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Popular culture and the formation of the working class

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Resumo

Social class is sometimes considered as a mere economic or a political phenomenon. In our research we tried to relate social class with cultural variables. Most notably, our purpose is to show how a particular kind of cultural production – popular culture – affects social and political mobilization of the working class. In this way, we focused our attention in the rural workers of the Left Margin of Guadiana River, in Alentejo. Basically, the research is a qualitative approach to the feelings and subjective apprehensions of those workers and how they interact with their political behaviour. Our hypothesis is that the cultural heritage of these social agents contributed to the development of social and political practices. At the same time, the proper and autonomous production of their own cultural sociabilities induced mental and symbolic frameworks creating a sense of community gathered by common values and beliefs. So, in order to understand some of the past political interventions of Alentejo's working class, we cannot escape to integrate theoretically these most visible phenomena with the correlative cultural background that supports them.

Popular culture and the formation of the working classⁱ

Social class is sometimes considered as a mere economic or a political phenomenon. In our research we tried to relate social class with cultural variables. Most notably, our purpose is to show how a particular kind of cultural production – popular culture – affects social and political mobilization of the working class. As Edward Thompson emphasized in his classical book – *The Formation of the English Working Class* – classes are «social and cultural formations» (Thompson, 1991: 937). This means that social classes integrate a huge range of significant dimensions. The conjunction of:

the place in the social relations of production;

the social arrangement how a social group appropriates the economic surplus;

the relation with the State, the political parties and the political apparatus;

the modalities of producing and consuming cultural, symbolic and ideological complexes;

all of this seems to be a net of central axis. A net of central and intricate axis, which shows that economic, political and cultural variables cannot escape to interact with each other. So, we departed from this general approach to study a fragment of contemporary Portuguese history: the political and social struggles in Alentejo along the twentieth century. In fact, there was, in the beginning of our research, an intriguing coincidence in rural workers of Alentejo: they were at the same time both one of the fractions of the Portuguese working class that mobilized the most against the dictatorship of Salazar and Marcelo Caetano and with an unique range of cultural production. In the end of the research, the coincidence became a remarkable feature of how culture and politics may interact in the formation of a social class.

In this way, we focused our attention in the rural workers of Alentejo. Basically, the research was a qualitative approach to the feelings and subjective apprehensions of those workers and how they interact with their political behaviour. Extensive interviews, oral testimonies, social photography and content analysis of poems and songs written by those social agents, were some of the techniques used to inquire our object of study. The absence – or almost – of this social class in the actual panorama of the Portuguese political and social scene, defy our methodological approach. This was an important challenge, how to make Sociology without becoming a historiography, in its strict sense. Simultaneously, the research obviously demanded interdisciplinary between Sociology and History. Consequently, we tried to develop a sociological interpretation of historical processes and how spatial and temporal sequences popular culture would affect the first.

The application of twenty interviews – which culminated in the constitution of five life-stories – and the thorough examination of the content of more than three hundred popular poems and eighty-four songs, resumed a wide range of cultural elements in Alentejo's workers. In this domain we focused our empirical research on three big chapters.

Firstly, the compilation of popular poems and songs. This was done in local libraries, municipalities and in direct contact with relatives of popular poets of Alentejo. The subsequent analysis of this data showed a presence of important cultural features in the social dispositions of those agents. From the valorization of the land as a mean to survive and to live and not as a property, to the presentation of an agnostic/irreligious reflection of the human condition, we did find out how rural workers of that region were very far away from a peasant vision of the world. For example, José Madureira Pinto (Pinto, 1985), João Ferreira de Almeida (Almeida, 1999), Augusto Santos Silva (Silva, 1994) or Manuel Carlos Silva (Silva, 1998), despite their

differences, showed the Portuguese peasantry from the North in their attitudes and values, extremely connected to religion, private and small property and a certain conflict among individualistic and collectivistic trends. Very differently, the rural workers of Alentejo presented a wide range of differences. Among them, and continuing to focus their popular culture, their own cultural and symbolic products, rural working class of that region, also developed songs and poems that were sang with a rebellious conscience against successive political regimes and against landlords. The obedience to God, the ambition to possess a piece of land or the deference to the big owners of the land was not part of their *habitus*.

To offer a better idea of how these cultural properties were immersed in the cultural universe of that population we present the following poems (in Portuguese language):

Alentejo terra rica

Muito rica, rica terra
Que dá tudo, tudo, tudo
Até o que a cabra berra.

Meus senhores eu venho à praça

Este meu corpo oferecer
Este meu corpo-carcaça
De se comprar e vender

De se comprar e vender
De bem se negociar
No negócio de render
Sem ele eu nada ganhar.

Há lobos sem ser na serra

Ainda não sabia
Debaixo do arvoredos
Trabalho de noite e de dia.
(...)
O rico é como o sapo
Só tem barriga e pança
O pobre é como a formiga
Só trabalha e não descansa.

In the first poem we notice the notion of the land and the place as an instance of production not a property of an individual. This is an ideal constantly present in the rural workers. The second poetical composition presents a brief portrait of the wage labor and how this produces a sense

of social vulnerability in the workers. More important than this, is the existence of a verbalization and a mental construction of the social roots of their individual and precarious lifestyles. Most notably during the dictatorship of the fascist regime the workers lived in conditions of famine, high levels of unemployment and very low wages. This discourse of “being” and assuming itself as a wage laborer helped to accelerate the political mobilization of that social class. The last poem plays the keynote of an open hostility in relation to the landlords and concentrating on the opposition between them and the workers. Or, in the language of the poem, between the “rich” and the “poor”.

