

Cultural Dynamics within a Structural-historical Framework – the Cedejor Case

Autoria: André Ofenhejm Mascarenhas, Flávio Carvalho de Vasconcelos

Abstract: Early organizational culture studies were influenced by theoretical approaches assuming culture as contextual constraint on thought and behavior. Recent theoretical developments place emphasis on the production and reproduction of culture: practice-oriented approaches would complement the earlier focus, this being a tendency to incorporate praxis, interaction, event, agency and other concepts into theoretical models. Although a pioneer in the practice-oriented approach, Marshall Sahlins' structural-historical anthropology has deserved no more than a few quotes within Organization Studies. Drawing on linguistics, Sahlins' ideas constitute a general theory of change in meanings and language, a framework for analyzing the evolution of organizational key symbols and concepts as resulting from interested actions of individuals. In this article we suggest the relevance of Sahlins' anthropology to our understanding of organizations through the analysis of the Cedejor Case – an NGO in south Brazil –, empirical findings drawing on a historical and ethnographical research. Some research opportunities are outlined: a criticism to traditional concepts of culture and the strategic value of sahlinian concepts for understanding culture dynamics, implying longitudinal and historical studies of how cultures overlap and evolve.

Within Organization Studies, culture has been traditionally conceived as a constraining and enduring force, a well-defined system of meanings or values, shared or not totally shared within and between organizational groups, organizations, fields or countries, depending on the perspective assumed and level of analysis. As contextual constraint on thought and behavior, culture studies were influenced by theoretical approaches leading to the devaluation of the dynamic dimension of the concept. Among the critics of these approaches, Hatch (2004) suggests that few of these studies explore diachrony. More recently, however, criticism to traditional culture approaches to organizations suggested the reevaluation of prior academic enterprise through the redefinition of the concept. This criticism mirrored major advances in social theory, suggesting the focus on culture as contextual constraint to be shifted, giving the concept new horizons, eventually leading to the valuation of the concept's dynamic dimension. Theoretical developments since the eighties do not deny culture (or system, or structure) as a constraining force shaping behavior, but rather place emphasis on the production and reproduction of culture, these being a necessary complement to the earlier focus. Ortner (1984) delineates a practice-oriented approach, a tendency to incorporate praxis, action, interaction, activity, experience, agency, the individual and other concepts into theoretical models in sociology, anthropology, linguistics and other fields (SCHATZKI, CETINA, SAVIGNY, 2001). This approach has already reached Organization Theory and other sub-fields of management, in spite of some delay. However, along this process of theoretical appropriation, Marshall Sahlins' ideas, a pioneer in the practice-oriented approach, have deserved no more than a few quotes or mentions (according to a comprehensive review of the literature carried out by the authors on the subjects of organizational culture, organizational learning and cultural change). As drawing on linguistics, Sahlins' ideas constitute a general theory of change in meanings and language, a useful framework for analyzing the evolution of organizational key symbols and concepts as resulting from interested actions of individuals. We suggest the relevance of considering Sahlins' anthropology to our understanding of organizations. Sahlins' structural-historical anthropology is essentially a processual view of culture, integrating the emphasis of interpretive anthropology in meaning to this latter tendency in social theory, highlighting the action of individuals upon the world (DUPUIS, 1996). The author's proposals gave us essential material to debate central tensions in social

theory, in special, the diachrony versus synchrony issue (or the difficulties of integrating continuity to change in social-anthropological theories) (SCHWARCZ, 2001; ORTNER, 1984). In this article, I draw on empirical data to delineate some fundamental opportunities brought up by Sahlins' structural-historical proposals to organizational culture studies. This paper is organized as follows: in the next section, we suggest the relevance of adopting a historical, processual perspective for investigating culture dynamics, outlining the most important aspects of structural-historical framework. Historical and ethnographical research findings in Cedejor – an educational NGO located in rural communities in south of Brazil – are then presented. In the last section we analyze the empirical findings suggesting two essential implications of incorporating Sahlins' proposals into the study of organizational culture: (1) the criticism to what is considered pivotal to the concept of culture by traditional theoretical schools, (2) the strategic relevance of Sahlins' general theory of culture dynamics, of which the notions of *structure of conjuncture* and *functional revaluation of the sign* are central.

Culture dynamics within a structural-historical framework

The issues concerning structural-historical anthropology were articulated at the end of the introduction to Sahlins' *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*: “*the great challenge to an historical anthropology is not merely to know how the events are ordered by culture, but how, in that process, culture is reordered. How does the reproduction of a structure become its transformation?*” (SAHLINS, 1981, p. 8). Sahlins (1981) criticizes the incorporation of structural analysis to anthropology, as originally proposed by Saussure's linguistics (SAUSSURE, 1966) and later adapted to anthropology by Lévi-Strauss (1970) and others. Sahlins (1990) uses the concept of “system” as originally proposed by Saussure (1996) as a starting point, reformulating the idea of structure, which is typical of synchronic analyses, using it to build studies that emphasize diachrony and individual action to cultural dynamics (SCHWARCZ, 2001). In the system, the sign has its conceptual value determined arbitrarily by contrasts to other coexistent signs. Hence, “green” would have its conceptual value assigned by means of its contrast with “blue”. However, while Saussure (1996) suggested the system to be analyzed as an autonomous, collective phenomenon that transcends individual implementation, Sahlins assumes it as a historical object. The quotidian use of language presents the signs as heterogeneous objects, subject to deliberations and utilizations other than the system's contrasting relations. Sahlins emphasizes the use of language in human discourse, since history is made at the level of speech, or yet, of the individuals' action projects. His framework can be presented in terms of two fundamental assertions, merging culture continuity and change. Firstly, the author invokes a long anthropological tradition, according to which “the seeing eye is the organ of tradition”. Symbolic action consists in the apprehension of objects or events from reality in terms of cultural concepts that a priori compose a structure or a system, in a way to turn the object or event intelligible and transmissible to other individuals. It can yet be said the structure is a historical object, due to the fact that signs are arbitrary conceptual categories or classes, not bound to particular referents, being real things contextually more particular and potentially more general than signs. According to Sahlins, the arbitrariness of the signs can be related to the risks associated to its meanings, when these are put into practice. This is the author's second assertion: the distinctive role of the signs in human action would need to be recognized, as opposed to its position in the cultural scheme. In the course of people's lives, they use the signs in reference to the objects of their actions and personal projects, this way acquiring particular contextual values. The signs assume new values within people's discourse, a phenomenon named *functional revaluation of the signs*. In cultural practice, meanings are exposed to a doubly dangerous risk. Objectively, it can be said the signs are polysemic, as virtual and in society

