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ALTER-GLOBALISATION, POLITICS AND CITIZENSHIP: AN ACCOUNT OUT OF PORTUGUESE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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Resumo

Os movimentos sociais e o espaço público estão intimamente ligados. Se esta proposição parece óbvia na medida em que a maioria dos movimentos sociais têm uma dimensão exotérica essencial em vez de ser esotérica ou acroamática, e consequentemente estão orientados para espaços abertos – como a rua onde os activistas geralmente demonstram, ou mais recentemente a Internet, um ciber-espaço para a informação e a comunicação –, esta proposição no entanto implica duas perguntas cuja resposta é menos evidente e que interessam às ciências sociais: Porque e como os activistas, através dos movimentos sociais, apropriam-se do espaço público? Um conceito fundamental que pode ajudar a responder a estas perguntas é o conceito de esfera pública que foi particularmente desenvolvido por Jürgen Habermas. Um outro conceito determinante que também ele expôs é o conceito de “razão comunicativa”. Assim, antes de tudo, exploraremos teorias de Habermas elaboradas a partir destes dois conceitos-chaves ao lado de, com menor intensidade, outras importantes teorias sobre “o domínio público”, ou seja teorias propostas por Richard Sennett e Alexis de Tocqueville. Depois, numa segunda etapa, estas teorias servirão como base para analisar algumas acções de movimentos sociais portugueses que estão ligados ao fenómeno da alter-globalização, acções que foram observadas a partir de uma etnografia ou sociografia – uma sociologia *in situ* e *in actu* – realizada dentro de alguns movimentos entre os anos 2010 e 2012.

Abstract

Social movements and the public space are intimately related. If this proposition seems obvious insofar as most of social movements have an essential exoteric dimension rather than an esoteric or acroamatic one, and consequently they are oriented toward open spaces – as streets where activists commonly demonstrate, or more recently internet, a cyber-space for information and communication –, this proposition nonetheless implies two questions whose reply is less evident and which interest social sciences: Why and how do activists, through social movements, appropriate the public space? A fundamental concept that can help to answer these questions is the concept of public sphere. The latter has been particularly developed by philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas. A further determinant concept that he has also put forward is that of “communicative reason”. Thus, first of all, we shall explore Habermas’ theories elaborated from these two key concepts alongside, to a lesser extent, some other important theories regarding “the public realm”, namely those advanced by Richard Sennett and Alexis de Tocqueville. Then, in a second step, these theories will serve as basis for analysing some actions carried out by Portuguese social movements that are linked to the phenomenon of alter-globalisation, actions that have been observed from an ethnography or sociography – a sociology *in situ* and *in actu* – realised within some movements between the years 2010 and 2012.

Palavras-chave: Movimentos Sociais – Alter-Globalização – Acção – Racionalidade – Público

Keywords: Social Movements – Alter-globalisation – Action – Rationality – Publicness

Social movements and the public space are intimately related. If this proposition seems obvious given the fact that most of social movements by nature have an essential exoteric dimension rather than an esoteric or acroamatic one, albeit it is more or less marked depending on the movement, and consequently they are oriented toward open spaces (Masse, 2005, 2007, 2010) – as streets where activists commonly demonstrate, or more recently internet, a cyber-space for information and communication –, this proposition nonetheless implies two questions whose reply is less evident and which interest social sciences: Why and how do activists, through social movements, appropriate the public space?

A fundamental concept that can help to answer these questions is the concept of public sphere. The latter has been particularly developed by philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas. A further determinant concept that he has also put forward is that of “communicative reason”. Thus, first of all, we shall explore Habermas’ theories elaborated from these two key concepts alongside, to a lesser extent, some other important theories regarding “the public realm”, namely those advanced by Richard Sennett and Alexis de Tocqueville. Then, in a second step, these theories will serve as basis for analysing some actions carried out by Portuguese social movements that are linked to the phenomenon of alter-globalisation, actions that have been observed from an ethnography or sociography – a sociology *in situ* and *in actu* – realised within some movements between the years 2010 and 2012.

1. Public sphere and communicative reason:

Jürgen Habermas is one of the main theorists who have developed this concept of public sphere.

