implementation, the São Paulo City Hall seeks to attract more investments in

partnerships with private companies, taking advantage of the market opportunities opened up by the previously combated street vendors and informal commerce in general.

In 2015, a bidding process was carried out for the management of the Feirinha, with the winning bid going to a group of investors who formed the consortium "Circuito São Paulo." The winning group was granted the right to economically exploit the space for 35 years. The contract stipulated a maximum period of four years for the construction of a new shopping mall on the same site. It was also agreed that all traders in possession of a TPU would have a place in the new development. However, over the years of the Feira's existence, many of those who worked there had occupied the stalls irregularly – buying, renting, or simply occupying an empty stall – which meant they did not have a TPU issued by the city government, and therefore were not among those entitled to a stall in the new development.

When the consortium took over the administration, it was agreed with the government that the figure of the TPU would be replaced by rental contracts for the stalls, and the tenancy law would come into effect. This meant that the municipality would no longer occupy the position of "almost employer" of the traders (Hirata, 2014). However, the former permit holders would have their right to stay guaranteed, including the maintenance of the price per square meter paid for the stalls (which, in the standard 3m² stalls, amounted to a total of R\$910.00 in 2017). On the other hand, those who did not previously have a TPU, which accounted

for about half of the workers, would only be regularized through contracts with the administrator and would pay the price set by them. They would also not have their right of preference guaranteed for occupying the new shopping mall to be built on the site.

This situation then provoked reactions from both groups of traders. The former TPU holders denounced harassment and acts of violence perpetrated by the administration in order to expel them from the Feira, so that they could be replaced by traders without TPU who would pay a higher price and would not have any preference agreement. The non-permit-holding traders, who had been working there for years, identified their imminent eviction. They had no guarantees of staying in the new development and would be more subject to market prices for renting the stalls - prices that, based on the prices of other shopping malls in the region, could eventually be more than four times higher than those practiced in the Feirinha.

The combination of these grievances and the reports of irregularities committed by the consortium led to widespread protests by the traders. They took to the streets, blocked avenues, and filed numerous complaints against the administration, ultimately leading to the opening of the CPI on the Feira da Madrugada. Among the allegations raised were complaints about traders in debt with the consortium being intimidated by armed security guards, the irregular construction of new stalls (supposedly to compensate for the non-payment of former permit holders), arbitrary contract terminations, seizure of merchandise, strategies to hinder

the presence of former permit holders, and disparities in the treatment of different categories of traders – former permit holders, non-permit-holding traders already working at the site, and new traders with contracts signed after the concession.

Therefore, the CPI emerges as a process of institutionalizing this conflict and as a mediation arena between the practical concerns of the traders and the objectives of the consortium responsible for implementing an entrepreneurial modernization project for this popular market. In this moment of exposure and dispute between conflicting interests within the context of the CPI, we can observe important elements for reflecting on the changes in work within popular commerce and the bases of legitimacy for a new management model for these markets.

The CPI on the Feira da Madrugada: fragments of a dispute for popular commerce

Although prompted by the traders' protests, who were fighting to remain in the space and demanding the cancellation of the bidding process, the opening of the CPI was rooted in the investigation of irregularities in the concession contract of Feira da Madrugada and the potential financial losses to the public treasury due to mismanagement. Officially, the objectives of the CPI were described as follows:

[...] investigate any potential damages to the municipal public treasury caused by irregularities in the concession contract for the construction, implementation, operation, maintenance, and economic exploitation of the Circuito das Compras in the Municipality of São Paulo, under contract number 13/2015/SDTE, supported by Administrative Process number 2013-0.363.235-3, entered into between the Municipality of São Paulo, the Municipal Secretariat of Development, Labor, and Entrepreneurship – SDTE, and the company Circuito das Compras São Paulo - SPE S.A. (CPI Final Report)

The commission was composed of nine members: councilors Adilson Amadeu (PTB), as President, Gilson Barreto (PSDB) as Vice President, Camilo Cristófaró (PSB) as General Rapporteur, Souza Santos (PRTB) as Deputy Rapporteur, Zé Turin (PHS/PPS Block) as Deputy Rapporteur, Eduardo Suplicy (PT), Toninho Paiva (PR), Rinaldi Digilio (PRB), and Dalton Silvano (DEM). Over the course of 24 meetings, held between October and December 2017, members of the consortium, traders, and public officials from municipal departments related to the management of popular commerce in Brás were heard.

