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**ONTOLOGY OF PRESENT-DAY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: BEYOND THE OLD
DICHOTOMY BETWEEN “OLD” AND “NEW” SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

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Resumo

Qual é a natureza dos movimentos sociais contemporâneos? São habitualmente espaços que mantêm uma certa esfera pública, a qual não é reservada a uma classe social particular – ou seja, nem a burguesia nem as camadas populares, mas que aspira à universalidade incorporando vários e diversos sectores da sociedade. Em outras palavras, são compostos por trabalhadores, ao lado das classes médias, a pequena e media burguesia também. São trans-classes. Unem uma pluralidade de indivíduos oriundos de diferentes camadas sociais, das mais desfavorecidas aos estratos mais endinheirados com uma importância relativa das classes médias tendo um nível de educação bastante alto. O substrato materialista reapareceu nos movimentos na era do capitalismo contemporâneo baseado nos serviços, a informação e as novas tecnologias na medida em que formas da dominação e “opressão” económicas seguem existindo. Mas, os movimentos actuais incluem também “precários”, “excluídos” e “pobres” e não só obreiros, explorados. Ao lado do seu substrato materialista, continuam a ter um substrato idealista, como as questões ligadas à ética. Em resumo, os movimentos contemporâneos superam a dicotomia tradicional, mais teórica que real, entre os “velhos” e “novos” movimentos, entre o materialismo geralmente atribuído aos primeiros e o post-materialismo ou idealismo identificado, ao contrário, com os segundos. Realizam então uma síntese entre estas duas dimensões – o velho/novo ou o materialismo/idealismo – que não são mais opostas mas que são integradas e associadas. Assim, estes são os aspectos que pretendo desenvolver na minha comunicação, em particular a partir de dados empíricos provenientes do contexto português.

Abstract

What is the nature of present-day social movements? They are usually spaces that maintain a certain public sphere, which is not reserved to a particular social class – that is, neither the bourgeoisie nor the popular strata, but rather it is a sphere which aims for universality by incorporating wide and diverse sectors of society. In other words, they are composed of workers, alongside the middle classes, petty and middle bourgeoisie as well. They are trans-class. They unite a plurality of individuals belonging to different social strata, from social outcasts to the most favoured social strata with a relative importance of the middle classes having a fairly high level of education. The materialistic substratum has re-appeared within movements in the age of contemporary capitalism founded on services, information and new technologies insofar as forms of economic domination and “oppression” continue to exist. But, current movements also include “precarious”, “excluded” and “poor people” and not only workers, the exploited. Moreover, alongside their materialistic substratum, they still have an idealistic substratum, such as the questions related to ethics. In sum, contemporary movements overcome the traditional dichotomy, more theoretical than real, between “old” and “new” movements, between materialism generally ascribed to the former and post-materialism or idealism attributed, by contrast, to the latter. They therefore realise a synthesis between these two dimensions – the old/new or materialism/idealism – that are no longer opposed but that are integrated and associated. Thus, these are the aspects that I intend to develop in my paper, notably out of empirical data stemming from the Portuguese context.

Palavras-chave: Movimentos Sociais; Classes Sociais; Materialismo; Pós-Materialismo; Portugal

Keywords: Social Movements; Social Classes; Materialism; Post-Materialism; Portugal

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The ontological question of social movements – what are social movements? – is particularly important given that one of the fundamental aspects of the scientific approach consists in defining its object of study, elucidating its nature, finding its essential properties in order to better understand it.

Nonetheless, the answer to this question is complex, on the one hand, to the extent that it is ample and may easily lead, because of its nature or links in the history of philosophy with theology and metaphysics, to speculative theories disconnected from objective reality or empirical facts, and, on the other hand, as this is demonstrated by the existence of different, and sometimes antithetic, interpretations within social sciences.

A way of dealing with this question and containing it, notably to avoid metaphysical deviations, consists in addressing the concrete composition of social movements – this is what we shall perform in this work via the observation of the composition of present-day social movements related to alter-globalisation in general and of contemporary Portuguese movements that integrate these previous movements in particular (from an ethnography).

Notwithstanding, including here, one cannot escape from the problem of its interpretation. Regarding this, indeed, one can distinguish two great tendencies within social sciences. The former that can be called materialistic relies upon the heritage of Marxian and Marxist theories whilst the latter that can be named, by contrast, post-materialistic or idealistic falls within what has been termed “new social movement theories”.

One of the shared features between these two tendencies beyond their differences and oppositions is that the collective composition of social movements is generally defined at large from what is at stake for their members or society *lato sensu*, from the nature of militants’ objectives, from the change to which they aspire or, on the contrary, from the conservation that they want to preserve. The determination of social movements is therefore explained or justified from the determination of their final or teleological cause, that is, from the real or potential consequences of their actions.