they have various possible meanings. In a real and specific context, a sign is valorized in a selected sense, to the detriment of others. When using a sign as reference, individuals explicit just a small part of its collective sense (as comprised in the synchronic system), which depends on the context's influences, the difference among individuals' social experiences and their interests. In a subjective manner, it can be said that historic subjects revise the signs in accordance to their own personal projects, suggesting the signs specific functional values. The revaluation of signs depends on how individuals engage them as interests. According to Sahlins (2001, p.141), 'interest' and 'meaning' are two sides of the same coin. Meaning is about the value of the sign within the symbolic system, that is, in contrast to other signs. At the same time, interest is about the instrumental value of the sign by individuals, according to their life schemes. This way, signs are susceptible to analyses and recombination from which unpredictable meanings emerge, imposing the subjects contradictions that may or may not be incorporated to the cultural system. In speech, people relate the signs to objects of their projects, which are the context for discourse as social activity. In this sense, although the instrumental value is derived from the conceptual value, the sign, while interest, shall have a role in an ordered scheme of means and ends. In a process of functional revaluation, the prominence of the conceptual value of the sign selected by the historic subject(s) may contribute to some kind of inflexion of its value as defined by the structure or meaningful system. This way, functional revaluation of the signs may generate cultural innovations, as individuals or groups can use their power or social ability to objectify their interpretations, elaborating new social consensuses. The "new" meaning given to the sign may alter the traditional contrasts of reciprocal delimitations with other signs, or the meaningful order. When building this argument in favor of the inseparability of cultural reproduction and transformation, the concept of *structure of conjuncture* is useful to comprehend cultural change. What Sahlins means by *structure of conjuncture* is the "practical realization of the cultural categories in a specific historical context, as expressed in the interested action of the historic agents, including the micro sociology of their interaction" (SAHLINS, 1990, p. 15). In the coming sections we present an ethnographic and historical interpretation of the events within a certain structure of conjuncture.

Sites and methods

This article analyzes an experience of induced social change, the 'Cedejor' project, or the 'Center of Development of the Rural Youth', with facilities in the city of Rio Pardo, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, a region historically dependent on the tobacco monoculture. Cedejor is a project that aims to foster local development by means of young people, who are to be protagonists of social innovations promoted in the ambit of educational processes that are complementary to regular education. By introducing changes by means of diversification of the families' productive activities, the intent of the project would be to multiply the people's personal experiences, this way promoting the groups' learning process and leading them to the reformulation of their symbolic schemes in such a way coherent with new action strategies, among which are entrepreneurship and cooperation. Among the NGO's goals is developing social and human capital in the context of initiatives to raise the attractiveness of the territory to its residents, stimulating the permanence of new generations, reducing migrations. The following analysis is part of an ample ongoing historical and ethnographic research (SAHLINS, 1992; SAHLINS, 2004). After short exploratory visits in 2003 and 2004, the first phase of field research required the integral insertion of the researcher in the field for four months, divided into two periods: three months between April and June 2005 and one month between May and June 2006. Based on a broad research question aiming to map the impacts of Cedejor project in the region, the researcher working under a structural-historical framework was to analyze data in order to inductively apprehend

culture (synchrony), or the established cultural concepts and their relations being relevant to individuals, and still, being reformulated as a consequence of the events being experienced by those individuals (diachrony). With this double and simultaneous focus (synchrony and diachrony), historical research techniques as well as ethnographic techniques were applied, requiring not only direct and participative observation (so that, based on latter applied analytical procedures, the researcher could infer relevant established cultural concepts, based on experiences and interpreted contingent events, as well as delineate the dynamic interplay of synchrony and diachrony), but also archive research and retrospective interviews (so that, based on latter applied analytical procedures, the researcher could build his understanding of cultural categories and the complex interrelations of past relevant events culminating in concepts being reformulated). During the periods in the field, the procedures of data collection generated approximately 400 pages of field notes, selected 150 hours of audio files, several kilos of physical files (such as administrative documents, pedagogical reports and photos, as well as electronic files). Interviews were selected and partially transcribed (more than 50 interviews were made, which lasted from 30 minutes to 6 hours each). The research process developed as the researcher progressively identified and interpreted relevant local meanings and their relations, searching also for cultural ambivalence within events of interested use of signs (*functional revaluation of signs*), as well as for conceptual value inflections and its boundaries. With the research material collected, successive coding phases of process data allowed for reconstructing the history of the project implementation (LANGLEY, 1999). Based on a holistic interpretation the researcher built while in the field, this analytical process developed towards greater detailed accounts in sub-research-products discussed and improved with the help of several informants identified. The periods in between data collection were used to refine understandings with the help of informants. The final ethnographic and historical report assumes the format of a realistic narrative (VAN MAANEN, 1988), strategy for presenting process data that maximizes accuracy (WEICK, 1989; LANGLEY, 1999).

