

A RETURN OF CLASS STRUGGLE WITHOUT CLASS? MORAL ECONOMY AND POPULAR RESISTANCE IN BRASIL, SOUTH AFRICA AND PORTUGAL

INTRODUCTION

Right and left of the political spectrum, the present seems to be a time of social polarisation with so-called populism returning with full force and on a global scale. On one side, Donald Trump and Brexit; on the other, Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. The advances of the far right in Central and Eastern European countries have been followed by electoral victories of the far left in the South of the continent. The pink tide that swept through Latin America in the 2000s has collapsed in the face of parliamentary coups (Honduras, Paraguay, Brasil...) and close-run electoral victories for right-wing parties (Argentina, Chile...). As was recently the case with President Dilma Rousseff in Brasil, Jacob Zuma in South Africa faced a process of impeachment in the midst of an unprecedented social crisis that combined the intensification of strikes and the trivialisation of xenophobic attacks in poor communities.

As already amply argued and documented, the crisis of globalisation that began in 2008 was a watershed in international politics, prompting the ruling classes of the Global North to resort to state interventionism as a means to stabilise the system. Having secured this objective, however, they once again began to attack the subaltern classes with an even crueller form of neoliberalism. Workers are paying for the crisis through rigorous austerity plans and ever lower living standards. In a nutshell, the wave of neoliberal exploitation tends to sow rebellion and multiply conflicts that are difficult to solve through

traditional democratic ways. It is easy to see various similarities with the interwar period of the last century and its succession of economic crises and political upheavals.

Both in Global South and North, the essentially destructive nature of market self-regulation takes its toll in terms of human suffering, threatening the “substance of society itself,” to recall Karl Polanyi. Naturally, the destruction promoted by neoliberalism is not limited to a single country, but has accompanied the historical dissemination of the market itself as a globalising institution. The crisis of Fordism in the 1970s and the consolidation of the neoliberal hegemony from the 1980s onward not only subverted the social forms of market regulation, they also inaugurated a new wave of commodification, whose most visible outcome is the growth of economic insecurity and social inequality throughout virtually the entire world.

The wave of commodification begun in the 1970s and intensified with the collapse of bureaucratic socialism in the 1990s rapidly erased decades of efforts to institutionalise what Edward P. Thompson (1978: 66) called “the moral economy of the poor,” that is:

[A] consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action.

Are we witnessing a return to the times of class struggle without class? This is what I intend to assess in this article, based on the evolving class experiences of poor and precarious workers in three countries in the so-called Global South.⁴ Here, the English historian does not let us forget that the traditional forms of representation of the working classes – that is, trade unions and the workers’ parties – have undergone a transition in which the old Fordist organisational structures are no longer effective in altering the course of this decline, while new organisational experiences are still in their embryonic stages. Moreover, not only does the plebeian consciousness differ from that of the industrial working class but also its characteristic form of revolt – that is, direct and rapid action.

After all, the growing deterioration of Fordist wage relations and the rise of unemployment in many countries have promoted the growth of casual labour, which takes labour protection away from workers, in addition to increasing turnover and encouraging intermittent work. Collective bargaining has become more and more decentralised, and work contracts increasingly precarious and individualised, undermining the protective capacity of the ‘moral’ economy of the poor, turning direct action into, perhaps, the only credible alternative.

Nevertheless, it is surprising that the convergence of neoliberalisation of the economy, job insecurity and the global growth of the labour force has

been accompanied by the intensification of social struggles across different regions of the planet.² Protests became more and more frequent after the onset of the crisis of globalisation, peaking between 2011 and 2015. Hence the astonishment: how to interpret the anomaly that Fordist syndicalism is on the wane, yet worker mobilisation is stronger? (Carothers & Youngs, 2015).

The first clue is given by Marcel van der Linden, who argues that what distinguishes the current cycle is the fact that the overwhelming majority of labour protests registered in the database of the Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies (AIAS) have directed their complaints to government, demanding that the nation state, rather than looking after the interests of large banks and business sectors, develop economic and social policies capable of halting the 'demoralisation' of the citizens' 'moral' economy (Linden, 2016: 202).