The central conflict became evident between the former permit-holder traders and the administering consortium, framed within the problem of the decline in buyer traffic at the Feira and, consequently, a decrease in traders' earnings, which in turn led to condominium fee defaults. The consortium argued that the high delinquency rate among traders (estimated to be around 50%) was causing financial losses for the administration, which was financially

unsustainable. Traders, on the other hand, claimed that legal uncertainty and the decline in Feira's footfall caused by the actions of the administrator were making it difficult to pay their bills. Furthermore, the consortium was accused of seeking alternative revenue sources through measures that further hindered the functioning of the space and traders' income, such as building additional stalls in positions that obstructed pedestrian circulation and bus entry to the parking area. As continued presence at the Feirinha and even a place at the new shopping mall were tied to compliance with the consortium's payment requirements, traders attending the CPI sessions feared losing their workspace and perceived a deliberate strategy by the business owners to force them out.

The members of the CPI sought to mediate solutions to these problems, which obviously does not mean solving them once and for all, but rather achieving an accommodation based on some criterion of justice.⁹ In this sense, the conflict was shaped between two fundamental normative pillars: the principle that the Feira had the social function of ensuring income for the workers, and the principle of legality of the concession contract, which was associated with the idealization of the process of entrepreneurial modernization of that space as a strategy for economic development and urban revitalization. Thus, although the defense of the traders appeared throughout the discourse of the council members, the need to maintain the concession project¹⁰ and the celebration of the modernization process were also explicitly announced throughout all the meetings.

The concern of this CPI, from the information we have, is that things are really not progressing as they should, but I see the opportunity for all these dedicated individuals who have been there for years, with their stalls, and for the gentlemen who won the bid and are part of this consortium, to come together in a transparent manner to achieve success for all of us. [...] It's not about success for the council members, the businessmen, or the traders, but for a different, modern Brazil with rules that are not currently being followed, that's the truth. (Councilman Adilson Amadeu – stenographic notes from the CPI, 19/8/2017)

I see the Feira da Madrugada as a place where money can be made. We are talking about money here, we are talking about making money. That's what we want, no one is there to do charity. (Councilman Souza Santos – stenographic notes from the CPI, 22/8/2017)

It can be observed that, under the mediation of the CPI members, the disputing parties sought to present their positions as legitimate, in an auditorium where two sides confront a “public problem” (Cefaï, 2017). However, it is not a matter of arguing that in this situation individuals would explicitly express what they truly think or feel, but rather of considering the moments of public communication of the issues as privileged situations for exploring the categories in which individuals recognize themselves and develop their experiences, normative references, and the justifications that the different sides in the dispute mobilize and deem relevant to make certain actions and demands plausible and legitimate. It is precisely in this process of presenting different views on the problem, seeking to gain credibility and approval for their

positions, that we can both analyze perceptions regarding work and reflect on the ongoing new model of management for popular markets.

The entrepreneurial management of popular markets

By following the public hearings' videos of the CPI and the committee's final report, it was possible to perceive that the core of the conflict between traders and consortium members resided in the tension between two distinct models of popular markets, which points to contrasting perspectives on the legitimate uses of urban space. On one hand, a perspective that recognizes these activities as a kind of “social function,” partly contained within the hegemonic perceptions of work in popular commerce, referring to survival strategies of individuals who, for some reason, are outside the formal job market. On the other hand, a model of popular market that stems from the state's recognition and from major capital operators that commerce in Brás district constitutes a promising space for investment, profit, and entrepreneurship promotion.

The traders sought to demonstrate that they were being harmed and denounced as unjust the actions of the administrator, and ultimately, the management model implemented by the municipal government. To do so, they relied on arguments about the social function of the market, as a place of work, and the collective merit of the individuals themselves who produced the economic value of this commercial center.