In this sense, are there specificities of contemporary stakes within society and correlatively of current movements in relation to prior objectives and movements? If yes, what are they? Why? What are current social movements? Are present-day stakes reducible to the material or, on the contrary, to the ideal? And consequently, are contemporary social movements identical to socio-economic subjects or, by contrast, do they subsume categories of actors related to the cultural and symbolic?

1. Materialism and the working class:

The stakes within capitalism would be essentially economic or material because this social regime would be above all characterised by specific social relations of production based upon the division between the bourgeois socio-economic class and the working class. Moreover, because this division would imply an opposition in terms of material interests – to their advantage and to the detriment of the latter, capitalists would economically dominate proletarians –, it would follow a class antagonism and social movements that would emerge would be essentially formed by and composed of the workers who would seek to transform this situation of exploitation or economic oppression in their favour.

Succinctly, this is the main interpretation, inherited from Marxism, which has considered that there is a material basis within societal stakes and consequently that social movements gather socio-economic subjects. In the historical case of capitalism, these subjects are the exploited people, that is, the working class.

It is this kind of approach that one can find in Keane’s writings (2003), one of the main advocates of the materialistic interpretations of the stakes within society and of the composition of social movements. Indeed, in his view, since Marx’s theses, civil society does not have fundamentally evolved in regard to its contexture. It would be still dominated by capitalistic forces in the West and at global scale by Western capitalists. In this sense, the phenomenon of globalisation would be especially the globalisation of capital. Whatever the socio-cultural contexts, civil society is characterised by socio-economic stratification and class difference. It serves less the oppressed and the exploited than established political and economic elites. In other words, this is a hierarchised social arena wherein social positions and relations are imbalanced and that is profitable for capitalists. Thus, it is also the arena of iterative conflicts between divergent class interests. In

these conditions where the unequal economy of civil society appears as universal, the working class still remains the determinant agent of social change or revolution – the subject of history – to the extent that capital still needs benefits produced by labour in order to reproduce itself, because capital is intrinsically dependent on labour for its own existence (capitalism's immanent contradiction that will ineluctably lead it to its fall), and since workers are always numerically superior, hold majority.

2. Post-materialism, the middle classes and the bourgeoisie:

However, a core objection that one can put forward is that the previous interpretation tends to offer a crystallised and frozen vision of social movements and capitalism. It seems that this interpretation that is a direct consequence of the philosophy of history related to dialectical materialism is itself paradoxically meta-historical or a-historical. This is the case maybe because it is perceived as the ultimate state in the agonistic history of human societies. Thus, one has the impression that capitalism has remained the same since the nineteenth century until today and correlatively that the stakes and social movements in their respective composition have also remained fundamentally unchanged over this same period of time. If one may suppose that initially the stakes inside capitalism were material and that social movements were merged with the working class, one may also legitimately wonder whether this situation does not have been altered thereafter because of historical dynamics.

This criticism was implicitly followed by new social movement theoreticians by presenting a radical structural transformation of capitalism in the wake of World War II.

This period that was named *Les Trente Glorieuses* (“The Glorious Thirty”, the thirty years after the Second World War, from 1945 to 1975) or “the Welfare-State” was featured by economic growth, a better redistribution of wealth under the aegis of the State, social welfare for a large part of the population in various Western countries (even though they were not all of them concerned and there existed several degrees among the countries that were involved in these dynamics). A new capitalism arose, founded on services and information as core goods of production, circulation and consumption, on high capital flexibility, great diversification and destructurement of social relations of production. For many commentators, in the 1960s and 1970s, capitalism would have reached its ultimate stage; since then, it would have been characterised by its post-industrial, post-material and post-modern dimensions. Thus, industrial economy that replaced rural economy over the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century would have been in turn substituted by services economy based essentially on knowledge, information exchanges, symbols, images, communication. It would be the age of the immaterial and virtual through the development of the mass media and computer science. Moreover, contrary to industrial economy, the new economy of services would rest less upon social nexuses of production than upon social links of consumption (Meiksins Wood, 1996, pp. 21-23 ; Morris-Suzuki, 2000, pp. 66-68).

Besides, nowadays, in the new stage of capitalism, domination would be less economic than cultural, especially through hegemonic institutions of education and communication that would diffuse elites' particularistic values, norms, truths, in brief, their discourses, to the whole of the people. These institutions (schools, universities, the media, etc.) would make and manipulate signs, icons, languages, texts in order to shape the populations' mind according to power holders' representations; popular cultures would be therefore jeopardised by the domination of the elitist culture (Epstein, 1997).

Political economy would therefore be less pertinent to understand social mechanisms and materialistic interpretations would be to a large extent null and void.

These structural transformations of Western societies in the post-World War II period would have had effects on the contexture of classes, their nature, their links, on the working class.