In short, the current protests revolve around the opposition to the wave of commodification of labour, land and money, translated in terms of the elimination of food and fuel subsidies, wage cuts, tax increases on the circulation of goods and essential services, attacks on social security, regressive reforms of retirement and health systems, precarious employment, and control over the prices of public transport and rents. In addition, the association of this agenda with criticism of the excessive influence of the power of finance and large corporations on the decisions taken by national governments has become increasingly common. In short, the workers, especially those in the Global South, are resignifying their class experience in order to defend, through direct action, their own subsistence from the threat posed by neoliberalism.

PORTUGAL: THE PLEBEIAN DRIVE

For several decades, the Fordist model of development led by European social democracy was the main antidote to the fluctuating and unstable character of the jobs and lifestyles of subaltern wage-earning classes, fulfilling the function of inspiring the imagination of workers not only in the North but above all in the Global South. Within Europe itself, the promise of wage citizenship – that is, a combination of occupational progress and labour protection for the majority of wage earners – stimulated the activism of social labour forces in different national contexts, especially after the collapse of the authoritarian cycle that imprisoned Europe's periphery until the mid-1970s.

The possibility for semi-peripheral countries such as Spain, Greece and Portugal, for example, to achieve a level of social protection compatible with the most advanced Western European countries was trumpeted as one of the main advantages of the project of continental integration revived in the early 1980s at the insistence of the first Mitterrand government. Indeed, this was the effect on the new governments of southern Europe seeking to consolidate their respective democratic transitions. The Portuguese case was the most emblematic of all.

After all, the trajectory of a solitary and victorious popular revolution, largely led by forces aligned with the Soviet bloc and later absorbed by the European project, revealed, in a moment of uncertainty about the feasibility of the European Union, both its politically neutralising potential and its social strength in terms of economic development. Despite the considerable scepticism about European integration shown by the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers (CGTP) from the outset, the enthusiasm with which the country's political elite and ruling classes embraced the project secured Portugal a pioneering role in unifying the continent.

However, because the European project was an initiative focused on the creation of a single currency, intended to ensure a common consumer market that would boost the commodification of labour on a continental scale, it not only frustrated a considerable portion of the political expectations aroused by Portugal's democratisation, it also changed the country's class structure in remarkable fashion.

In spite of the undeniable progress made by continental integration in the modernisation of the country's infrastructure, in addition to advances in education and health, Portuguese society has also experienced a period of deepening class inequality whose end result is an increase in social unrest and political polarisation. In order to analyse the experience of poor Portuguese workers and their forms of mobilisation in the last decade and a half, I shall focus on the construction of different independent organisations of young adults experiencing precarious employment and the emergence of a renewed agenda and new repertoires of direct action.

Schematically, we can differentiate two major moments in this process: first, in the early 2000s, there was the wave of social mobilisation associated with the outbreak of alternative globalisation, represented by the experience of the World Social Forums and their regional (European Social Forum) and national (Portuguese Social Forum) counterparts. The second wave began in 2011 in the context of the global economic crisis and the adoption of the austerity policy negotiated between the Troika (that is, the FMI, the European Central Bank and the European Commission) and the national government, led first by socialist Prime Minister José Sócrates and, soon after, by his successor, conservative politician Pedro Passos Coelho.

Predictably, the application of a set of austerity measures centred on the erosion of labour rights and on cuts in healthcare and education expenditure precipitated a sudden change in the political conjuncture, inaugurating the revitalisation of collective action by workers. To take just one initial example, between 2010 and 2013, Portugal experienced five general strikes, as many as during the entire previous democratic period (since 1974).

In addition to deepening the social crisis, the implementation of austerity policies in southern Europe radicalised all previous trends towards pre-

carious labour, such as contractual flexibilization and low salaries, paving the way for a new wave of mobilisations across Europe, originated precisely in Portugal (Soeiro, 2015).