And our Feira da Madrugada is coming to an end, which is ours, it's our discovery. Give another piece of land to them. We've found the Feira da Madrugada. Nobody cared. We had the intelligence, Mr. Elias [businessman and consortium member], because they didn't have the intelligence to find a piece of land without us. Be smart like that. We found it first, we changed the situation in Brás. We are known worldwide as Feira da Madrugada because we founded it; you are just opportunists. (Patrício, trader at the Feira da Madrugada – stenographic notes from the CPI, 1º/8/2017)

This speech encapsulates the criticism (echoed in other testimonies from other traders) that the entrepreneurial interest in the Brás region is due to the value created through the spontaneous mobilization of workers in a relatively neglected area, that is, a value produced through the development of activities that coexist with the image of illegality, poverty, and marginality. This perception is also expressed in the passage that opens this paper and, in fact, by the commission that formed the CPI, described as follows in the committee's final report:

[...] it is worth noting that the success of the fair is due, if not entirely, but to a large extent, to street vendors, informal traders, and entrepreneurs who, in a certain way, created the most sought-after and profitable commercial spot in the region. Without them, the renowned Feira da Madrugada would not exist." (CPI Final Report, p. 399).

We can observe that this new management model has been implemented in contradiction with the project under which the Feirinha da Madrugada was developed in its early years – including with the support of

the government – that is, a place of inclusion for informal vendors under conditions less precarious than those on the street. The entrepreneurial management is a model more aligned with the logic of neoliberalism, understood not only as a mode of governance based on the "universal principle of competition" (Dardot; Laval, 2016), but as the situated materialization of an "actually existing neoliberalism" (Peck; Theodore; Brenner, 2009). By discussing the actually existing neoliberalism, these authors seek to overcome the neoliberal ideological narrative as an efficient and essentialized model, in order to consider the multifaceted nature of neoliberal strategies, never fully formed and always rooted in the particular social structures of each social context. From this perspective, they observe the aspect of creative destruction that emerges as a "neoliberal urbanism," an expanding strategy that identifies certain territories of the city as targets and laboratories for political experiments, typically characterized by privatization, liberalization, and austerity policies that simultaneously impact the control of marginalized populations (ibid.).

In the case of the enterprisation of popular commerce in São Paulo, as a neoliberal urban strategy, a fundamental aspect to be highlighted is that this management model develops with the legitimization of economic power as the definitive criterion for participation in this market, at the expense of a previously attributed "social function" to spaces like the Feira da Madrugada. During the CPI, Carmelo Moradim, one of the members of the management consortium, reinforces this argument when asked about the eviction of traders who were behind on box rental payments.

We will always have problems, it's a large space with many people and conflicting interests, which means it's contentious. Their business [the traders] is to sell clothes, my business [as a consortium] is to collect rent, so it's conflicting. [...] The concessionaire ensures the rights of all those who are up-to-date with their payments. If I have a tenant who religiously pays me on time, I want them with me for the 35 years of the concession. But I don't want someone who has been owing me for 14 months. I really don't care about him. (Carmelo Moradim, Consortium administrator – stenographic notes from the CPI, 6/27/2017)

It is important to note that, in addition to the adopted concession model, there were other proposals for managing the space. The traders themselves submitted a proposal during the Feirinha bidding process. But according to the CPI report, it could not be considered because it "did not meet the pre-established requirements". Alex Cabral, one of the most active traders during the CPI sessions, recalls this attempt at "self-management" of the space.

I submitted the envelope, and each worker here can prove it, proposing that each one would deposit three thousand reais into the City Hall's account – not my account, it's the City Hall's account – and the rest would be paid over 35 years and renewed for another 35 years. An amount that would average 30% of the minimum wage. [...] Where is the envelope from the workers? They simply said that we workers were not capable of paying anything, that street vendors are not capable of anything; and street vendors are indeed capable, street vendors are not criminals, street vendors are workers. (Alex Cabral, vendor at Feira da Madrugada – stenographic notes from the CPI, 8/8/2017)

The proposal put forth by the traders, whether feasible or not, pointed to another possibility of managing the fair, an alternative to granting it to large external investors. However, the very construction of the bidding document contained a reliance on a specific model for managing this market, where any organization outside the entrepreneurial paradigm could not even be considered. It is not by chance that in their defense during the CPI, the consortium members sought to defend themselves against the accusations by emphasizing the legality of their actions and highlighting the importance of modernizing the economic and social relations as promised by the project they represented. Along with the traders, they aimed to reorganize this market under a new management model, incorporating more entrepreneurial aspects.