Gaúchos from Rio Pardo Valley

Crisis in agriculture, the dependency of tobacco monoculture, individuals in debt with tobacco dealers and the efforts for diversification of rural production in the municipality of Rio Pardo characterized the structure of the conjuncture we were to investigate. Albardão is a rural community with about 4.000 inhabitants located 20 kilometers away from the city center through precarious roads, and 170 kilometers from Porto Alegre, the capital of the State. Public infrastructure is also precarious, communication through fixed telephones is not available, cellular phones are very expensive and Internet was introduced in the region with the arrival of Cedejor. As well as its neighbor districts, Albardão had gone through an economic *boom* due to the introduction of tobacco culture, especially after 1970, with the internationalization of this sector. With the arrival of the large tobacco dealers, the *colonos* adhered to the 'integrated production system', learning how to plant tobacco of the Virginia type, whose know-how was introduced by the multinational companies. The *colonos* are agriculturists that involve their family as work force, in primary activities developed in their own properties, small or medium-sized (VOGT, 1997). Most of the rural producers in the region can be classified like that. According to the integrated production system, the *colonos* can raise capital to invest in their properties, agreeing to deliver an amount of tobacco every year that will be integrally purchased by the dealers. The risks involved include the impossibility of producing according to the expectations of the dealers (problems in the culture, bad weather, etc, leading to debts, additional quantity of tobacco expected for the next harvest, often leading to vicious cycle of dependence on the contract), the lack of money to sustain the family during the year, as payments are done once or twice a year, serious health

problems due to the usage of chemicals in the production and, finally, the possibility of having the tobacco produced under classified by the dealers, who then pay less for the *fardo*, or the unit of tobacco traded. Despite the general involvement with tobacco production (their subsistence activities are proportionally of little significance), this activity is nowadays viewed as hardly promising. The number of families adhered to the system has risen very much and the prices paid by the tobacco dealers would have diminished in the last few years, causing a lot of dissatisfaction and further debts. Besides that, perspectives brought by the recent ratification of the Convention on Tobacco Control in Brazil, an international arrangement led by UN, caused commotion in the region. The ratification was approved by the Senate, but a plan for the substitution of tobacco culture in the region was promised, causing skepticism among local leaders and colonos. These facts reinforced the growing awareness of the need to diversify the productive activities. However, tobacco production is still considered the only safe occupation by the colonos, whose small properties don't generate scale of production when used for other traditional cultures in the region, such as rice and soia. Therefore, colonos find themselves in a 'comfort zone' characterized by conformist behaviors that compose a vicious cycle: although the profitability is considered inadequate, colonos are seduced by the guaranteed income from tobacco trade and discouraged to look for new alternatives of professional insertion due to the low risk and numerous facilities offered by the dealers (including the guarantee of purchasing the production agreed). However, when dedicated years to assisted tobacco production, the colonos feel their capacity for change aggrieved and, consequently, remain in the system, despite their unhappiness.

Although exclusive dedication to tobacco monoculture is considered increasingly uninteresting, consolidated cultural meanings reinforce passive behaviors in relation to the diverse possibilities of learning and organizational development. In this context, the economic and productive perspectives of rural communities' inhabitants are also limited by difficulties related to little self-esteem, low confidence and trust, isolation, limited information and competences available and incipient collective mobilization, which are perceptions capable of reinforcing pessimist expectations about the future of new generations. Actually, insertion in the production system led by the tobacco dealers discourages continuous learning, diversification and local partnership. This happens because tobacco culture essentially requires the reception of supplies, execution of assisted technical work within the rural properties, and, as a final step, delivery of the production to the tobacco dealers, making the levels of profit imposed by the companies. As a consequence of this pattern of vertical relationships, the inhabitants of rural communities do not believe and have not developed relevant productive partnerships. On the contrary, due to the historically precarious support to the innovative initiatives of the colonos (such as an unsuccessful cooperative of processing chicken that caused unsustainable levels of debt for its partners), the families are not stimulated to cooperate (credit has always been scarce and expensive, budgets are very tight and governmental support has been minimal). Alternatively, those rural inhabitants who don't want to join the system have been historically forced to look for the few job or income-making alternatives in the localities, including the risky option of entering the local political circle (becoming a *politico*). Being successful through this last option depends on several factors, such as popularity in the communities (*being a communitarian leader*), possessing or controlling resources to sustain a political campaign and acceptance within the already established political alliances or groups. Besides these and other strategies, it is up to the families "to wait" for the articulations led by capacitated political agents, seem as the sole possessors of the necessary resources for concrete changes in the community. In practice, this stand translates itself in ambiguous stances of veneration and despise towards the political class, which is seem as intrinsically egoist, but also as the only hope for changes in their lives. In this context, life is characterized by the expectance of '*saving events, subjects or*

institutions’, capable of solving local problems, as was the case of Cedejor. Rural families have been nurturing the hope of development (constantly blaming the politicians for not acting pro the communities) without getting organized to take over an effective role in this process, which certainly requires ‘*learning for diversifying*’. In fact, as a consequence of all these difficulties, collective mobilization in the communities can be summed up in the agglutination of individuals in associations whose goals are, besides socialization and leisure, the claim of public investments and projects, which are collective in priority, to the local governmental instances, among other powerful actors and institutions, which may generate mutual gains to politicians and communities.

These conformist behaviors apply less to the new generations, which show more resistance to the reproduction of their parents’ ways of living. When realizing that exclusive occupation with tobacco monoculture is low profitable and insalubrious, many youths show less restrictions to educational opportunities and dream with ‘more interesting’ occupations. Even with those who are definitely identified with life in the rural environment, their parents’ activities seem little stimulating. This frequently impels them to seek redefinitions that include the city. Migration to the city is a long-established phenomenon in the region, and it has been associated to the pursuit for better life conditions. For a long time, youths have been facing a fundamental dilemma: either they settle in the property and, since their early years, take up responsibilities related to agriculture and taking care of their families, or move to the city, to conclude their education and find an urban job. At the present time, due to the perceptions of a growing crisis in the tobacco production, many youths have been feeling compelled to complete their education to, eventually, migrate to the city, in case they are prepared to join the labor market. In discussions with friends and families about possible alternative strategies, some important concepts are polarized. To the families, rupturing with the traditional occupations requires the conclusion of the educational cycle. Doing this, however, implies taking up jobs in the city, despite its disadvantages. On the other hand, not completing education is a common decision for those who, for diverse reasons, will implement life projects similar to their parents’. To many youths, the city would be the place where one could make a career, while life in the small properties would be intrinsically limited. To work with tobacco or as a colono, it is presumed that ‘*higher education*’ is not necessary, since the occupation would be learned in the familiar context. For those assuming this life project, the hard tasks associated to the culture of tobacco and subsistence often assume higher priority than completing high school (*ensino médio*), as life can become a constant struggle for guaranteeing decent conditions of life¹. To the colonos, the barriers to diversification certainly include the perception of few competencies available, but they go beyond that. If contrasted to the stimuli to tobacco production, the risks to diversification are always discouraging, making efforts towards qualification to be directed to the more promising opportunities in the city.

