

Narratives in context: social movements and the ne(s)t of possibilities
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Introduction

What I am going to say here today are highlights of a yet unfinished research. It started as an undergraduate project and is currently been continued as graduate study. The main aim of the research is to investigate the processes of giving meaning to participation in a social movement, paying close attention to actor's narratives, which trigger notions of both collective and subject. Walter Benjamin once said that "the art of narrative is about to disappear". While the experience of *Erlebnis*, the individual loneliness gets stronger, the experience of *Erfahrung*, the collective experience and shared tradition becomes weaker. Jeanne-Marie Gagnebin suggests that the reconstruction of shared tradition and collective experience can only be achieved with another kind of narrative. So, I ask, could social movements be potentially actors of this other form of narrativity? How is it built, through thought and action, that thing that allows actors to recognize themselves as a collectivity and to claim what they call 'movement'? I must emphasize, however, that I am not worried about *what* gathers people together in a social movement, even because that question could easily degenerate into a reification of notions such as culture or identity. I am, indeed, concerned with *how* the processes of giving meaning to participation in a social movement take place. And why a social movement? Besides the enchantment, already a hypothesis: that politics are indeed a world re-enchanting domain. This hypothesis is based on a definition of politics that is far from any other definition that poses politics as bureaucratic technique. Jacques Rancière asks us: "What is there to be specifically thought under the name of 'politics'?", and proposes: its rationality, the logic of disagreement. The situation of disagreement is not only the non-comprehension of words in a speech, but has to do with the situation of those involved in the communicative situation. Jeanne Favret-Saada, in her ethnographic work on the peasants living in the

Bocage, in France, realizes exactly that it is less important to decode what is said than to understand the relation between the speaker and the one to whom the speaker says. Specifically in my research, I will deal with the housing movement in the city of São Paulo, which I have been studying for two years now.

In these two years, I have accompanied meetings and protests, and together with the research group I am part of, we conducted a survey at the 11th State Meeting for Popular Housing, in the city of São Paulo, in april/2009. We conducted that survey with 147 people. According to Mariza Peirano, a brazilian anthropologist, "fieldwork, in anthropology, is not just collecting data, but is a complex procedure that has specific theoretical implications". So if the anthropological work consists in a link between theory and practice, ethnography (as research and writing) is a dear method to study the theme of collective action fundamentally because it can offer us conceptual mediations which are loyal to the relational and non-essential specificity of social movements.

During the analysis of the data and the meetings to discuss the outcomes of the fieldwork, some theories about social movements came up, namely the Theory of Resource Mobilization and the Theory of New Social Movements. But they didn't work out to be loyal to the research object in the way I later understood I should apprehend it, mainly because I realized it was not worthy nor fair, speaking from an anthropological point of view, to suppose the social movement as an homogeneous actor, which positions and arguments are well defined, but rather consider it as relational and situational. So another hypothesis of this research is that the multiple senses of collectivity are built by the actors working in more or less creative organization schemes and, most of all, when these actors historicize their condition and connect past, present and future thorough narratives that have intelligibility as their main challenge.

In a broader sense, what moves me in this study is to contribute to the debate around and the effort to cease the dichotomy between action and structure in the social

sciences. Allying the study of social movements with a narrative perspective and ethnographic work, I believe there will be some contributions to share. So I will first give you some highlights about the history of the housing movement in São Paulo, and, next, discuss some aspects of the research.

First part: Some highlights about the housing movement in São Paulo, Brazil

The housing movement began in São Paulo at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, when people who lived in tenements started struggling for more fair renting taxes and energy and water bills; against the abuses of landlords, such as unwarned evictions; and for the regularization of lots. In the following years, several organizations were created, split, merged and re-created. The main reason for these creations and re-creations of organizations were disagreements regarding the forms of action mobilized by different groups of people that are part of the housing movement. Forms of action such as occupations, street manifestations, participating in councils and other public spaces of negotiation with the State; or electing people to represent their interests officially in the government.

