

FIELD NOTES ON THE USE OF Q METHODOLOGY
IN A STUDY OF THE BRAZILIAN LEFT

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ABSTRACT: The general problems of conducting research among members of leftist parties are described, with particular reference to the parties on the Brazilian Left. The comparative advantages of Q methodology are outlined in terms of the selection of statements and respondents, and the modifications which have to be effected under shifting circumstances.

Unlike the case in the United States, politics in Brazil is not an item of consumption, a lazy "gut reaction" to media stimuli. Instead, it is a commitment to be assumed and lived, an existential reaction accompanied by a high degree of affect. Given the brutal repression of the political left wing during the past two decades--the disappearances, assassinations, systematic torture, underground prisons, and exile--the pragmatic liberal optimism of "value-free" American social science, with its implied rationalism and messianism, is rejected on theoretical and emotional grounds. (For an introduction to this period, consult Alves, 1984/1985.) Of the various

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interviews I have attempted to solicit, for example, approximately 20% have refused to participate and roughly 35% of those with whom I have spoken in depth have been victims of torture. Interviewing is a type of interrogation, and many subjects will not allow it to penetrate beyond a certain level of political generality.

A research project conducted by the Catholic Church documenting all of the testimony denouncing torture between 1964 and 1979 shows the atmosphere of constraint in which research occurs in Brazil. More than a million pages of documentation were microfilmed and smuggled out of the country to be deposited in various archives in Europe. The main report, some 5000 pages, was distributed to various archives within Brazil and sent to human rights organizations and universities outside the country. The research team worked underground and anonymously to produce this material, and this in the late 1970s and early 1980s during the *abertura*, or negotiated transition to democracy. Only last year was a summary report published: *Brasil: Nunca Mais* (Arns, 1985) was a best seller and went through several printings within a few months. If a powerful institution like the Church conducts its research with this level of security, imagine the care with which a lone North American social scientist must proceed.

For five months in 1983 and throughout 1985, I was engaged in a study of the activities of citizens occupying the left end of the Brazilian political spectrum. My preliminary approach involved participant observation and extensive interviewing, but the need for a more formalized method asserted itself when the major outlines of the subject matter started to become visible, at which point it became desirable to move from the observational-anecdotal level to underlying causes, motivations, and contradictions. A method of discovery was indicated.

But R-methodological methods, which typically posit a scale of traits in a given population which can be delimited and sampled, were of little use in defining the ideological divisions of the political opposition in Brazil, and there are a number of cultural and political reasons why this is the case. First,

there is a cultural hostility, politically amplified on the Left, against quantification. Left-wing parties do not keep detailed records, and certainly would not allow researchers access if they did. In the Sao Paulo headquarters of the P.T. (Partido dos Trabalhadores), or Workers Party, I asked for simple breakdowns of party membership by electoral district. The response was that I should ask the Supreme Electoral Tribunal or secret police, that the P.T. did not have the personnel or time to concern itself with membership figures. Another commented, "You know, that is a very American question."

Second, the researcher is socially marginal, and is allowed to operate only on the periphery of these opposition groups. I was able to attend various meetings of P.T. Nucleii, but only P.T.'s commitment to participatory democracy, my contacts with important leaders, and at times precarious masquerading made these interventions possible; within the P.C.B. (Partido Comunista Brasileiro) or within the Trotskyist, Stalinist, or Leninist Left splinters this is clearly impossible.

Third, the parameters of the respondent universe to be sampled are not clear either as to structure or numbers of adherents. The first problem is the analytic reconstruction of the Left from its historical fragments; the second is to determine the nuclei of opinion within the Left spectrum given that these nucleii do not correspond to given organizations. Between 1961 and 1974, for example, the Left in Brazil splintered into 27 different groups, and today the socialist Left is represented by the P.T., which in turn is composed of a syndicalist center, a parliamentary wing, church activists, and three Trotskyist and three Leninist splinter groups; meanwhile, between the 1979 amnesty of exiles to the return of political democracy in 1985, the communist Left has been variously comprised of, among others, the P.C.B., the Ala Prestista (expelled Gramscian intellectuals), the P.C. do B. (Partido Comunista do Brazil, a Stalinist group), and MR-8 (Movimento Revolucionario-8 de Outubro, an ex-guerrilla faction). The difficulties of positing traits that would define the differences among these groups, of de-

fining sample parameters, and of conducting a meaningful survey of opinions within this fragmented universe are apparent.

In this climate, assertions of scientific objectivity or neutrality are seen as naive or as screening a hidden agenda, and the fact of the researcher's being foreign complicates the situation. Since the respondent cannot foresee the possible effects of participation in the project, the researcher is often faced with a barrage of questions: What is the purpose of this research? Who is financing it? Why are you interested in this topic? Even if the answers are satisfactory and the individual agrees to participate, responses will be guarded and will depend on the warmth of the affective relationship and degree of political convergence.