The arrival of Cedejor in Rio Pardo – RS

The foundation of the NGO Cedejor was an initiative of another NGO, Souza Cruz Institute (ISC), the social responsibility institute associated to one of Brazil’s leading players in the tobacco sector. The aim of the project was to promote the permanence of youths in the rural environment by developing their entrepreneurial skills, so that they could define and implement alternative life projects to the consolidated options in the region, this way inserting themselves in society by means of innovative initiatives, individual or collective, hence contributing to the reformulation of the local socioeconomic model. Its mission would be carried out by applying the concepts of the *pedagogy of alternância*, a French methodology that emphasizes the *alternâncias*, or the selected weeks when the youths get integrally involved in educational activities in the NGO’s facilities, complimentary to the regular

school, being assisted by monitors. The program would be structured around three axes of competencies, developed by the local staff with the support of contracted consultants and volunteers recruited in the region. The humanistic axis was to promote the increment of communication and interpersonal skills, conflict management skills, the youths' self esteem, besides themes such as sociability, diversity and ecology. The technical axis would come in second, and have the objective of developing basic technical capacities, based on which the youths could think of diversification strategies. Among other initiatives, the technical axis would promote skills on ecological agriculture and alternative cultures. These were necessary stages to the managerial axis, during which the *Capital Investment Projects* (PIC) would be elaborated. The efforts for elaborating the PIC would be the opportunity for the youths to discuss collectively their personal and professional projects, thus making a complete business plan to be evaluated by specialists. The success of the PIC would be the parameter of evaluation of the program, which would last for three years.

Cedejor began its activities with few organizational resources. The local leaders got engaged and obtained authorization to the usage of the local primary school facilities. Despite the scarceness of available competencies, it was noticed that the consolidation of the new proposals in the communities would depend on the direct involvement of respected family leaders, who would lend their credibility to the newly created program, going through a development process with the youths. A coordinator and two monitors formed the team. One of their first challenges was to recruit and select the first thirty youths to join the project. During the process, difficulties arose, making the final result unaligned with the initial criteria. The staff was apprehensive with the imminent deadline for the beginning of the program, and underestimated the necessity for more discerning structuring of the process. Hence, anybody who wanted to join the group was automatically chosen. Having difficulty to attract the youths, the staff gave emphasis to some advantages of participating. These were arguments that diverged from the original proposals but solved the contradictions that were pointed out by the families, this way guaranteeing a rapid assemblage of the group. It would be coherent to interpret the arrival of Cedejor as '*a life-changing opportunity*', what implied in considering it more of a *provider institution* than a *formative and mobilizing opportunity*. For such, the families' questionings were aimed to know about the objective advantages with the youths' participation. Doing so, they would have to delegate their responsibilities in their properties and also abdicate from other good opportunities (such as temporary jobs in the tobacco dealers). To those more inclined to migration, Cedejor' recruitment staff promised the offering of short technical courses during the two last years of the program. Most attractive, these courses included informatics, as this competence is considered scarce but highly important for competing in the urban labor market. To those less inclined to migration, Cedejor brought important perspectives given little consideration until then. If the possibility to implement an alternative business plan reinforced their interest to remain in the region, the promise of a special financing plan and technical support from Cedejor staff would make a more autonomous future viable, by overcoming the main problems that families associate to diversification. Strategically, the staff suggested these candidates that the PIC would be financed by ISC through a *fundo perdido*, (credit you don't have to pay back), or a *fundo rotativo* (credit you have to pay back in special conditions). The program was divulged by aligning its proposals to the families' needs and expectations, evidencing the potential advantages of participation, maximizing its attractiveness to the communities. However, this discourse did not relate to the original proposal. Credit would certainly be a crucial factor to the implementation of the youths' project and to the success of the program, but the financiers had not promised any money.

The pedagogic process

The complicated beginning of the program was marked by misunderstandings, arguments and even fights among the youths, who barely knew each other and did not share the same objectives to participate in the program (those more inclined *versus* those less inclined for migration, for example). With the passing of the alternâncias, it became clear that part of the youths participated in the group without the necessary commitment and discipline, giving emphasis to the opportunity of meeting and having fun with their friends. For those waiting for the short courses, for example, the humanistic axle was wasting of time, requiring no involvement. The conflicts worsened with the construction of the new Cedejor facilities in Albardão, since youths began to sleep in collective bedrooms during the alternâncias. This situation deepened conflicts between the coordinator and one of the monitors, whose pedagogic views were very divergent. The coordinator feared that the group diminished, so he covered the conflicts, satisfying the youths' desires. For him, a necessary balance between discipline and freedom was unquestionable so that the youths would not give up and leave the project. For the coordinator, it was necessary to show to the eyes of the sponsors that the group was unified and engaged with the proposals. As he hid the conflicts, for the financiers far in Rio de Janeiro indiscipline was not an issue, and the project was developing successfully. Differently, the monitor believed it was necessity to impose clear limits to them, and protested against the permissive attitudes of the coordinator. With the imposition of the coordinator's views, pedagogic activities were no longer a necessary priority, only an option among others (including soccer games and dating, this last one prohibited in the NGO's facilities), which depended on the immediate disposition of the youths and their specific interest in the content being developed. Henceforth, it became tough to keep the group unified during the activities. While part of the youths sought to work on the contents, the staff was constantly trying to attract the attention of the rest. Some youths simply did not respond to the staff's calls, not getting involved, frequently distracting the ones that aimed engaged, and disrespecting the specialists invited to give lectures. Others lamented the inexistence of 'stricter attitudes', someone able to deal with the group's relationships and guarantee respect of the 'rules of sociability' agreed by the collectivity. With time, the conflicts would shake Cedejor's credibility and the group's motivation. *'If many do not work and only mess around, why do we have to work?'* In the communities, Cedejor was nicknamed *cabaret*, due to the perception that the youths had *'too much freedom to mess around'*