When I say “organizations of social movements”, I intend to emphasize that I am talking about specific organizations that compose the field of the social movement. Therefore I am not following the native terms, to whom 'social movement' is a blurry term, that may include more or less groups, more or less concretely (because it may also refer to an abstract idea of the movement, sometimes). When I want to refer to the housing movement as a field, as an abstraction, or as a network with interactions and relationships, or even as a synthesis of an ethical-political spectrum, I will just say “movement”, or “social movement”. Organizations have borders, clear objectives, power structures, rules, statute, elected coordinators etc. Movements, on the other hand, are a bit fluid, they are networks and relations, interactions through which different actors, with different identities and

orientations elaborate a shared system of beliefs, principles and a sense of belonging that transcends organizational borders. In this definition, I am inspired in the writings of Mario Diani (2003, p. 26). I am only separating the organizations from every other meaning the term “social movement” may express, in order to make myself clear. So what I call 'organizations of social movements' are, for example, the MMC - I will say the Portuguese acronyms and the approximated names in English - , Downtown Housing Movement; ULC, the Union of Tenements Struggle; MMRC, Housing Movement of the Central Area; and MSTC, Downtown Homeless Movement.

So, during field research, what we observed was a fragmentation of the housing movement, and the effort of leaderships – because we did notice the presence of leaders – to relate events, arguments and organizations to one another, in order to make stronger a sense of collectivity in the movement. So we realized that there are two main organizations that gather together other smaller organizations while emphasizing, these two bigger organizations, different practices, more or less polarized: the first one, called UMM, the Portuguese acronym for Union of Housing Movements, is a main actor in dealing with government bodies. The other one is FLM, another acronym for something like a striking front to struggle for housing, and is highly present in occupations of idle properties, and other types of action that they consider *combative*. Besides that, all the organizations of the housing movement have one thing in common: the struggle for the right to a dignified housing.

Once the housing movement asserts that right, it triggers a field of conflicts, a time-space of disagreement, as Rancière proposes, nowadays strongly present in disputes concerning the downtown area. In one side, there are gentrification proposals; repossession in occupations of idle properties; expulsion of homeless that live downtown. On the other hand, there are proposals to use the idle/empty buildings of the center of the city for social interest housing (HIS), according to Brazilian law and the social function that

land must follow; the struggle for more participation in the public spaces concerning habitation policies; concerns about other rights, like health, education and social security.

These two sides, however, are ideal types. Actions, strategies, horizons and projects are way more nuanced: from actors that think that it is acceptable to live in the periphery as long as there is enough infra-structure to live far from downtown (such as public transportation and schools); to those whose main argument is struggle for urban reform or even against capitalism; and there are, still, those who see the housing movement as an expression of deepened citizenship and democracy. In what concerns downtown São Paulo, we have noticed the existence of different framing strategies to build, like an assemblage, the argument on the importance of bringing social housing, popular housing, to the center of the city.

We have also noticed dilemmas concerning how to combine fund raising activities with the emancipatory potentials of the movement. What makes us realize the fragmentation and heterogeneity that define the social movement also makes us realize one of its main efforts: to become a political collective subject. This main effort is permeated with continuity and discontinuity in relationships, as I will show next, with some research data.

Second part: Research results

In the housing movement, one of the major issues concerns modes of action. The dichotomy between direct action and struggling from inside the State is one of the main reasons for the creation and split, merge and re-creation of organizations. And in the roll of direct actions, there are occupations. Nowadays, disagreements as to the role of occupations are central in the movement. There are those who defend occupations as a place to live in and build different everyday relationships, and there are those who claim occupations must be brief and quick, to draw attention to the existence of the movement

and to point out its claims, publicizing them. As I mentioned, we conducted a survey, at the 11th State Meeting for Popular Housing, in São Paulo, in may/2009. One of the questions in the survey was: “What’s your opinion about occupations?” Being for or against occupations were positions that could express relationships of continuity and discontinuity. Being for them was justified, for example, by claiming occupations as legitimate and effective political instruments, once it made possible to pressure the government to ensure citizens' rights and to make other sectors of society aware of problems concerning housing issues. One of the interviewees told us that occupations are necessary to make negotiation processes possible, just like strikes in factories.