Thus, a growing proportion of the working class politically and economically would have integrated capitalistic social regime, joined the middle classes and consumption society. The working class would have ceased to form a united and homogeneous totality and became fragmented and diversified. In other words, the working class *per se* would have been drastically reduced – a phenomenon that was also called “class

retreat” – to the extent that the Welfare-State would have caused the “gentrification” of the proletarian class. The extreme antinomy between the working class and capitalists would no longer be valid. The differences between proletarians and the bourgeoisie would have decreased with the numerical growth of the middle classes, an intermediary social category. As a core result, the conversion of industrial societies into post-industrial ones would have made the idea of class at large less central for the understanding of the new societies (Nederveen, 1992, pp. 19; Pillion, 1998, pp. 80).

Simultaneously, these effects on the working class would have repercussions on social movements, their composition, their aims.

Class retreat would have therefore provoked the disappearance or at least the weakening of the working class’ social movement and diverse organisations such as trade unions and political parties. Thus, social movements would no longer be formed by the working class and essentially would stem from the middle classes, petty and middle bourgeoisie. Their objectives would no longer be economic and material but rather immaterial and symbolic (Touraine, 1969, 1973, 1978; Habermas, 1981; Melucci, 1989, 1996 ; Holst, 2002).

3 – Materialism and post-materialism: The universality of social movements:

Notwithstanding, by radically calling into question Marxian and Marxist assertions regarding the composition of social movements and the nature of the stakes within capitalism, new social movement theories tend to show the same kind of partiality and exclusivity. By replacing the predicate “material” by that of “immaterial” or “post-material” for the same subject “stakes” and by substituting “the working class” by “the middle classes and the bourgeoisie” in the composition of social movements, they put forward an anti-thesis that present the same shortcomings of monolithism and stasis as the thesis that they denounce. In fact, reflection thanks to and from empirical experiences should allow to overcome this old antinomy that is pointless.

Indeed, an ethnography of present-day Portuguese social movements, which are linked in their forms and contents to alter-globalist movements belonging to a plurality of geographical, political, economic and socio-cultural contexts, has shown that they are constituted and set in motion by a diversity of individuals that integrate various social categories. Within them, there are workers, the exploited people or economically oppressed persons, echoing Marxist and materialistic conceptions of the type of social movements, because economic domination under the form of exploitation continues to exist within contemporary capitalism. But, there are also, following this time new social movement theories and post-materialistic acceptations, individuals of the middle classes, of the petty and middle bourgeoisie owning university degrees and skilful in the use of the new technologies of information and communication to the extent that axiological, deontic and cognitive objectives determine militants’ actions as well. And even, there are new figures that did not have been taken into consideration by these two prior approaches. These new types refer to “the precarious”, “the marginals”, “the informals”, “the excluded”, “the indigents”; types that show that the genus economic domination is not reducible to economic exploitation and subsumes several species, notably a growing and chronic mass unemployment and under-employment.

In any case, the materialistic dimension remains central within social movements even though it is not irreducible and reciprocally acts with post-materialistic forms, that is, with dimensions related to the cultural, the symbolic, the identity.

Moreover, there is no longer a unique determinant social actor that would be to the forefront of social movements and mobilisations, such as the emblematic working class in the classic Marxist acceptations.

These general features are irreducible to the Portuguese situation and its movements. They appear in other societies, especially in the framework of movements linked to the phenomenon of alter-globalisation, movements that contest the current model of globalisation and its applications, propose alternatives at the world level and with which, as we have just mentioned, the studied movements in Portugal are related from an ideal and organisational point of view.

Conclusion

What is the nature of present-day social movements? Contrary to common Marxist interpretations, according to some post-modern theoreticians, contemporary movements would no longer be formed by the working class and essentially result from the middle classes, petty and middle bourgeoisie. Their objectives would no longer be economic and material but rather immaterial and symbolic.

Actually, present-day social movements are usually spaces that ensure a certain public sphere, which is not exclusively reserved to a sole particular social class – that is, neither only the bourgeoisie nor uniquely the popular strata, but rather it is a sphere which aims for universality by incorporating wide and diverse sectors of society.

In other words, current movements are composed of workers, alongside the middle classes, petty and middle bourgeoisie as well. They are trans-class. They unite a plurality of individuals belonging to different social strata, from social outcasts to the most favoured social strata with a relative importance of the middle classes having a fairly high level of education.

The materialistic substratum has re-appeared within movements in the age of contemporary capitalism founded on services, information and new technologies insofar as economic domination continues to exist. But, current movements also include “precarious”, “marginals”, “informals”, “excluded” and “poor people” and not only workers, the exploited, the economically oppressed because economic domination takes different concrete modalities that are irreducible to economic exploitation.

Moreover, alongside their materialistic substratum, they still have an idealistic substratum, such as the questions related to ethics.

In sum, contemporary movements transcend the traditional dichotomy, more theoretical than real, between “old” and “new” movements, between the materialism generally ascribed to the former and the post-materialism or idealism attributed, by contrast, to the latter. They therefore realise a synthesis between these two dimensions – the old/new or the materialism/idealism – that are no longer opposed but that are integrated and associated because contemporary societal stakes are both material and immaterial and nurture each other.

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