First and foremost, we are talking about the maturing of the existing relationship between the militancy influenced by the EuroMayDay movement, the expansion of the precariat due to the deterioration of working conditions in the context of the crisis of globalisation and the full-scale deployment of austerity policies decided at the European level. Here a rapid observation may be useful. By 'precariat' I mean those groups of the working class immersed in precarious living and working conditions, more susceptible to economic crises and, consequently, more exposed to the cycles of increased poverty and inequalities between classes.

Additionally, we should also include in this notion those intermediary layers of different social classes, especially younger workers, who, because of the increase in social inequalities, are becoming more proletarianized. In Marxist terms, we could say that the precariat comprises that fraction of the working class formed by an amalgam of its latent, fluctuating and stagnated populations (Braga, 2012). Thus the precariat can be said to be formed by social groups of poor workers and middle-class sectors of society, especially the younger generation, more or less permanently shuttling between rising economic exploitation and the threat of social exclusion.

When we observe the subaltern classes in the different national societies, it becomes clear that the precariat is one of their most populous sectors. In referring to the precariat, therefore, I am not seeking to substitute concepts such as 'workers,' 'subaltern classes' or even 'plebeian' with this notion, but simply to describe the sector of the subaltern classes in a form that appears more useful when it comes to understanding the current cycle of popular uprisings at global level.

On this point, I should emphasize that I adopt a certain distance from the concept of the 'multitude' extensively elaborated by Toni Negri and Michael Hardt (2004). For these authors, the multitude is the source of a global constituent power precisely because, as a class, it maintains very similar characteristics in different countries due to the globalization of production and which confronts the 'empire' formed by the amalgam of world corporations with institutions of global governance (G-7, WTO, IMF etc.). Among the main characteristics of the multitude is its engagement with the "production of differences, inventions and ways of life," leading to an "explosion of singularities" connected and coordinated by a "open constituent process."

As I aim to highlight in this article, the precariat has proven to be a dynamic source of contestations directed not at corporations or global governance but at nation states. Moreover, I do not identify the precariat as a source of some kind of 'global constituent power,' since its action consists of resisting

the attacks of commodification primarily through defence of the protective pole of labour and, consequently, of their own subsistence. Thus the precariat is not situated 'outside' institutions by its 'constitution' of a new kind of global society, but tends instead to manifest as a source of 'instituent power' – that is, a reformist social force capable of challenging the nation state through the language of social rights.³

In the case of Portugal, the new cycle of political uprisings from 2011 onwards led by young workers reveals the importance of this instituent dimension, sharing some key features with the previous cycle, including the importance of social networks, organizational horizontality and the centrality of collectives focused on combatting fake independent labour contracts.

It is important to stress, however, that the transition from the 2000s to the 2010s was accompanied by an adjustment in the scale of social protests. The globalised dimension of the protests was pushed into the background in favour of demands for more democracy and changes to national policies. The precariat has turned against the nation state.

This undoubtedly helps us understand the reasons behind the re-evaluation of unions by the precarious worker movements. To a certain extent, a shift can be observed from a markedly hostile stance, perceptible in the Euro-MayDays, towards a more collaborative attitude vis-à-vis the unions. After all, with the welfare state becoming the favourite target of the policy of spoliation, the trade unions emerged as natural allies in defence of the 'moral' economy of the poor – that is, of fundamental rights, public welfare, and spending on health services and education.

The first successful post-Fordist experience of self-mobilisation of the young precariat in Portugal was probably the organisation of the December 2002 strike by the call centre operators of Energias de Portugal (EDP). In a context of high labour turnover and virtually non-existent unionisation, the STOP Precariedade collective managed to organise plenary sessions with the operators who eventually led the campaign against the company's proposed wage cuts (Soeiro, 2015).

This pioneering strike inaugurated the cycle of mobilisations of the young precariat of Portugal, originally formed – and not by chance – in the call centre industry. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that the trade union identity remained relatively fragile in the Portuguese call centre industry. To some extent, this was due to a combination of political inexperience and the malpractice of trade unions active in the sector. Hence the importance of initiatives like those of the Association Against Precarious Work – Inflexible Precarious Workers (PIs), whose direct action tactics have focused precisely on this group of workers.