Extensive sampling is difficult under these conditions, but the researcher will miss out on the dialectical interactions if Brazilians are used to conduct the survey. Moreover, the meaning of the numbers gathered would always be open to question because of significant refusal rates and because of purposely evasive, guarded, or sham answers which cannot be controlled by statistical means. Nor, for that matter, can participant observation deal with this dynamic beyond a small group context or a detailed case study.

Within this extraordinary diversity of organizations, the following questions emerged to prominence: What beliefs are held in common and what points of divergence delimit the various tendencies? What are the nuclei of ideology and practice which transcend and unify this historically dispersed political field? With these root problems in mind, I decided to utilize Q methodology as the most economical and feasible approach to ideological commonalities within organizational diversity.

Q Methodology and the Problem of Research Design

Q methodology is attractive within the Brazilian context, although to my knowledge it has been used

there only once (Motta, 1978). The concourse is fairly easily delimited through extensive preliminary interviewing. Moreover, the subjective and ludic Q-sort procedure appeals to a high-affect culture, and the anonymity and unpredictability of the result (plus its intrinsic importance to the subject population) all contribute to the acceptability of the research project among left partisans.

Table 1. Q-Sample Structure

Effects	Levels		
Theory	(a) socialism	(b) Marxist-Leninist theory	
	(c) vanguard party	(d) politics	
	(e) parliament	(f) green issues	
Valence	(g) +	(h) 0	(i) -

The research design in Table 1 reflects my understanding of the central issues of the Left from a year of interviewing, observation, and study of party documents. (I have attempted to control for my own bias by including my Q sort in the sample set.) From the concourse, approximately 100 propositions were selected, from which were sampled 54 statements roughly balanced in terms of theory and valence. (In addition, an effort was made to balance positivity and negativity within the valence categories.) $m=3$ statements were selected from each of the $6 \times 3 = 18$ cells.

It should be pointed out that valence is relative to the context of discourse: No one on the left can be assumed to be antifeminist, but there are degrees of adherence to what is largely considered a "secondary question" in Brazil's highly traditional Left. Thus, the "green issues" statements dealing with women included the following:

- The pluralist, multiclass and democratic character of the feminist movement is pos-

itive for the participation of women in the political and economic life of the country. (+)

- The demands of women for the alteration of the Civil Code, family planning, abortion, against violence, and for public daycare are basic. (0)
- The profoundly divided and partisan women's movement can regain its unity only through concrete initiatives of emancipation. (-)

Within the vanguard segment of the design were the following statements:

- The party is a system of organizations but needs a single center to give it cohesion (*um centro unico coesionador*). (+) [Derived from a communist document.]
- We want a party which is ample and open to all persons committed to the cause of the workers. (0) [The broader term *trabalhador*, meaning any salaried worker, shows the origin of this statement in the P.T. Communist parties tend to use *operario* (industrial worker) or *proletario*, narrower categories which exclude white collar and intellectual workers.]
- A party is never ready made or complete (*pronto e acabado*), but develops at the same tempo as the workers' struggles. (-)

Thus, the subject has the opportunity to differentiate statements regarding 6 main topics and 18 subtopics, and with balanced positivity and negativity, into an order which he or she considers valid.

The P set was intended to include representatives of various of the leftist parties in Brazilian politics; interviews were ultimately conducted with the following:

Partido dos Trabalhadores	12
Partido Verde	4
Em Tempo	2
Convergencia Socialista	4
Partido Revolucionario Comunista	1
Movimento Comunista Revolucionario	1
Partido Comunista Brasileiro	9
Presenca	2
Ala Prestista	4
Partido Comunista do Brasil	1
MR-8	2
Investigator	1
TOTAL	43

The 43 Q sorts were subsequently analyzed, resulting in three factors--socialists, militant Marxist-Leninists, and Eurocommunists (Peritore, 1986).

Critique of Research in Progress

There are three main kinds of problems involved in fieldwork using Q technique, and these probably will be familiar to social scientists working in Third World cultures.

First, entering into the political world of a party is delicate and difficult. My first approach to the P.C.B., the week it was legalized by Presidential decree, was through a friend in the P.T. In Brazil, the first question on introducing yourself is "quem indica?" ("Who sent you?"). The question is implicit and it is incumbent on the researcher to provide the name that will vouch for his or her legitimacy. In the U.S. people are used to the idea of surveys, and professors have enough charisma to carry them through interview situations dealing with the most delicate topics. In Brazil, however, professors are usually political activists and there is no credence given to the notion of objective scientific interest.

The immediate problem, then, is one of patronage. One can start at the top of an organization, explaining the research in detail to the leading figure in the party. But this strategy runs the risk of an

overriding veto on intellectual or personal grounds. One also risks the partisan nature of the indications which leaders can give, and may miss significant opposition or factional groups if patronized by those in authority. Also, leaders may have limited power to help with this sort of work, their organizations being rambling congeries of groups which the leadership may know only indirectly. Thus, an approach at the intermediate level is indicated, and the project must proceed through progressive penetration. The interviews or Q sorts proceed through a chain of introductions, the usefulness of which must constantly be cross-checked. Since Q technique aims at maximizing diversity of opinion in its statement sample, there is not as much danger of overrepresenting a group (inasmuch as they will all load on the same factor) as there is of missing or underrepresenting a group.