[...] the role that this bidding process has to fulfill, which is the economic role for those who have invested, for the Municipality, for the small entrepreneur. It is the social role, the economic role, employability, income, and entrepreneurship. (Elias Tergilene, leader of the consortium – stenographic notes from the CPI, 1/8/2017)

If the hegemonic image of popular markets tends to be associated with informal work, disorder, and marginality, the legitimation of this new management model is precisely based on the promise of organization and formalization of activities. However, formalizing activities is not the same as formalizing those workers who are actively engaged in these occupations, which can lead to processes of "exclusionary formalization" and "gentrification of work" (Rangel, 2019). This was illustrated in the criticisms from the traders, who denounced

the impossibility of remaining in the Feirinha due to their impossibility of financially meet the requirements of commercialization.

All the traders at Feira da Madrugada are bankrupt. I have debt, almost everyone does. They [the consortium] put all the traders' names in the Serasa [credit protection agency] and issued eviction orders. Sixty percent of the stalls at Feira da Madrugada are closed, and then this guy comes here and talks about acting for the social good [referring to one of the consortium members]. (Francisco da Graça, trader at Feira da Madrugada – stenographic notes from the CPI, 1/8/2017)

They [the traders] simply had to sign in order to work, either sign the rent contract [with the consortium] or not work. Most people didn't really know what they were actually signing because most people are not concerned with paperwork. They are concerned with workspace. Understand? So people concerned with this workspace signed a contract that, in reality, we believe was a death sentence for everyone. (Gil dos Santos, trader at Feira da Madrugada – stenographic notes from the CPI, 27/06/2017)

Considering this movement of privatization and expulsion, we can perceive the enterprisation of informal commerce in São Paulo as a local manifestation of a model of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2005). According to Harvey, "all the characteristics of primitive accumulation that Marx mentions remain strongly present in the historical geography of capitalism to this day" (ibid., p. 121). Among these characteristics, we can mention the commodification of labor, the suppression of alternative forms of

production and consumption, indebtedness and subordination to capital through the credit system, and the state violence and its capacity to define legality as crucial for the advancement of these practices.

We can also establish a meaningful connection between these transformations and the development model promoted by the global trend of converting informal economies, associated with areas of poverty, into spaces for profit-oriented enterprises (Roy, 2010). Roy analyzes this movement through what she calls "poverty capital," where development projects focus on expanding microcredit and loan possibilities for the poorest individuals. These projects no longer perceive spaces of poverty as obstacles to development, but as investment frontiers. The discourse of Elias Tergilene, a consortium businessman, aligns with this perspective.

[...] we consider places like Feira da Madrugada, street markets wherever they are, the street vendor in the slum, as a nursery for future entrepreneurs. [...] Assuming that informality is a natural stage for any successful entrepreneur. I was informal, Henry Ford started Ford in his garage, Bill Gates was on his couch at home, and Zara was a tailor. [...] Feira da Madrugada was a great example of the capability of small entrepreneurs. They were taken off the streets of São Paulo and placed in the Pari courtyard, where an organization was created without the presence of the state for years, and that was very good because it showed that the people there had the ability to develop to the extent that they did. So, no one can speak negatively about Feira da Madrugada. I consider it a success story and a demonstration of the capability of small entrepreneurs. When interests

arose, and I believe you mentioned it, Feira da Madrugada has always been a place of making a lot of money, and it should be. (Elias Tergilene, consortium leader – stenographic notes from the CPI, 1/8/2017)

Tergilene is the main figure involved in the consortium and one of the main promoters of what is known as "popular entrepreneurship" in Brazil (Araújo Filho, 2021). He is the president of the Doimo Foundation, which is linked to the network of popular shopping malls called UAI. In recent years, UAI has opened units in Belo Horizonte, Manaus, Toritama, and Feira de Santana, all cities with intense popular commerce activity. Tergilene can be considered what Roy (2010) refers to as a "poverty expert", as he mobilizes his own life trajectory to construct narratives about poverty and advocate for strategies on how to overcome it and generate social development through the promotion of popular entrepreneurship.¹¹

This project of democratizing economic opportunities at the base of the pyramid, which Roy (2010) identifies as a form of "neoliberal populism," is present in the legitimization of the enterprisation of popular commerce, as is currently happening in the case of the Feirinha. Thus, understood as a project that seeks legitimacy, it is important to note that, beyond the allegations of the inequalities it produces, it also finds support in the economic mobility expectations of the workers in these markets. While the workers most negatively affected by the commercialization exposed their complaints in the CPI, on the other hand, many other traders had already signed the contracts and were eagerly awaiting the construction of

the new popular shopping mall, supporting the privatization of the space, and demonstrating a greater affinity with the modernization project. Although in smaller numbers, some representatives of this group also spoke up during the CPI.