The PIs was created during the first MayDay Lisbon, in 2007. The PIs rapidly stood out due to their denunciation of labour abuses, especially the

debts owed by self-employed workers to the social security administration. Acting alongside other organisations (here it is worth mentioning the collectives engaged in the struggle for housing) throughout the second half of the 2000s, the PIs were able to diversify their scope of action, promoting, in addition to meetings and briefings on labour rights, activities such as theatre classes, creative writing workshops, book launches and picture exhibitions.

In the second half of the 2000s, the main interest of the PIs was to discuss with workers the agenda of precarious labour, then still a distant issue for the unions. The preferred method was direct action through exemplary initiatives that attracted the attention of a broad public, such as invasions of call centres and the spraying of graffiti on temporary employment agencies. From the very outset, in fact, direct transgressive action was the method chosen by the movement of precarious workers to increase the visibility of its agenda. Invasion of call centres in particular became the movement's hallmark (Soeiro, 2015).

However, with the 2008 crisis and the implementation of austerity policies negotiated with the Troika, these initiatives gradually lost their effectiveness, mainly due to the fears that workers still harboured about supporting such interventions. The decline of the precarious workers movement in Portugal observed in the late 2000s was short-lived. In 2011, a new cycle of protests broke out in the country, to the surprise of most political analysts (Baumgarten, 2013).

Between March 2011 and November 2013, in fact, there were twelve large street demonstrations, organised either by precarious workers or by the trade union movement. The wave of mobilisations began with the demonstration of March 12, 2011, known as *Geração à Rasca* [the 'Generation in Trouble' or 'Desperate Generation'], convened through social networks independently of the trade unions. This demonstration succeeded in generating mass support, especially among young precarious workers, becoming, despite its contradictions, a clear turning point in the Portuguese political scene.

The novelty of the movement was its focus on the social protagonism of young precarious workers, addressing labour market issues and the democratic deficit, and challenging the Portuguese government (Baumgarten, 2013). Analysing the 2,083 letters left at the Assembly of the Republic by demonstrators on March 12, 2011, in fact, José Soeiro (2015) concluded that, in addition to the labour and employment issues that mostly dominated the protest, there was also a clear general concern about participation in the country's democratic life.

In the case of the link between the movement of precarious young workers and trade unionism, this usually tense relationship demonstrably matured as the economic crisis deepened and the bases of the unions' bargaining power steadily deteriorated. As the need to defend labour rights increasingly became part of the routine of anti-austerity mobilisations, a more collaborative rather

than competitive agenda began to flourish between the movement of young workers in precarious employment and the trade unions, especially those affiliated to the CGTP. These unions came to perceive the precarious workers movement as an ally in the resistance to dismantlement of the 'moral' economy of the popular classes promoted by the Portuguese government's agreement with the Troika.

Specifically, the general strike convened by the CGTP and UGT on November 24, 2011, regarded by many trade unionists as the largest general strike in Portuguese history, saw the mass rallying of young workers in precarious jobs who joined the trade unionists' protest in front of the Assembly of the Republic. Additionally, the CGTP helped convene the demonstration of March 2, 2013, organised by the *Que Se Lixe a Troika* ['Screw the Troika'] movement. This was the culmination of a whole series of initiatives carried out by the most active sectors of the trade union and social movements, including teachers, nurses, pensioners and dockers, resulting in a day of protest that gathered 800,000 demonstrators in Lisbon (Camargo, 2013).

In the wake of the plebeian insurgency that marked the beginning of the new cycle of precariat mobilisation emerged a new conjuncture that stimulated the strikes of young precarious workers. The proximity of the latter to organisations such as the PIs, for example, would not only redefine the forms of militant engagement when the mass demonstrations began to wane, but also test the limits of Portuguese trade-union bureaucratism.

Probably the most important example of this new appetite for trade unions was the strike by phone operators from *Linha Saúde 24* (the 24 Health Helpline). Linked to the National Health Service (SNS), the helpline was created in the mid-2000s as a screening, counselling and triage service for patients. It was a medium-sized operation employing four hundred telephone operators, most of them nurses, responsible for staffing the 24-hour telephone service at two separate call centres located in Lisbon and Porto. The employment relationship between these operators and the telemarketing company was based on "false green receipts" (Soeiro, 2015).