The pedagogic problems reflected staff conflicts opposing divergent interests concerning the development of the program. In fact, the coordinator had promoted a *functional revaluation* of Cedejor, whose original proposal agreed with the sponsors was educational. If Cedejor was an educational opportunity capable of changing youths' lives, the project could be implanted in formats to serve other interests besides the youths' and their families', including the coordinator's political aspirations, which grew as the program gained visibility in the localities. During the last phase of the program, pedagogic challenges were no longer a priority, because the staff was intensely involved in tasks, planning and strategic negotiations related to the construction of the new Cedejor facilities in the district. After an episode of theft of computers from the primary school hall, the financiers felt the precarious facilities were insecure and waved with an investment in a new building for the program. A modern, ample facility was projected, with an informatics lab, a library, a kitchen, a dining hall, collective bedrooms and bathrooms, infrastructure capable of comfortably accommodating the thirty youths for the alternâncias. The construction of the building permitted the consolidation of an organizational model characterized by the promotion of ties with the community. The coordinator implemented this model, and it was characterized by precarious systematization of pedagogic processes and permanent assistance to the local residents. The new facilities were viewed as the best infrastructure available in the region, so it would be a waste not to let everyone benefit from it. Coherently, a youth from the program

was invited to assist the coordination and systematize the offer of various services to the community, despite the limited resources (these services included assistance using the computer, writing and printing letters and documents). These investments, as well as the organizational model implemented in Cedejor, attracted the residents' and the local government's attention for bringing new development possibilities for the region. As a recognition act, ISC also allotted (long-awaited) resources for improvements in the school building, conceded by the community for a period of two years. Projects for the building of a poly sports complex next to Cedejor, and also for a residential / commercial condominium in front of the new building were discussed and articulated with the close involvement of the coordinator and his supporters. To the residents, these expectations added to the financing promises suggesting a new economic *boom*, after so many years of economic paralysis and dependency. Although the economic *boom* did not happen, the actions levered up the coordinator's career, who declined a job proposal for municipal secretary of agriculture short before the mayor was withdrawn due to an impeachment process.

The last phases of the project were problematic. The sponsors would consider the elaboration, approval and implantation of the projects as parameters for evaluating the program's effectiveness. However, during the *alternâncias*, it was clear that these goals would not be achieved. Actually, Souza Cruz Institute assumed this criterion, but the basic competences required had not been sufficiently developed. The staff did not assume the complexity associated to PIC, which should have been the result of a long collective discussion on the necessary personal engagement for the youths' professional projects. During the precarious debate, if the original disinterest of some was explicitly revealed as they avoided the team's callings (those more inclined for migration, interested in the courses that had actually been offered), the others were not really conscious of the complexity and difficulties associated to this challenge. Effectively, the youths had not written any project until much late in the process, while the pedagogic work became progressively more difficult due to the complex demands of the construction of the new facilities. Hoping to be financed, part of the group was frustrated as they could not elaborate their business plans. The refusal of some youths in elaborating them may be related to the frustration with the promises. During the last *alternâncias*, talking to the youths about the project was a grievous task, since there had been no debate which could clarify expectations and mobilize the youths to decisions. The youths started to demand on the promises that were made when they were recruited. Until that moment, however, there had been no concrete possibility of financing. The team suggested alternatives such as the Pronaf (an innovative and newly-released federal governmental program for financing familiar agriculture), which seemed little appropriate to the youths' expectations. Consequently, the last *alternâncias* were characterized by apathy, frustration and riot. This situation was, in fact, threatening to the organization, since the evaluation of the program based on the youths' proposals was imminent, and the staff competences were about to be checked. Finally, the pressure for results made the staff adopt some dishonest strategies. Some youths were asked in secrecy to help the others. The pact suggested that those who were uninterested or unprepared to the elaboration of projects would be replaced by the monitors or other youths, so that their projects would be delivered in time. According to the staff, the projects could be prepared with no obligation of implementing them; they only needed to be delivered for evaluation. At the end of the program, the projects were delivered in time, though many of them had not been written by their authors. The credibility of Cedejor among families reached minimum levels. Some parents suggested that their siblings wasted time in Cedejor and the project was '*too good to be true*'. Simultaneously, the image of the coordinator in the localities was controversial, due to the conflicts and frustrations, but he was a natural candidate to join the political alliances, as there was no former-colono in the region that controlled so many resources. By promoting his

version of an organizational model, the coordinator underestimated the original pedagogic objectives, causing riot among families, hopeful in making feasible the 'change' in their lives. Late in the elaboration of the projects, the staff found themselves unprepared, and the youths, disoriented. In practice, the pact proposed was not well received in a way that, at that moment, the contradictions of the program became clear. Contrarily to their expectations, the youths did not have news from Cedejor anymore, after the program was over. A large part of the projects, hastily elaborated, was abandoned and lost in the building. Frustrated, the youths engaged in the opportunity could not further develop their project, since the staff had been replaced and was involved in the implementation of the pedagogical process with the newly-selected second group of youths. The functional reevaluation of Cedejor promoted by the coordination is summarized in the table below:

FUNCTIONAL REVALUATION OF CEDEJOR - 1	
Promoter	Coordinator of Cedejor
Original meanings attributed to Cedejor	<i>"Cedejor as an opportunity for empowering the youth"</i> : an educational opportunity for the local youth; the development of entrepreneurship competences for diversification of economic activities; the implementation of a program made up of three axles of knowledge leading to the elaboration and implementation of a business plan. A development opportunity for local leaders. An opportunity for communitarian mobilization and aggregation.
Alternative meanings selected and imposed by the coordinator	<i>"Cedejor should be closer to the community"</i> : a development opportunity for the community with emphasis on leveraging further local investments through alliances with capacitated social actors, including local investors and governmental instances. An opportunity for creating visibility in the community through basic but important services offered by Cedejor in the most modern facilities available in the region.
Interests involved	The investments the coordinator attracted to the region could leverage his visibility in the community, making possible his insertion in the local political scene. Investments made by the sponsors raised the prices of cheap-land and raised the possibility of further economic advantages.
Unforeseen consequences attributed to the process	Youth who were interested in the original proposal of the program felt betrayed by the staff, which abandoned pedagogic goals due to their involvement in the negotiation and implementation of the new facilities. With the dishonest proposals, contradictions were clear as the youth realized the group was not capacitated to elaborate and implement their business plans.