Actually, what we hope, what I hope, is that this configuration of the market is replaced by the shopping mall, which in my opinion would be better for everyone. It's a matter of sitting down and talking and reaching a common ground for this to materialize. (Daniel Ferrer Filho, trader at Feira da Madrugada – stenographic notes from the CPI, 8/8/2017)

Currently, it is observed that work experiences in the popular commerce in Brazil have become more heterogeneous (Rangel; Araújo Filho, 2022), especially in a market of great importance like Brás and the Feirinha. This heterogeneity, driven by the transformations in the world of work in recent decades, further highlights the inadequacy of analyzing engagement in these activities solely focusing on "absences" (lack of education, qualifications, skills, opportunities). In this sense, the expansion of the enterprisation of popular commerce is better understood when considering not only the processes of exploitation and domination, but also the movements of approval and accommodation, which are in turn related to the objective and symbolic changes in the world of work (Machado da Silva, 2002; Lima, 2010; Rizek, 2012). Thus, the plausibility of entrepreneurial management in popular commerce - a failed attempt years ago (Rangel, 2020; Guerreiro, 2000) – is constructed alongside the new ways

of experiencing this work, inviting an analysis of the positivity of these experiences and the new meanings that this work acquires for the individuals involved.

The work in popular commerce between the image of poverty and entrepreneurial expectations

Work in the popular commerce, a historical activity in Brazilian urban centers, has traditionally been associated with informal labor, perceived as the precarious counterpart of formal wage employment, whose expectation of generalization shaped a sort of “Brazilian utopia” throughout much of the 20th century (Cardoso, 2010). However, in the last few decades, and more notably in recent years, formal employment has ceased to represent a concrete possibility of social mobility for many individuals. Additionally, the sense of security and social protection that it once held in the popular imagination has weakened, becoming for many more of a promise than a reality they have access to (Fischer, 2008; Cardoso, 2010). Consequently, this “disenchantment with wage relations” (Rangel, 2017), as identified in various studies with workers in popular commerce (Gago, 2018; Rangel, 2021; Nahoun, 2020), has made the positive valuation of autonomous and informal work more plausible. It has also led to the formation of promising

expectations, even in these stigmatized activities characterized by daily precarity and material, and often physical, insecurity.

During the debates in the CPI, the workers sought to represent themselves and formulate their criticisms based on how they perceived their situation and projected their expectations, always within the boundaries of what they deemed plausible and suitable for the audience they sought to persuade. In the tension between the perceptions and experiences of the traders and the representation of these workers that existed in the imagination and normative repertoire of the council commission, two images of the popular commerce worker were presented, strained, and even merged: the image of the poor worker struggling to make a living in the city, a common representation associated with popular commerce, and the figure of the microentrepreneur, the formalized, self-employed trader that the entrepreneurial management model seeks to promote.

The first image can be illustrated by the following statement from Councilman Camilo Cristóforo:

[...] from the appearance of the people here, it is clear that nobody has become rich and is getting rich from the Fair. You have the face of good people, hardworking, Brazilians. [...] it is written on your face the wrinkles of work, of everyday life, as Alex said, of being beaten by the police on the sidewalk, of going through humiliation. (Councilman Camilo Cristóforo – stenographic notes from the CPI, 6/6/2017)

The simple attire of the traders present at the sessions and their sun-worn faces confirmed the image that the councilman had of the informal traders. It is the hegemonic representation of the street vendor: a poor worker engaged in a less dignified occupation, and in frequent tension with law enforcement. This representation of the informal trade is influenced by a conception that primarily identifies this work as a survival strategy, also operating with a normative notion of the place of formal employment in Brazil as an object of desire for those outside regulated wage relations. Undoubtedly, a large portion of workers in popular commerce in Brazil is subject to the situations mentioned by the councilman, both in terms of the urgency of making ends meet and the daily subjection to all kinds of violence and humiliations.

The traders present and most actively engaged in the sessions were those most negatively affected by the consortium's actions and who faced the imminent risk of losing their workspaces due to being unable to afford the costs of the contract. It is no coincidence that those who took the microphone denounced what they perceived as unjust reinforced the image of precariousness in this line of work.