At the end of 2013, when the ministry outsourced the contract to another firm, workers were presented with a proposal to cut their wages by 50%. A labour conflict then ensued that culminated with the first strike on January 4, 2014. This moment of mobilisation was marked by the emergence of two workers' commissions, based in Lisbon and Porto respectively and organised via Facebook. Through appeals made to the Authority for Working Conditions (ACT), demands to the Directorate-General for Health, meetings with parliamentary groups, and mobilisation of the *Ordem dos Enfermeiros* (the professional and regulatory body representing Portuguese nurses), the PIs sought to circumvent the company's attempts to limit the wage dispute to private employer-employee negotiations, taking the strike to the public sphere (Soeiro, 2015).

This exercise of symbolic power by subalterns proved successful. The company's decision to fire the striking helpline employees failed to achieve the expected result, since the strike had already become a topic of parliamentary debate, prompting the *Ordem dos Enfermeiros* and the CGTP to adopt an official position. The public visibility achieved by the strike forced the company to cancel the layoffs and, the following month, the ACT report recognized that they were not self-employed. This in turn led to approval of the Law on Precarious Employment (passed after the Citizens' Legislative Initiative that resulted from the *Geração da Rasca* demonstrations) which formalized the employment relationship of teleoperators. The strike came to an end (Soeiro, 2015).

The recent Portuguese experience has shown that the worlds of institutional political life, including trade unions, and the precarious workers movement are complementary rather than antagonistic. At the same time, the experience revealed one of the main limits of the current wave of social rebellions, namely the centrality of the nation state in the political struggle of the global precariat. The cornerstone of this political dynamic seems to be the strengthening of parties aligned with the mobilisation of the precariat, such as the Portuguese Left Bloc.

SOUTH AFRICA: THE REBELLION OF THE POOR

Despite recent efforts to rebuild the safety net following the election of the socialist government of Antonio Costa, the crisis of globalisation has devastated a considerable part of the labour rights and social protection system in Portugal. This is a trend that can be readily observed throughout Southern Europe. The pace at which 'austericidal' attacks on wage-based citizenship have been taking place in semi-peripheral capitalist countries suggests that the democratic regulation of the social conflict is being progressively replaced with despotic regimes disguised as – to use Boaventura de Sousa Santos's (2006) expression – "low-intensity democracies."

As a general rule, the deeper the 'demoralisation' of the 'moral' economy of the poor, the greater the scope of 'social apartheid,' that is, the spoliation through the articulation of different modes of commodification (of labour, land and money) of poor workers and their achievements in terms of obtaining social protection, access to basic services, income guarantees and citizenship rights. Evidently, as occurred under the racial apartheid regime in South Africa, this social apartheid now spreading through semi-peripheral capitalist countries, driven by accumulation through spoliation, has prompted widespread popular resistance.

For various reasons, the South African case is emblematic of the reinvention of apartheid, now no longer in the guise of the despotic racialisation that ensured the reproduction of a labour system based on black migrant workers (Wolpe, 1972). While the emergence of the apartheid system was inseparable

from this recrudescence of racial segregation in the context of the South African 'nationalist revolution' of the 1940s, the political attacks of white nationalists on the black population, added to the economic effects of the advent of racist and peripheral Fordism in South Africa, stimulated the intensification of black workers' resistance to the segregational structures of the apartheid regime (Moodie, 1975).

The combination of a slowdown in the economic growth cycle and a renewal of the political challenges represented by the increased resistance of the black population reached a turning point in the 1970s (Saul & Bond, 2014). Of course, the class experience forged from the combination of industrial despotism, racial segregation and large-scale political exclusion provided a backbone to the trajectory of the black trade union movement in South Africa.