Secondly, we have collected a considerable amount of documents and newspapers. In this chapter, we tried to reconstruct the path of that working class. We stress the word reconstruct in order to fulfill our theoretical purpose: present a few but central guidelines for a theory of the formation of the Alentejo’s working class. In the following paragraph there is a description of the overall process.

In the time of the First Republic (1910-1926) there were a vast number of strikes against the low wages and to achieve the right to organize trade unions. The influence of anarchist currents was a reality although this was more reflected in the spontaneous character of the struggles of the period and less a real work of mobilization of the anarchists. With the upsurge of the military dictatorship in 1926 and the following fascist tendency in the building of the State machine, only in the forties the workers started again to mobilize in considerable numbers against their situation. In a first moment, the struggles involved, most of the time, economic slogans, such as better wages. This lasted all the decade and the first half of the 50’s. With the electoral campaign in 1958, with the participation of democratic candidates Arlindo Vicente and Humberto Delgado, the workers developed a vigorous wave of political struggles against the regime and claiming freedom for the political prisoners. However this already present – let us just remind the huge rallies and demonstrations against the dictatorship just in the end of Second World War – its dimension diffused through the workers in this period. In fact, was the mixture of political struggle against Salazar’s dictatorship and the economic struggles for better conditions of labor and for better wages that galvanized that social class in the struggles of 1962. In May of 1962 two hundred thousand rural workers entered on strike demanding eight hours of work per day. Until then they had to work from “sun-to-sun” as in the Portuguese expression. In other words, until their victory in the strikes and demonstrations of 1962 the huge majority of Alentejo’s rural workers had to be in the field before the sun rise and only departed from there at the sunset. This achievement was never accepted in legal and juridical terms by the regime and by the landlords, besides being a common practice in the fields since that time. With the democratic revolution in 1974, the workers were allowed to constitute trade unions. In this new political circumstance, the landlords started to sack the workers and to abandon the crops and the animals. This attitude of the former ruling class in the Alentejo’s fields created a response unexpected in the local workers. In that moment their trade unions were pushed to intervene. Hundreds of public meetings gathering thousands of workers arrived to one political solution: the need to occupy the uncultivated lands of the farms to put an end to the unemployment and to the famine in some families. This process was named “Reforma Agrária”, and collective units of production (in Portuguese, UCP’s) were formed. The workers started to elect their leaders in the cooperatives and the revenue of the production in the end of the year was to invest in technical means to improve productivity of labor. In this way there was a firm discourse against the individual appropriation of the products of labor and the money of its sell in the market. With the end of the revolutionary process and the end of a possible socialist perspective for Portugal, that process of self-management of the rural workers was condemned to suffer financial cuts from the government and even the repression from the police authorities. With the defeat of this process, the levels of emigration increased again (they virtually stopped

in the 70's), the agricultural activities were abandoned and the rural working class practically disappeared nowadays.

These two levels were unified by the oral testimonies of (former) rural workers. In this chapter we captured their subjective feelings on the political processes they have participated but also to register their own point of view on the episodes occurred. At the same time, the interviews to the workers framed the existence of values of solidarity and a language of class (Koo, 2001: 175). This node of juncture permitted us to access pertinent data on how popular culture was not reduced to a symbolic production but, in fact, reproduced itself in the actions of those social agents. That is, popular cultural consisted in immaterial objects (oral poems and songs) but also operated in the production of social identities and collective practices. As the Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*ⁱⁱ illustrated, all the cultural heritage of these social agents contributed to the development of social and political practices based on values of solidarity and companionship. At the same time, the proper and autonomous production of their own cultural sociabilities induced mental and symbolic frameworks creating a sense of community and, which is further important, a *real* and *effective* community of individuals gathered by common values and beliefs. So, in order to understand some of the most relevant political interventions of Alentejo's working class, such as the struggles and mass strikes against the dictatorship of Salazar or the process of land occupations in 1974 and 1975 (Murteira, 2004; Barros, 1981), we cannot escape to integrate theoretically these most visible phenomena with the correlative cultural background that supports them.

To use a metaphor, popular culture seems to be the soil where the seeds of revolt and class conflict in Alentejo grew up. Without that embodiment of popular culture in the individuals of rural working class, the constitution of that class as a social and historical agent would have been, at least, completely different and, at most, improbably possible in such a long period of time. The bond between popular culture and formation of the working class in the referred case relates to the irreplaceable place of the first in the dynamics of class social and political mobilization. The resistance to the repression of the dictatorship, the unity and collective participation in the occupation of lands and the durability of class modalities of struggle and organization induced the thought that without sociabilities based on values of solidarity and on the common share of cultural signs and practices (such as, for example, the collective performances of popular songs through the streets and plazas of Alentejo's villages), rural workers of that region would not have been capable to organize themselves in the political and social milieus.

To summarize, cultural dimensions influence and interfere in political and socio-historical macro-processes. Without the dynamics of cultural self-identification of the collective of Alentejo's workers – expressed in their popular culture – it would be hardly difficult for them to intervene in the political scene.

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ⁱ Uma versão desta comunicação foi apresentada previamente no Colóquio Internacional Marx e Engels realizado pelo Instituto de Filosofia e de Ciências Humanas (IFCH) da Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Brasil), no dia 5 de Novembro de 2007. Uma outra versão foi apresentada, em língua inglesa, no IJUP 08 - First Meeting of Young Researchers of Universidade do Porto, promovido pela Reitoria da UP na Faculdade de Arquitectura do Porto, no dia 21 de Fevereiro de 2008.

ⁱⁱ «Habitus is the matrix of dispositions of the objective structures socially incorporated in mental structures that human beings set off when they reflect about, apprehend and put practices in motion» (Bourdieu, 2002: 167).