[...] I sold five reais today, Mr. President, Mr. Chairman. I have a 16-year-old daughter to raise, and I have debts to pay. (Maria de Jesus Vieira, trader at Feira da Madrugada – stenographic notes from the CPI, 8/8/2017)

I just turned 60 years old. I have a grandchild to raise. Where am I supposed to work now if they're going to demolish my stall? Should I sleep inside the stall?

The situation at that market is precarious. (Luciene, trader at Feira – stenographic notes from the CPI, 29/8/2017)

I'm 68 years old, tired of being humiliated. [...] he [referring to one of the consortium members] talked about cost-benefit. And what about us? It's cost-sacrifice for us. We are being sacrificed by those who did nothing, didn't pay anything, and are exploiting us. It's the contract, it's the monthly fee, no one has money for anything anymore. (Petrônio, trader at Feira – stenographic notes from the CPI, 5/9/2017)

The exposition of these situations found empathy among the council members who identified the fair as a survival space for workers excluded from the formal job market. However, in other expressions, distinct features of experiences and perceptions regarding work in popular commerce were highlighted, showcasing heterogeneity in how to experience the limits and possibilities of making a living in these markets, which allows for a complexification of the hegemonic image of these workers.

Do you think I want to work on the street or at a stall for my whole life? I want progress in my life. I want the best. I don't want the minimum. I'm not fighting here for the minimum. I'm fighting for the maximum. I'm fighting so I can go to a good steakhouse. I'm fighting so I can buy a good car. I'm fighting so I can buy a nice apartment. I'm fighting so I can buy a good country house. [...] To progress, because if the Feira didn't bring progress, there wouldn't be anyone here. The consortium wouldn't be behind us. The Feira brought progress. The Feira provided all this for us, a good car, a nice country house, a good apartment, a good

restaurant. It gave us all of that. (Fábio Ribeiro, trader at Feirinha – stenographic notes of the CPI, 31/10/2017)

This statement demonstrates both expectations of future mobility that are not simply driven by necessity and urgency, as well as records an objective and personal experience in this work that supports this expectation. An experience that speaks of a "good country house, a good apartment, a good restaurant" and, therefore, is very different from the one projected by the image of subsistence activity.

Recent research on popular economies in Brazil has documented these changes in the profile of traders, related to income, education, working conditions, and also in terms of the expectations they create about the possibilities offered by the activity (Kopper, 2015; Nahoum, 2020; Fonseca, 2021; Penteadó and Cruz Júnior, 2020). In the study I conducted with the workers of Feirinha (Rangel, 2019), the perception that the economic and social mobility possibilities offered by work in these markets were more promising than those identified in formal employment that appeared in their "space of possibilities" (Bourdieu, 2012) was common. Others, even with higher education degrees, had left positions in the formal job market to take their chances with the possibility of achieving better economic situations through self-employment in popular commerce.

In a way, this change in objective experiences and perceptions about the possibilities found in this work has also been reflected in the categories of recognition for these workers. Even among those who were there reporting the difficulties and

precariousness of their daily lives, being the most affected by the business management of commerce, elements of the transformation of work in popular commerce were evident. In the accounts of these traders, along with the narrative of necessity and precarity, there often emerged information about owning multiple commercial spots, having employees, and many of them referred to themselves as business owners, microentrepreneurs, or entrepreneurs. I highlight these elements not to expose supposed contradictions between the hardships reported and the objective aspects that, in theory, would attenuate the public recognition of this suffering. On the contrary, the intention is to observe and reflect on the categories of identification that point to different perceptions than those represented by the terms "ambulantes" (street vendors) or "camelôs" (hawkers), understanding also that the possibility of developing these categories is associated with objective changes in work experiences.

I was in the place working, and the right, I think it was mine. Mine and my family's who were working, to maintain our business and our employee. (Alex Cabral, trader at Feira da Madrugada – stenographic notes of the CPI, 27/6/2017)

[Regarding the profile of the traders] *I would say that the vast majority are producers, people who work in garment manufacturing, they gather with their spouses, children, and buy fabric, put it together; and some, the minority in my view, are people who buy from importers, who bring in finished materials, but the vast majority*

are people who have their own small garment manufacturing business, true microentrepreneurs. (Daniel Ferrer Filho, trader at Feira – stenographic notes of the CPI, 8/8/2017)

In these two excerpts, the figure of the self-employed worker, the family labor, and the microentrepreneur who employs workers are mixed. The situation of this microentrepreneur worker can be interpreted as an attempt to emulate the functioning of the formal labor market in popular commerce, reproducing a relationship of exploitation between the "vendor-owner" and the "vendor-employee" (Durães, 2013). However, this fusion between the figure of the worker engaged in their daily work and that of the microentrepreneur points to a new moment of redefinition of forms of recognition in this work that cannot be reduced to a mere imitation of the wage labor world.