Subsequently, the rise of popular resistance during the 1980s was largely due to the refusal of the African subaltern classes to remain subjected to the oppression of a racist state. In this sense, precarious workers in South Africa acted as a social force capable of dissolving the racist structures, galvanising the class struggle in the country on a scale that was almost uncontrollable for the regime. Although far from being the main protagonist of the resistance movement to apartheid between the 1960s and 1980s, the national liberation movement, with the African National Congress (ANC) at its forefront, re-emerged in the early 1990s as the principal instrument of South Africa's transformation into a representative democracy (Saul & Bond, 2014).

In short, while it was not inevitable that the ANC would establish a politically hegemonic position within the national liberation movement, it was quite likely to happen given the combination of a well-structured political group and the charismatic leadership of Nelson Mandela. However, although the national liberation movement proved successful in directing the country's transformation into a representative democracy, it is important to point out that the ANC's celebrated agreements with the National Party consummated a pact largely favourable to the interests of local capital and global interests (Ashman, Fine & Newman, 2011).

Moreover, almost immediately after Nelson Mandela's electoral victory, the ANC's old banner of the national liberation struggle was replaced by the push to construct a democratic nation state based on a globalised capitalist economy. The new ruling party largely transformed any contestation to its new liberal orientation into a political deviation punishable under the party's disciplinary regime. Government austerity measures, including budget cuts, led to a decline in economic growth. And when the economy recovered in the second half of the 2000s due to the commodity super-cycle, the unemployment rate failed to fall to the same levels as the 1990s.

At the peak of economic growth in the 2000s, therefore, the sectors employing the most workers were those linked to private services. Because these sectors rely heavily on outsourced and subcontracted workforces, the new occupations tended to be underpaid, unstable and precarious (Marais, 2011).

The promise of national liberation through hard work resulted in the need for successive ANC governments to discipline the insurgent plebeian classes that began to threaten the stability of the 'national-democratic revolution' as black workers began to conclude that their wages were not an alternative to extreme poverty. With the crisis of globalisation that began in 2008, coupled with rising unemployment, especially among black and poor workers, the hopes of young adults for paid employment with unionised rights seemed to fade.

Unlike what happened in Portugal, resistance to the articulation of modes of labour, land and money commodification in South Africa did not begin with the defence of a fragile welfare state. For most African workers, the real utopia has never been a protective state, but simply a permanent job. In addition, the privatisation of municipal water and electricity services aggravated the poverty of African households primarily affected by precarious employment, prompting a debt crisis among working families and fuelling a new cycle of popular protests led by poor communities (Desai, 2002).

In these communities, water and power supplies are no longer a right subsidised by the local authorities, but a commodity like any other. In short, the dynamics of labour precarisation in the country has been fuelled less by revolt against the dismantling of labour regulations and more by the 'demoralisation' of the 'moral' economy of the poor, in particular, the most basic forms of human subsistence.

As the contours of these assaults on their welfare became clearer, new community-based organisations and lobby groups began to emerge on the South African political scene. These social movements have primarily focused on problems identified as urgent by residents of poor communities and neighbourhoods, such as access to privatised municipal services, opposition to forced evictions, and precarious employment. However, the new social movements present a series of differences that are potentially conflictual in tactical terms, as well as an excessive fragmentation of national campaigns against the ANC's policies (Buhlungu, 2005).

Although the new social movements emerging from the splits of the Tripartite Alliance did not present a real challenge to the neoliberal hegemony of the ANC, a new wave of significantly more violent and spontaneous mass popular protests from the mid-2000s onwards began to threaten the continuity of the post-apartheid mode of regulation. A wave of daily struggles in poor neighbourhoods increased subaltern pressure on political authorities, filling the void left by the collapse of new social movements in the early 2000s (Alexander, 2010).

In a way, for black workers the post-apartheid period was a transition from the centrality of labour struggles to the centrality of struggles for better living conditions in poor neighbourhoods and communities. When steady employment, despite its enormous importance for working families, ceases to be a short-term demand of trade unions, the sphere of social reproduction understandably assumes a more prominent position in the way of life of subaltern

populations. Workers are thus compelled to transform the employment crisis into political actions in their neighbourhoods, shifting their organisational efforts to issues of debt oppression and spatial segregation.