In a historical and sociological study that contrasts with his later more abstract and theoretical works, Habermas (2010 [1962]) has shown the evolution of the public sphere (*öffentlichkeit* – this German term also means “(the) public”, “publicity”, “publicness”). The latter emerged in seventeenth-century Great Britain through the spread of reading societies. In the following century, this expansion increased with the proliferation of coffee houses in Great Britain, of *salons* in France, of *tischgesellschaften* (table societies) in Germany. These places, centres of literary, art and cultural criticism, generated the development of the novel periodicals, moral weeklies and literary journalism. Hence, the public sphere first appeared in the world of letters – the literary public sphere (*literarische öffentlichkeit*).

De facto, the public sphere described and analysed by Habermas was the bourgeois public sphere (*bürgerliche öffentlichkeit*) that relied on two related criteria of admission: owning property and being “educated”. Indeed, at this time, only those who owned the economic means were able to access education; albeit, as the sociology of education has shown it – Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Passeron (1964, 1970) and Raymond Boudon (1973) –, the democratisation of education by expanding the social basis that can receive educational services has not eliminated until today inequalities of school opportunities and success, which in large measure lean upon socio-economic inequalities.

It was necessary to have a certain education in order to be able to participate, first, in the literary public sphere, and then, in the linked political public sphere (*politische öffentlichkeit*). The appearance of the public sphere is therefore related to the development of market economy and the associated socio-economic ascendancy of the bourgeoisie in the early modern period in Europe.

From the literary public sphere and a related literary self-consciousness and criticism, the bourgeoisie developed a political self-consciousness and criticism that allowed the formation of the political public sphere, which remained narrowly intertwined with the former public sphere. Thus, they gave rise to political journalism that spread along with literary journalism and the original and traditional journalism based essentially on the diffusion of international commercial news and administrative rules for merchants.

The public sphere was a sphere situated between the State and civil society, or more precisely, between the State and the private sphere – that of the world of economy and businesses, that of social reproduction along with the intimate sphere (*intimsphäre*) of the conjugal family house.

The public sphere was a sphere composed of private persons (bourgeoisie) who decided to join together – thanks to their private experiences lived around the intimate sphere of the conjugal family house and oriented toward the public through activities of literary criticisms – in order to precisely form a public, to use their reason in group (*öffentliches rasonnement*). Indeed, there, people debated publicly, rationally and critically. They sought to found a “reasoned agreement”. It was a sphere where the best argument, and not the socio-economic status, governed. It was a space for critical public reflection and informed discussion concerning issues of general or public interest. In this way, private interests linked to particular economic interests had not their place there and were left behind in the realm of the private sphere, that of economy and social reproduction marked by the competition of diverse businesses.

The private persons composing the public sphere were politically active. They systematically opposed to the opaque, secret and bureaucratic practices of the absolutist State. They claimed to rationalise the political power by making its policies and actions transparent and thereby submitting them to the rational-critical discussion and approval of the informed people. They were animated by the will to submit prince’s sovereignty (*voluntas*) to reason (*ratio*). This implied to convert “representative publicness” (*repräsentative öffentlichkeit*) – which characterised the public sphere of the feudal system inherited from the Middle Ages and which merely consisted in the display of their spiritual and socio-political power by the dignitaries (clergy, the nobility, princes and monarchs) *before* the people who had to limit themselves to acclaim them – into a “political public sphere” in which the State power or the authorities had to be publicly controlled via informed and critical discourses *by* the people. Along with this principle of publicity, the public sphere leaned upon that of universal access, of openness to all human beings. The bourgeoisie tended to confuse itself with humanity in general.

These wills and the continued political opposition against the absolutism created an active public sphere and finally contributed to the establishment of the liberal constitutional State based on the principle of publicity formulated by the liberal or bourgeois public sphere.

At the top of its development in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Europe under its liberal or bourgeois form, the public sphere – its nature and function – has been nevertheless deeply transformed since the middle nineteenth-century and until today under the effects of the development of industrial capitalism, of the mass media and of the modern State. Within this new structural context, the public sphere lost its previous features and roles. The idea and the practice of the “public” was reshaped. It lost its active role within the political realm.