On the one hand, it can be considered that the conversion of the street vendor into a microentrepreneur is an effect of the contemporary process of the expansion of "neoliberal rationality" (Dardot; Laval, 2016), which universalizes the individual responsibility of individuals to ensure their own living conditions. In this sense, it can be interpreted as a blurring of the boundaries between the worker and the entrepreneur, obscuring relations of economic subordination. On the other hand, if we think of categories of identification not as abstract concepts endowed with theoretical and historical grounding but as "intervals of meaning delineated by the boundaries of plausibility" (Feltran, 2014, p. 3), whose uses are produced in the relationship between

experience and language, it seems important to reflect on these forms of identification and self-recognition beyond what appears as a reflection of the ideological narrative of the post-Fordist world. To do so, it is essential to observe the contextual situations and concrete experiences that give plausibility to the use and redefinition of categories of recognition.

As mentioned, work in major urban centers of popular commerce has currently shown itself to be a means of livelihood different from the historically constructed image of the street vendor confined to a subsistence economy. These changes make it plausible for individuals to construct alternative forms of recognition in this work, which challenges the use of stigmatized categories such as "camelô" or "ambulante". Thus, categories of recognition such as "microempreendedor" (microentrepreneur), "comerciante" (trader), or even "empresario" (business owners) better communicate, in the subjects' conception, the reality they experience. The coherence in the pragmatic use of these categories is established not only through language inscribed in formal records – as formality tends to be experienced by the population in plural and concrete forms, such as "papers," identifiable records (Guyer, 1997) – but also through the possibility of elaborating and positively recognizing a social contribution of the work performed.

For us, it doesn't matter who will administer. What matters is that it provides us with the opportunity to work, support our families, maintain our microenterprises, and keep those workers who work in the business (Alex Cabral, trader at the Feira, stenographic notes of the CPI, 6/6/2017).

There are four thousand people here. My stall is me, plus my son, plus four children, my wife. I have a workshop that works for me, two workshops, each one supporting a child as well, and I'm talking about my stall alone. How many lives, how much food does my stall alone generate? (Fábio Ribeiro, trader at the Feira – stenographic notes of the CPI, 31/10/2017)

No longer just about individual survival, but the affirmation of a social contribution through their economic activity, now identified as a microenterprise. It is the worker transformed into an entrepreneur of oneself, but not only that. The way it appears in the traders' speech, this merging does not hide the condition of being a worker under that of an entrepreneur, losing sight of the precariousness of life. We have not only the category of worker, but also that of entrepreneur (or business owner), being redefined in this process. Instead of mere ideological persuasion, there is a fusion of categories that indicates the specificity of this way of working in relation to the classical image of the street vendor. Microentrepreneur comes to refer to the condition of those who no longer identify with the common image of the street vendor in a precarious situation, on the streets and sidewalks, and who resent being unable to integrate into the job market. It is mobilized as a category of recognition for those who, even with possible institutionalization through the legal figure of the microentrepreneur, continue to shape their experience as workers struggling to make a living in a popular trade market, but one that can no longer be reduced

to the economic activity of the excluded. In the pragmatism of everyday popular life, worker and microentrepreneur, both redefined categories, often appear as synonyms.

Conclusions

At the end of the CPI, it was argued that despite the defaults, the administration of the fair was still profitable, and therefore, the consortium was warned and instructed to facilitate the payment of the traders' debts. On the other hand, although various irregularities in the practices of the administrator were recognized, the most serious allegations, which could lead to the revocation of the concession, were deemed unsubstantiated due to "lack of objective evidence." In its conclusion, the report also highlighted the importance of the concession and the role of this business model in the development of the region, despite the identified problems, perceived merely as "bureaucratic obstacles."