Actually, we cannot ignore these unpredictable effects emerging from different and conflicting views of a proper organizational model. If the former coordination often praised the *'great social project, the development of collective mobilization, the education for the future'*, these words sounded paradoxical to the majority, who left the process frustrated. As a youth expressed during the "meeting with the egresses":

"My project was all dandy, and people told me it was not approved. Then he [the monitor] came back and told me I had to do some changes, put some pressure on me and sent me back. I didn't understand a thing. Then, one day, somebody called me and told me I had received a certificate, and the project was approved... I found it weird but, I don't know,

everyone receives a certificate. Then I said 'well I'll go there anyway'". [...] I arrived and all the staff was there. Then, they gave me the certificate. Then I started reading it, and lots of things were missing. The project wasn't finished; it had not been approved... And there it was written 'Project approved', in six lines. I asked, 'what? This is in the certificate?'. All the projects were there, approved, all of them".

As the conflicts were finally revealed and the coordinator was dismissed, the egressed youths were called by the new staff to express their grieves with the disastrous ending of the program. As Cedejor had been apprehended as a provider institution, which would make changes in youths' lives viable by mean of financing PICs or offering short technical courses, these expectations were partially frustrated with the program's failure. To the eyes of the community, the lack of credit as promised made the program uninteresting (*'So, when you speak about Cedejor, at least in the area I live, people go like, 'it's not worth it because, you see, you spent three years there...'*). However, the incoherencies or contradictions that surfaced to the eyes of youths interested in developing alternative activities in the rural zone undermined the validity of these local cultural interpretations. Though the perspective of obtaining financing was a crucial reason to the involvement in the project, some youths seemed to clearly think that the process would not come about due to the way it was being conducted. During the 'meeting with the egressed', the new Cedejor staff introduced themselves and listened to the experiences and future plans of youths, those more inclined to remain in the rural area, who indicated the contradictions felt and strived reintegration to the program. In reaction to the perceived contradictions, the "meeting of the egresses" was characterized by the association, by these youths, of other dimensions to the meaning of Cedejor, emphasizing the opportunity of personal and social development, requiring the group's interaction and engagement. Committed to the realization of their goals, youths and families should reconsider the opportunity based on their new experiences, which suggested the necessity of aggregating new meanings to the traditional local interpretations. The following table suggests this extension of meanings promoted by the youth by aggregating to the original interpretations associated to Cedejor (*'you would earn money to put your project into practice'*) the new perceptions of the youths interested in alternative projects of lives in the rural area (*'nowadays I am unable to say 'no' to people, I know how to do things, I used to deal with people in a different manner'*). The quotations are attributed to kids speaking in the meeting. Actually, not all youths showed up, since some of them said they were too frustrated to believe that the meeting would result in something.

FUNCTIONAL REVALUATION OF CEDEJOR - 2	
Promoters	Kids interested in developing alternative economic activities in the region
Original meanings attributed to Cedejor	"Cedejor as a provider institution that would make viable alternative life projects in the rural area": a provider institution which would make alternative economic activities possible due to the financing opportunities and technical assistance (<i>"One thing that distressed me, and not only me, I think, was... We had hopes, since the beginning, of, how should I explain... to assemble the project and go through an evaluation with your project. So, they said we would earn money to put our projects in practice, but this never happened. In the end, many things changed, and they did not say anything to us"</i>). Cedejor was also an opportunity to make friends, to leave the isolation of their rural properties and build new life perspectives outside the "integrated production system". An opportunity to have their

	projects implemented and assisted by the local staff. A risky bet, as youths would have to leave their responsibilities in their properties as well as other temporary job opportunities in the tobacco sector.
Extension of meanings promoted by the youth.	"Cedejor was not a 'promise' of a better life" ("It was too good to be true anyway"): Cedejor should be understood as an opportunity for personal and collective development through building the diverse competences necessary to the achievement of the youths' goals ("My God, I did not waste time here, I learned a lot. I learned a lot of good things to help people, in my daily life, as a human person, you know?"). Raising capital for projects depended on participation in the program allowed for the creation of affective ties and trust among youths ("We came here, learned a lot of things, we made strong friendships inside here..."). The new perceptions put emphasis in the necessity of personal engagement ("The guy needed to at least make an effort to be present, right?"), the importance of cooperation ("they never asked 'do you need help, I am here to help', you know?"), building know-how and knowledge ("couldn't tell a lettuce apart from a cabbage."), leadership ("Because when we go to the House, even when we did not want, Adair was there to say 'c'mon let's do it'. We went to the bathroom and he came after us and said 'what are you doing there, let's go back to work'"), negotiation and consensus building ("They said they were right because they were 'always' right. They did not take time to hear explanations, to talk to us, they were always bossy, you know"), union and mobilization ("In the beginning, the entire group was dedicated, in the first alternâncias, everyone was there, it was a beautiful thing to see").
Interests involved	Youths were interested in further developing their business plans, allowing alternative professional future in the rural area. They were frustrated along the development of their educational program and strived reintegration in the new structure, as a new, more professional staff had been hired.

Case analysis and research implications

Structural-historical proposals allow us to question what authors aligned to traditional perspectives on organizational culture consider essential to the concept. If considering ambiguity as inherent to the concept of culture were a major issue debated by these researchers (see MARTIN, 2002, for example), Sahlins' proposals assume the centrality of ambiguity, contradictions and interests, which would be embedded in cultural dynamics. Moreover, culture is to be considered not only contextual constraint on thought and behavior (as in Sahlins' assertion number 1), but also a pragmatic resource deployed by individuals and groups (as in Sahlins' assertion number 2), being constitutive of evolving social practices. According to Sahlins' model, culture change depends neither on conflicts and struggle (as to Marxism-inspired social change approaches), nor on people having radically different views of the world (although these may be important elements of cultural dynamics). Culture change is neither dependent on cross-culture contact, although these are cases when the mechanisms delineated by Sahlins can specially operate (such as in Rio Pardo). Rather, change might happen when people try to enhance their particular positions as opportunities come up, deploying to new phenomena traditional action strategies available for them, which do not respond in traditional ways (the *refractoriness* of the world), so that change is largely