We also found a pragmatic argumentation, impossible to refute even according to the logic of big construction companies: there are lots of idle properties, and lots of homeless people, or people needing houses – why not to occupy them, those idle properties? There are, still, those who answer the question, about opinion about occupations, in a conditioned way. The first condition we noticed was that occupations should be legal: the property should be idle according to the law, as it is known in the Brazilian Constitution. The second kind of conditioned acceptance of occupations as legitimate represented a worry about organization: occupations should be organized before, during (with, for example, income-generating activities) and after it happens. And that should no matter whether an occupation leads to transforming the property in housing for social interest or it ends violently, with police intervention to guarantee the repossession to the legal owner. Finally, a third kind of conditional support to occupations is pointing it out as a last option, when dialogue with governments comes to deadlocks, seems to freeze.

Around 40% of the interviewees told us they were explicitly against occupations. One of the main arguments raised was the defense of private property, almost always combined to a meritocratic argument alluding to the achievement of homeownership. Such

notions of private property and meritocracy seemed to be behind arguments pro and anti-occupations. A pro-occupation answer that says, for example, that once the movement occupies an idle property it is not in order to claim a *free house* – and they do emphasize that – seems to have those assumptions, and the same goes for an anti-occupation person stating “I'm not pro-occupation because the property is not mine”.

I hope this example I chose to show you, about occupations and a bit of how the actors manage to put them, the occupations, in plural positions, have made sense to think about continuity and discontinuity of positions and arguments of a social movement and specifically among the actors of that movement. What I would like to draw attention to here is that the movements' strategies of actions do not refer to the essence of the social movement, but to ways of how militants try to solve their dilemmas concerning to collective action in specific contexts.

In order to organize the project (more than the research, actually), I would like to remember what Roy Dilley says about context: “(...) context are sets of connections construed as relevant to someone, to something or to a particular problem, and this process yields an explanation, a sense, an interpretation for the object so connected. the context of frame also creates a disjunction between the object of interest and its surroundings on the one hand, and those features which are excluded and deemed as irrelevant on the other”.

Therefore, context can be considered not as external elements of the research object, but indeed the relations that the object of the research may have with external elements. But why to think context as relations? Again, that just makes sense once one recognizes the object of research as non-essentialist but rather counting with different relations being combined.

It might be possible to approximate context and narrative, due to the relational character in both of the conceptual resources. I was happy to find that Polletta said: “If part

of the power of mobilizing narratives lies in their polyvalence of meaning, oppositional meanings must always contend with more conventional ones". The concerning, here, is also – and all the time – about making sense. Victor Turner also seems to share this concern. He says that narratives may rearticulate opposite values and objectives, once it relates past, present and future in a signifiante structure. His concept of social drama seems to be quite helpful for the study of social movements, once a social drama consists in a chained sequence of events and represent a complex interaction between a) normative patterns that have been built through social experience and carry the weight of conditioned acting and b) immediate aspirations, ambitions or other objectives and conscious struggles of groups or individuals 'right here, right now'.

But the first condition for the happening of a social drama is the break of a rule, a custom, a habit. This breaking can be seen as the indeed expression of deep social conflicts, inherent to a group, that concern to structural social problems, which are referenced and updated in the drama itself. So, I suggest, the housing movement of the city of São Paulo might exist in a time and space of disagreement, explicitly lived in social dramas. And from now on, I intend to apprehend the structure of experience, through narratives that the movement performs, through acting, events and articulation of past, present and future.