Since bureaucratic obstacles, which we observed throughout the proceedings, have now been resolved and overcome, with progress being made, the investment in the popular shopping mall – Circuito das Compras will provide convenience to users, security to workers, stimulate the economy, and revitalize the space, which until now has been underutilized and lacking infrastructure, contrary to the economic development of the region. (Final Report of the CPI)

As a moment of dispute between traders and investors, the CPI hearings revealed the prevalence of the entrepreneurial discourse, which shapes policies targeting popular commerce spaces and even the categories of recognition of the workers - aligned with the semantic field of entrepreneurship. There is a reconfiguration of popular markets, which, from spaces of precariousness, are transformed into frontiers of accumulation. The context of the disputes in the CPI highlights the construction of a political and economic arrangement that makes it more difficult for low-income workers to participate in this "modern" market model. As a result, the redefinition of street vendors as entrepreneurs paves the way for a "gentrification of work" in popular commerce, leading to the displacement of the poorest workers from the best spaces in this market (Rangel, 2019; 2021).

At the same time, the discourses of the workers present in the CPI hearings demonstrate the operation of recognition categories that, despite being produced and disseminated within the neoliberal semantic field and entrepreneurial logic, are reconfigured in concrete experiences. Considering the way in which the identities of worker and microentrepreneur are intertwined and recombined in the subjects' elaboration, taking into account their objective contexts and symbolic horizons, allows us to avoid a miserabilist interpretation of work in urban popular commerce without falling into the romanticization propagated by the entrepreneurial narrative. It is an analytical effort necessary both to understand the complex modes of expansion of existing neoliberalism and to identify the meanings and strategies of the disputes surrounding the possibilities for the reproduction of life in the city.

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Notes

- (1) The development of this paper was supported by the São Paulo Research Foundation (processes 2015/12742-7 and 2023/04838-0) and the Urban Studies Foundation, through the International Fellowship Award code USF-INT-210808
- (2) The very terms trader or merchant ("comerciante" in Portuguese), used in this text to refer to workers in popular commerce, symbolize the ongoing change in this realm, as it becomes a widely recognized category embraced by the individuals themselves, who were previously identified by terms such as "camelô," which is equivalent to hawker.
- (3) Currently, the name "Feira da Madrugada" has been more commonly used to refer to the nighttime commerce that takes place on the streets of the Brás and Pari neighborhoods almost daily. However, this text focuses on discussing the case of the Feira da Madrugada that operated in the Pari Courtyard, which was the origin of the popularization of the term and the dynamism of the nighttime commerce in Brás, and which was demolished to make way for the construction of a popular shopping mall.
- (4) In the year 2019, according to a survey released by the Association of Merchants of Brás (Alobrás), local commerce achieved an estimated revenue of R\$20 billion (approximately 4 billion dollars).
- (5) The citation refers to information presented in the account of the formation of the Feirinha da Madrugada, as presented by Eduardo Odloak on his personal blog.
- (6) The administration of the Brás district also falls under the responsibility of the Mooca sub-mayor's office.
- (7) From now on, references to this space will be made using the shorter and more commonly used term by workers and visitors: "Feirinha"; which is the diminutive form of "feira" (fair).
- (8) The project consists of the construction of a set of facilities and services that would boost shopping tourism in the city center, connecting its main commercial hubs: Brás, Bom Retiro, Santa Ifigênia, and 25 de Março. The planning includes the creation of parking lots for charter buses, support centers, buses for transporting shoppers and their luggage between the commercial hubs, and the expansion of the hotel network.
- (9) Magaldi (2022), based on a study on distributive justice among commercial workers, discusses how the establishment of criteria for justice in situations of inequality cannot be seen merely as imposition, as they are produced through processes of justification that are legitimized even by those who may be harmed by their implementation.
- (10) According to the councilors and as stated in the Final Report of the CPI, the bidding process for the concession of the Feirinha space was already foreseen in the transfer agreement of the land's custody from the Union to the São Paulo City Hall.
- (11) Often, as he did in the CPI and in various interviews, Tergilene tells the story of how he started his life selling manure until he became a successful entrepreneur, in order to legitimize his discourse promoting popular entrepreneurship: "My first job was selling manure; then I started selling firewood, selling milk, and then I became a metalworker in a favela in Belo Horizonte. [...] And the company grew. Along this journey, I started buying properties and renting them because I always had a fear of running out of money again. So, since I didn't study, I started building my reserves and my retirement through real estate." (Elias Tergilene, CPI shorthand notes)

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Received: October 6, 2022
Approved: February 25, 2023