unintended consequence of human action (ORTNER, 1984). The historical culture change process would then be characterized by a structural dialectics impelled by the discontinuities between consolidated conceptual values and intentional values attributed to signs by the individuals, engaged in their personal projects. Among other consequential re-conceptualizations, culture need not be considered as pieces of a mosaic, as if they existed within firmly defined boundaries. On the contrary, culture boundaries are to be considered dynamic, moveable and permeable to external influences, as well as produced and transformed by social actors. We could assume culture as a dynamic and pluralist concept, defined as the systems of meanings constantly negotiated in the context of daily interactions of interested individuals and groups with unequal access to power, systems that are historically built and potentially open to varied influences. In line with this definition, Sahlins' proposals become a privileged framework for interpreting culture dynamics or collective learning, including organizational learning (COOK, YANOW, 2001). These could be considered in terms of reproduction and/or transformation of cultural contents within a certain structure of meanings in face of History. This approach allows us to understand learning as promoting transformation (innovation) as well as reproduction (resistance, persistence) of organizational phenomena. In this sense, the cultural order must be seen as a synthesis between past and present, and the evolution of the cultural system is analyzed in terms of the meaningful practices of individuals, the way they manifest themselves in a specific *structure of conjuncture*. To sum it up, the concepts of *structure of conjuncture* and *functional revaluation of signs* have strategic value in the investigation of culture dynamics:

“I argue too that such effects as transformation and reproduction are maximally distinguishable in situations of culture contact, although the processes involved are by no means unique to these situations. For here, in the clash of cultural understandings and interests, both change and resistance to change are themselves historic issues. People are criticizing each other. Besides, their different interpretations of the same events also criticize each other [...]. All these processes are occurring in the same general way within any society, independently of radical differences in culture, so long as actors with partially distinct concepts and projects relate their actions to each other – and to a world that may prove *refractory* to the understandings of any and all concerned” (SAHLINS, 1981, p. 68, emphasis added).

In terms of research, these new emphasis suggest the relevance of longitudinal and historical studies of how cultures overlap and evolve. In Rio Pardo, as resulting from a strategic decision made by the sponsors, the introduction of Cedejor project in the rural community of Albardão was led by native leaders, whose priorities and world views were embedded in the local system of meanings suggesting personal and group interests related to several possibilities of social differentiation in a region for decades characterized by the deep dependence from the monoculture. Sahlins' assertions allow us make better sense of the events following the arrival of Cedejor in the region. The proposals of culture change through an educational program triggered by the sponsors in the region went through a revaluation of history (the proposals and events with Cedejor) within the consolidated structure of meanings, leading to serious deviations from the original proposals to be implemented. This phenomenon could be seen since the recruitment of candidates for the program, when recruiters had to waive with objective advantages for the participation in the program, as the educational proposals seemed little appealing and inconsistent with the families' immediate needs, although potentially promising. To solve inconsistencies, the offering of financial advantages for joining the program was interpreted as a saving-opportunity in a country where credit for small rural producers has been too risky. Later, the investments in Cedejor were so that it became the region's most sophisticated infrastructure attracting the attention of local

inhabitants and other leaders to the person of the coordinator, whose interests were coherently also to include other goals rather than only pedagogical ones. The limited alternative professional options to tobacco in the region (the coordinator himself was an ex-colono) were suddenly widened for him and his group, who introduced an organizational model coherent with their then wider aspirations. In this sense, the offer of objective advantages for attracting candidates for the program as well as the functional revaluation of Cedejor led by the coordinator were processes reproducing local culture. The coordinator and his group assumed a very traditional development strategy in the region, based on investment initiatives led by a few powerful social actors (usually the government itself), undermining human development goals. The positioning of Cedejor as an institution in service of the community reproduced local dependence from few people (managing resources and supplying basic and needy services, the coordinator acted as an aspirant of politician, gaining visibility in the communities). The negligence of pedagogical goals obstructed the development of the program's participants, therefore not fully contributing to the strengthening of their autonomy, cooperation and initiative. However, if events and proposals were reinterpreted in terms of traditional cultural concepts and priorities, unforeseen consequences arose along this process, potentially transforming these concepts. According to Sahlins, this means that culture change is a dialectical and continuous process that unfolds in a reciprocal movement of "the practice of structure and the structure of practice" (SAHLINS, 2001, p. 144): pragmatic events are interpreted in the light of previous categories ("practice of structure"), a process with the potential to unpredictably change the cultural system ("structure of practice").

About the second functional revaluation of Cedejor, although it is still an embryonic phase on the reformulation of locally widespread traditional concepts, here we face an important process of revaluation, which also comprises the sign *mobilization*. The experiences with Cedejor pointed out the need to rethink traditional behaviors in the community, which did not bestow the subjects with active roles in the construction of viable alternatives for life in the rural environment. In a context of dependency on the monoculture, the subjects have not assumed proactive and effective organizational roles in the process of development of the communities, thus individual mobilization takes the format of emphasis on education as a precondition for migration, and collective mobilization is summed up in associations and groups with little expression. In this context, coherently with local concepts, Cedejor would be seemed as a saving institution (*instituição salvadora*) generating immediate advantages to its participants (either the short courses or the financing facilities). By breaking up with consolidated local interpretations, the process of functional revaluation of Cedejor's proposals suggested the necessity to cooperate, get involved, negotiate, organize and learn so as to build up alternatives of life in the rural environment. These conceptual dimensions put emphasis in the possibility of individual and collective achievement by means of wider and more autonomous efforts, based on the necessary knowledge and supported by the local educational institutions. "To mobilize" would then assume wider meanings. At this moment, it is possible to suggest that, if we initiate the process with cultural reproduction (the original appropriation of Cedejor by the community), the functional revaluation led by the youths presented implications to their worldviews, as the new meanings would alter the relations between signs. If opportunities of complementary education have been traditionally associated to the departure from the rural environment, since it capacitates the youth to urban job opportunities, the new meanings associated to the opportunities offered by Cedejor suggested new ways of thinking about life in the rural environment. According to these new perspectives, the diversification of productive activities in small properties is a real action strategy available for the youths, alternatively or complementary to tobacco, and able to generate stimuli for permanence in the rural environment. Assuming it, however, requires the groups to mobilize, capacitate and develop themselves, by means, for example, of the opportunities offered by