For example, is sex going to be a differentiating factor on the left? What proportions of women to men exist in each party? No one could give the vaguest indication on these issues. Are social class, "race," or region going to differentiate positions? Unable to obtain answers to these questions, I endeavored to maximize diversity along these lines. Thus, out of 43 Q sorts, 13 were from females, 26 from youth, 5 from "blacks" (the issue of ethnic definition is intensely complex in Brazil), and 14 from the working class. I will return to this problem momentarily.

Proportions in the P set are difficult to guess. For example, the Ala Prestista, the faction of L.C. Prestes expelled by the Party in 1982, may have as many as 1000 followers in Rio working in the P.D.T., a social democratic party outside the purview of the study. Thus it became important to grant this tendency more representation. Similarly with regard to the Gramscian intellectuals expelled from the Party in 1982: Three were included in the sample because although no longer members, their thought finds a sympathetic resonance among communist youth. Four of the P.T. sample are exiting the Party to found a Green Party: Should they be dropped from the sample, or do they represent a significant trend within middle class professionals and artists prominent in

the P.T.? Thus, sample design must be corrected as research proceeds.

A further problem is the difficulty in overcoming the suspicion of old cadres, whom one would expect to load heavily on a Leninist-vanguard factor over against communist youth, who have thus far manifested a more Eurocommunist orientation. Similarly, the small sectarian parties have been quite closed to research so far. The Troskyite groups are small and well hidden, preferring not to expose their "double militancy" within the P.T. A certain amount of "pull" and indirect multisided pressure would have been needed to fill out this portion of the P set--a delicate political problem at best.

Another problem is infrastructural. Transportation and communication in Brazil are frustrating at best. Interviews must be widely spaced, and three a day is probably the maximum feasible. My interviews have run up to 3½ hours. Brazilians are generous with time if their interest is engaged, and in this regard Q sorting is an excellent starting point for depth interviewing since it raises all of the pertinent issues at once and provides a smooth and natural bridge to discursive analysis. In the Brazilian situation interviews must be conversational and must flow naturally. Staccato questioning of the kind common to questionnaire formats produces monosyllabic answers and short interviews. If the researcher lets the subject talk and uses questions to "track" the subject matter, he or she will learn much about the subject's logical processes and will gain much inside information; Rogerian silence is often presumed to be inside knowledge, which the respondent will often amplify.

Field correction of the P set through preliminary factor analysis would be ideal, but to my knowledge the necessary computer programs do not exist in Brazil; the researcher must therefore expand the sample in the field to include all possibilities.

Whereas Q sorts require privacy and space, Brazilian offices are usually crowded and chaotic, and I have lost four sorts because of this physical limitation. Some people simply cannot concentrate or keep their interest in the process. A P.C. do B. youth

gave up after sorting the positive end of the Q sort; he could not bring himself to finish. A P.T. youth agreed with most of the statements, surely an odd result, and required a great deal of cajoling to proceed to differentiate the neutral and negative sides.

The main problem associated with applying Q technique in a Third World setting is that it presupposes above average literacy and logical and linguistic skills. In one night I was able to sort nine P.C.B. youth (university students) because they approached the process as a game and enjoyed comparing each others' positions. But with older people, workers, and slum dwellers--all of which are crucial categories--these logical and reading skills do not exist. If the subject is a lip-reader, will he finish a sort of 54 cards? Some cannot understand a concept contained in a statement. Many disagree with a concept or can accept only part of a statement. Some are disconcerted by the lack of overall context, and must be made to understand that their task is to assemble this context from a field of conflicting propositions.

The semantic design of the Q sample is crucial. I tried to avoid conjunctural issues because responses before and after the municipal elections of November 1985 would be inconsistent; after all, the research had to be conducted over at least a three month period. The set of statements therefore dealt with matters of principle which would differentiate opinion groups.

The minimum semantic context of each card has to be self explanatory; consequently, the sentences are at times too long. Portuguese is not as terse as English, and one concept must be reinforced by others if it is to have significance and impact. Yet precision tires the subject and shortens valuable post-sorting interviews. The conflict between the vividness of conjunctural issues and the universality of general principles, between the appeal of simplicity and the need for a rich context, will always provide design problems.

Finally, operating in a subculture of another language and culture, a researcher does not feel as free to invent and edit, to rely on his or her intui-

tion or analyses in research design. There are semantic and cultural subtleties which can be addressed only through ample discussion and pretesting of the research design with Brazilians. The richness and even the frustration of this cultural learning is an important experience for a social scientist, whatever the alien setting, and these few field notes are meant to aid future researchers who go into the field with Q methodology or any similar research instrument.

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The universe displays various orders of recaltrance. (Kenneth Burke)