If the public sphere was reserved to the bourgeoisie, nevertheless, the idea of public sphere formulated by the same bourgeoisie also rested upon principles – the principles of publicity and of universality of access to the public sphere – which allowed to go beyond the mere bourgeoisie as exclusive social category for integrating within it, from the liberal and bourgeois constitutional State that emerged in the nineteenth-century, wider social sectors. Nonetheless, this integration contributed to convert the liberal constitutional State into the social-welfare State, and finally and paradoxically to undermine the proper public sphere. Accordingly, the bourgeois public sphere contained in itself dialectical or contradictory elements that led later to its own dissolution.

The public sphere, by incorporating a wide range of social sectors according to its principle of universality of access and under the pressure of capitalism expansion, has become a place of competition among diverse and opposed economic and private interests that were before confined to the realm of the private sphere and outside the former.

This competition has generated the growth of conflicting organisations representing these diverse interests. This representation realised in interactions with the State and the other competing organisations has taken shape at the expense of the active participation of the “represented” people. Habermas asserts that this process has permitted a certain “refeudalisation” of the public sphere by going back to a sort of representative publicness to the detriment of the political public sphere – a sphere where private persons joined together in order to rationally and critically debate on public issues – which prevailed in the era of the bourgeois public sphere.

Besides, from a State based on a liberal constitution, the State has become a social-welfare State (albeit today its social-welfare role is increasingly diminishing). The social-welfare State, by intervening increasingly in terms of social rights to face social discontent provoked by capitalism expansion, has acted as an arbitrator among the different interests emerging within the public sphere, and it has sought a certain equilibrium among them in order to ensure the *ordo rerum*. The public sphere extended and included popular social strata that were systematically disadvantaged by the rules of free market. Accordingly, they have oriented via representative organisations toward the State in order to get compensation and a regulation in their behalf.

The transformation of the media also had an impact on the public sphere. By following capitalism expansion as well, the press has come to be oriented toward profitability and big oligopolistic companies have been formed. Literary and political journalism carried out by the bourgeois just for literary and political motives, for helping public information and debate, and not for monetary reasons, have been substituted by culture industry and mass media (press and broadcast media) that work as instruments for shaping public opinion, managing the passive, a-critical and a-political consensus of the people, and for developing consumer and leisure culture. Thus, “a culture-consuming public” would have replaced “a culture-debating” one and publicity would have become mere advertising.

In short, according to Habermas, state interventionism (in contradiction with the liberal idea of monitoring State authority from the public) along with the passage from a literary and political journalism to mass media and culture industry (through which people can no longer discuss together publicly, rationally and critically), the spread of competition among conflicting private interests (that before characterised exclusively the private sphere), and the related expansion of organisations representing particularistic interests (representative publicness being the mark of publicity under the feudal system and in total opposition with the bourgeois public sphere) within the public sphere – dynamics that have implied an increasing reciprocal permeation between the State and the society, which has also reached the intimate sphere – contributed to weaken it and to the disappearance of its liberal or bourgeois form.

The solution put forward by Habermas to allow the public sphere to re-establish its anterior virtuous characteristics – that is, a sphere in which private persons join together to form a public and make rational-critical debates – does not consist in going back to its bourgeois form by restricting the access to the public sphere and thereby reserving it only to an elite because this would undermine one of its core principle that affirms the universality of its access. It consists rather in keeping the representative authorities in democratic societies (political parties, interest associations) under public monitoring and control by opening them, that is, by allowing a real intra-organisational and intra-institutional participation, from below, *by* the people assembled to rationally and critically discuss about public matters.

Richard Sennett (1976 [1974]) has emphasised that since the nineteenth century the public domain has been eroded in behalf of the private realm in large measure because of the growth of capitalism and the process of secularisation of the society. The latter factors implied that the organising principle of life was no longer the transcendence of Nature but rather the immanence of individuals. To face existential interrogations, they no longer rest upon exterior and superior entities and they are nowadays oriented toward their inner Self, their own psyche, their particular “personality”.

