

Pre-industrial weavers and post-industrial rag pickers: a comparative study.

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In the past, much attention was paid to the social structure and history of European weavers at the evil of industrialization and at the moment of transition of national societies from “ancien régime” to modern capitalist and democratic forms of government. On the other hand there is a growing awareness of the massification of rag picker activities on the international level. As a particular case, the “cartoneros” or “cirujas” of the surroundings of Buenos Aires became a worldwide known and well-documented phenomenon.

Nevertheless, social science produced only a few case studies of this phenomenon, which focus rather on economics than on the aspects of cultural anthropology and do not include any perspective of comparison between different societies.

This talk is devoted to a preliminary and cultural anthropologic characterization of the social structure of the subculture of post-industrial rag pickers in Buenos Aires and to its comparison with the pre-industrial phenomenon of weavers. We shall exhibit a series of surprising parallels and links between both phenomena and based on that we shall discuss the possibility of historical prediction.

We shall stress aspects of cultural life in pauperised conditions, namely aspects of habitat in the case of the rag pickers and literature in the case of the weavers. We shall go back to the very origins of literature about pauperism produced by pious and show that this literature emerges (very late) with the weavers and explain why this is the case.

From the epistemological point of view our presentation will follow a historical orientation elaborated by the Swiss cultural anthropologist Richard Weiss, Arnold Niederer and Rudolf Braun (their orientation may be considered as alternative or opposite to the more disseminated view of culture of poorness due to Oscar Lewis and his followers).