Cedejor. This way, a wider approach on mobilization, education and development turns out to be important to alternative professional insertion in the rural zone. Actually, this is a very important cultural innovation. It is about breaking up with traditional meanings attributed to education, in a context that it would be associated to activities or careers developed outside the properties. On the contrary, new emphasis is put in the importance of cooperation and mobilization for the development of new rural activities, agricultural and non-agricultural, potentially transforming the future of new generations. In practice, the contradictions experienced by the youths indicated the necessity of advancing the mobilization process and their education, viewing initiatives on diversification of economic activities. As expressed by one of the youths in the meeting with the egresses: “*You see, I think that the things we learned, I think it wasn’t enough, like, I think we have to... work more, but to learn. We learned a bit, a piece of the orange. There’s a lot that we need to learn.*”

In the structure of conjuncture being interpreted, despite indicators of cultural changes, it is necessary to recognize that it yet depends on other factors and developments, among which are symbolical and political powers of the proponents of the revaluations, as well as their capacity to act and impose their reinterpretations to the others. Ample, objective changes will arise only when the new meanings, attributed to the facts, are effectively incorporated into the local cultural order and to the individuals’ action strategies. This is a process whose control does not belong to the manager, but to the subjects in such *structure of conjuncture*. Culture change does not happen as a result of passive adjustment of the individuals to new ideologies (as if they were naturally inclined to revise their concepts and interests due to Cedejor’s arrival), but as a result of interested apprehension of new ideas by historical agents, who eventually seek to impose their interpretations to the others. The incorporation of new ideas would happen as they are seen as coherent with the objectives and action strategies adopted by the social actors in a given *structure of conjuncture*. Cedejor’s youths are agents of change, for promoting the new meanings attributed to mobilization in the ambit of their collective activities. However, in the process of questioning traditional meanings the challenges youths and their supporters have to face are diverse. Among such challenges, youths would have to negotiate with other subjects on new consensus, which would depend on their capacity to persuade them to recognize the relevance and pertinence of new meanings within that *structure of conjuncture*. In fact, the practical results of their projects may call other individuals’ attention, who would be invited to rethink their action strategies, based on the new experiences. More specifically, the youths would have to convince the others that the projects of diversification are feasible, but require the effort and involvement of all interested parts. It concerns striving against interpretations such as “*it’s not worth it, because, you see, you spent three years there...*” About this challenge, it is possible to suggest the relevance of thinking about the role of the community leaders, who are involved with youths’ experiences, whose perceptions and actions would also articulate new meanings amongst the community. The political postures of these leaders may contribute to the widening of the consequences of the youths’ actions.

¹ These latter interpretations are consistent with other studies (interpretive and non-interpretive) on the realities of rural populations in South America. See, for example, ABRAMOVAY (1998), ABRAMOVAY, CAMARANO (1999), DURSTON (1996) and STROPASOLAS (2006).

References

- ABRAMOVAY, R. (coord.), *Juventude e agricultura familiar*. Desafios dos novos padrões sucessórios. Brasília, Unesco, 1998.
- ABRAMOVAY, R., CAMARANO, A., *Êxodo rural, envelhecimento e masculinização no Brasil: panorama dos últimos 50 anos*. Rio de Janeiro, Ipea, 1999.

- COOK, S., YANOW, D., Culture and organizational learning. In: SHAFRITZ, J., OTT, J., *Classics of organization theory*. Belmont CA: Wadsworth Thomson Learning, 2001.
- DUPUIS, J., Antropologia, cultura e organização: proposta de um modelo construtivista. In: CHANLAT, J. (coord.) *O indivíduo na organização*, v. 3. São Paulo, Atlas, 1996.
- DURSTON, J., Estrategias de vida de los jóvenes rurales en América Latina. In: CEPAL, *Juventud rural – modernidad y democracia en América Latina*. Santiago, Chile, 1996.
- HATCH, M., Dynamics in organizational culture. In: POOLE, M., VAN DE VEN, A. (orgs.), *New directions in the study of organizational change and innovation processes*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2004.
- LANGLEY, A. Strategies for theorizing from process data. *Academy of Management. Review*, 24(4), 691-710, 1999.
- LÉVI-STRAUSS, C., *Antropologia Estrutural*. Rio de Janeiro: Tempo Brasileiro, 1970.
- MARTIN, J., *Organizational Culture – mapping the terrain*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002.
- ORTNER, S., Theory of anthropology since the sixties. *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History*, 2004.
- SAHLINS, M., Historical metaphors and mythical realities. Association for social anthropology in oceania. *ASAO Special Publications* n° 1. Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1981.
- SAHLINS, M., *Ilhas de História*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editores, 1990.
- SAHLINS, M., Historical ethnography. In: KIRCH, P., SAHLINS, M., *Anahulu: the anthropology of history in the kingdom of Hawaii*. Vol. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- SAHLINS, M., *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, For Example*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- SAHLINS, M., Antropologia e história em Marshall Sahlins – introdução e conclusão de Historical metaphors and mythical realities. *Cadernos de Campo*, n. 9, 2001.
- SAHLINS, M., *Apologies to Thucydides*. Understanding history as culture and vice-versa. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- SAUSSURE, F., *Course in general linguistics*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966.
- SCHATZKI, T., CETINA, K., SAVIGNY, E., *The practice turn in contemporary theory*. New York, Routledge, 2001.
- SCHWARCZ, L., Marshall Sahlins ou por uma antropologia histórica e estrutural. *Cadernos de Campo*, n. 9, 2001.
- STROPASOLAS, V., *O mundo rural no horizonte dos jovens*. Florianópolis, Editora da UFSC, 2006.
- VAN MAANEN, J., *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- VOGT, O., *A produção de fumo em Santa Cruz do Sul – RS – 1849-1993*. Santa Cruz do Sul: EDUNISC, 1997.
- WEICK, K., Theory construction as disciplined imagination. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4): 516– 531, 1989.