Thus, parallel to the rise of the private realm, the *res publica*, a place in which impersonal relations, the social nexus among people not belonging to the same intimate space take shape, that is, the space of polity, has vanished.

These changes have political and social consequences. Political leaders are not chosen according to their programme or their political ideas but rather following their personality in private life, their ipseity. Democracy is in this sense affected. Modern societies would have therefore entered into the “culture of personality” that nowadays would govern social relations.

Alexis de Tocqueville (2010 [1835, 1840]), after his travel in the United States, attested that the social state of this country is characterised by the equality of social conditions. On the whole, Anglo-American people occupy social positions that are more or less similar, they have a same average level of education. Their social conditions in general therefore tend toward the middle. Before this observation, the central problem

that preoccupied Tocqueville was to know to what extent social democracy – equality of social conditions – can be realised without prejudicing political democracy, that is, freedom.

According to Tocqueville, the equalisation of conditions, irreversible process of history, covers all domains, the social, and then, the political. However, the equalisation of conditions in the political realm may provoke two antithetical consequences, two possible alternatives in relation to freedom: Either everybody has the same political rights and participates in the power – the people's sovereignty –, or, on the contrary, none governs – this signifies the people's subjection to a despot. It seems that for Tocqueville Anglo-American people chose the first path, that of political freedom and of the people's sovereignty against servitude. This political freedom is made possible in large measure thanks to two related kinds of freedom: Freedom of the press and freedom of association.

Nonetheless, he indicated that all democracies are not protected from despotic drifts and threats that aim freedom. The most important danger for democracies, in Tocqueville's view, is that of the growth of the private life to the detriment of the public affairs. As we observed it above, this is the theme that was exploited later by authors as Habermas or Sennett. For Tocqueville, in a democratic society, activities belonging to private life increase because more people can and want to carry out things for their pleasure, their well-being, for achieving some personal ambitions. By dedicating more time and energy to their private life, people have *a fortiori* less time and energy to dedicate to the public affairs. This withdrawal from public affairs risks to open the way for an absolutist power that alone and exclusively would come to grips with them.

Going back to Habermas, in what is considered as his *magnum opus* (Habermas, 2006a [1981]), (Habermas, 2006b [1981]), he developed the concepts of “communicative action” and “communicative rationality” that prolong to some degree his earlier concept of “public sphere”.

In Habermas' view, communicative action is about speech acts, the use of language, the formulation of verbal utterances within the framework of social interactions. Communication in general and communication pursued in order to get agreement or consensus in particular allow to coordinate people's social activities. Communication via the language permits social actors to understand each other, to reach shared interpretations, to give way to common definitions of situations without coercion or the use of force. These dynamics imply the existence of a rationality within communicative action. People use reasons or grounds to access intersubjective recognition concerning claims whose validity can be criticised. They put forward propositional truths, they define the rightness and the appropriateness in a reflective manner. They claim what is legitimate, sincere and authentic according to shared values and social norms, and from modes of argumentation. They contest, criticise and revise claims, and they defend themselves with reasons.

Communicative action takes place within the “lifeworld” (*lebenswelt*) – that is, drawing on Edmund Husserl (1970 [1936]), Alfred Schütz, Thomas Luckmann (1974) and phenomenology in general, within the world of everyday action and beliefs, the world of human activity and everyday sociability, the realm of shared intersubjectivity relying on shared knowledge, which is also equated, more broadly by Habermas, with the public sphere and civil society.

The lifeworld is opposed to the world of “systems”, political and economic systems, in which instrumental reason – the equation between means and ends for strategic actions following Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's criticism (1974 [1947]) – dominate. The political system is defined by the installation of an imposing administrative State while the economic system is characterised by the expansion of productive forces, market and money.

Systems follow a logic of expansion that permanently threatens to invade or colonise the lifeworld by submitting it to the teleological rationalisation. This process generates tensions and oppositions from the lifeworld and through “new social movements” like the ecology, antinuclear, peace, women, gay movements, and so on. The latter are therefore committed against the colonisation of the lifeworld by the market and money and by the bureaucratic and technocratic power. They act to save, defend and re-establish threatened ways of life, or in order to implement new ways of life, what Habermas names “*the grammar of forms of life*”.

The role of critical thought and communicative reason is to protect the lifeworld from these penetrations by acting as a mediator between the two levels of the society (the lifeworld and the systems), or by providing a link or a balance between everyday action and expertise.

2. Some analyses of Portuguese social movements related to alter-globalisation:

Social movements are public spheres. We saw that Habermas asserted that the public sphere, a place activated by and for the people (*de facto*, the bourgeoisie), an area of the public life open to the (in)formation, communication and debates on public issues, flourished in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Europe (Great Britain, France and Germany), and then, by contrast, in the following centuries, it has vanished. Sennett depicted a quite similar situation and historical evolution some years later.

In fact, social movements, and more concretely the alter-globalisation ones, are spaces that permit to maintain a certain public sphere, which is not reserved to a particular social class – that is to say, neither the bourgeoisie nor the popular strata, but rather it is about a sphere, in accord with the proper liberal or bourgeois meaning of public, which aims for the universality by incorporating wide and diverse sectors of the society. Following Habermasian terms in particular and the language of the Frankfurt School's critical theory in general, social movements construct “communicative reason” as when activists denounce “instrumental rationality” under its economicist and neo-liberal variant. They are places for “ideal speech situation”, that is, beyond their personal or private interests, beyond their idiosyncrasies, people through social movements discuss and debate publicly, rationally and critically about issues concerning the public realm. They use their reason for political matters.

This concretely occurs notably via assemblies, print and virtual media. But, this is also the case through other “repertoires of collective action” (Tilly, 1978) as when they take to the streets during marches and demonstrations, as when they re-appropriate common kinds of public places as the square. This process also happens through the activation of various artistic expressions (dramaturgies, *mises-en-scène*, paintings, sculptures, songs, music, etc.), games, exchanges (in its symbolic sense and not economic), sometimes around foods and drinks, all of them often taking place in the proper recuperated square.

In some aspects, the praxis of social movements recalls *de jure* the model of Ancient Greek democracy – although the latter was *de facto* marked by a highly exclusive character. Within the city (*polis*) and outside the private sphere (*oikonomia* – economy, management of the house), public or political life (*bios politikos*) takes shape in the square, in the marketplace (*agora*).

Activists practise a type of participative democracy, from the grassroots, from below, *by* the people, which counterweights the prevalent idea and practice of democracy in democratic countries – that is, representative democracy, which is realised from above, by the elite *before* the people. The people within the system of representative democracy are invited to participate in it only sporadically and quickly during the regular elections by giving a mere vote in order to satisfy parties' power interest, which strictly organise, supervise and control these elections without a real active integration of the former in these processes. Accordingly, militants call into question the kind of “representative publicness” that has ever been criticised by Habermas and has characterised the publicity and the public sphere in modern societies since the nineteenth-century following the expansion of capitalism, the implantation of the social-welfare State (albeit nowadays one is assisting to the continued decrease of its social-welfare function), and the growth of culture industry and the mass media. Activists question the publicity based on representation, which has allowed a certain “refeudalisation” of the public sphere, as Habermas pointed it, to the extent that the former defined the type of publicity that had prevailed since the Middle Ages within the feudal society and in which the high religious, political and statutory dignitaries – the *patriciat* – displayed their spiritual, symbolic, and socio-political prestige and power *before* the *plebs* who had to settle for acclaiming this public without being admitted to participate actively in it.

Conclusion:

Hence, the example of Portuguese alter-globalisation social movements shows how their members make public spheres, notably through the re-appropriation of public places such as the squares or streets, and consecutively reinvent democracy. This happens via repertoires of collective action that are often considered as “non-conventional politics” and including as “irrational”, in particular by the psychology of crowds, collective behaviour theories, a certain Establishment and adversaries. However, one can easily observe that these actions have, on the contrary, their own rationalities, notably by expressing and being the result of communicative reasons of people, which reappraise the concept of conventionality in politics and in democracy, and finally the ideas and practices of politics and democracy themselves.

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