It seems no exaggeration to state that the protests of poor communities and the challenges posed by new social movements to the Tripartite Alliance added to the fatigue of the ANC's own leaders in relation to neoliberal policies, paving the way for Jacob Zuma to assume leadership of the South African liberation movement at the ANC conference held in Polokwane in 2007. However, the hopes for a neodevelopmental turn awakened by Zuma's rise to power gradually disappeared as social instability spread and deepened as a result of the global economic crisis.

In addition to presenting projects to create precarious job opportunities for Africans, the government's response has focused on social expenditures largely insufficient to meet the needs of communities, which tends to stimulate social mobilisation to demand increases in public spending.

In this regard, it should be noted that the recent wave of xenophobic violence in South Africa differs from the social protest of poor communities against local governments, both in terms of levels of coercion and in relation to priority targets. However, although this is a controversial subject, field research has revealed the existence of disturbing similarities between the two kinds of protest, sharing repertoires, approximating collective action and violence, and voicing complaints about corruption and the incompetence of the state in providing services adequate to the needs of poor communities (Holdt et al., 2011).

Reacting to these pressures, the ruling party has undertaken to replace local leaderships weakened by the intensification of the cycle of protests in poor communities. The results achieved by the ANC have generally not been encouraging. This stems from the fact that xenophobic violence has become the preferred mode of collective action – indeed, in the informal settlements and in the old shantytowns, the government has a markedly remote presence.

As the social conflicts became more and more radical, the repressive tendency of Zuma's government became unambiguous, culminating in the country's largest massacre since the 1976 Soweto uprising. On August 16, 2012, South African police killed 34 workers, mostly immigrants, who were taking part in a peaceful meeting in a public area outside the town of Marikana. The miners' demands were simple: they wanted their employer, the Lonmin company, to accept their request for salary readjustment.

However, the company's managers inferred that a claim sent through direct action and without authorisation of the NUM, the all-powerful miners' union, threatened the system of labour relations that had thus far ensured both the business owners' profits and the privileges of trade unionists. Both the management and the union decided, therefore, to resort to the police to disci-

pline the miners. As can be concluded from the analysis of the testimonies of striking workers who witnessed the flow of events, the massacre was not a result of a disastrous reaction of police officers seeking to protect themselves from the fury of armed immigrant workers, but a deliberately planned action involving the company, government and union (Holdt et al., 2011).

However, this full-blown bloodbath was not enough to put an end to the miners' strike. On the contrary, the surviving leaders refused to back down, organising a massive march to the company headquarters, attended by the entire poor population of Marikana. Faced with the resilience of the strikers, the Lonmin company finally relented and opened direct negotiations with the miners, agreeing to readjust the salaries of drill operators by 22% and to award a bonus of 2,000 rands to all strikers who returned to work.

To some extent, the convergence of tensions that accumulated in the 2000s and deepened after the global crisis in 2008, reached its end point in Marikana. Probably the greatest challenges faced by South African workers today are to overcome bureaucratism, organise the precariat and rebuild ties of solidarity between unions and poor communities in order to revive a social movement capable of coping with the crisis of globalisation. Despite the enormous difficulties inherent to this task, it is important to highlight the strategic role played by the precarious sectors in any credible attempt to reinvent the labour movement in South Africa.

BRAZIL: THE MEANINGS OF JUNE

South African neoliberalism relied on the commodification of labour, land, money and public services in the country, as well as the state's strategic participation in the configuration of a hegemonic regime whose legitimacy was fuelled by the memory of the many struggles against a racist dictatorship. It is an odd combination that only highlights the unstable nature of a hybrid political form arising from a passive revolution in the semi-periphery of the system. From the perspective of the global history of labour, such a remarkable accumulation of social contradictions resulting from a democratisation with a considerable involvement of working-class organisations only finds a parallel in the Brazilian experience.

As was the case of Mandela eight years earlier, the presidential election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2002 attracted worldwide attention. And, as with the ANC government, the hope that the Workers' Party (PT) administration would move away from the neoliberal policies adopted by previous administrations also soon gave way to scepticism. The guarantee of operational independence of the Central Bank, the maintenance of interest rates at a high level, the preservation of the policy of inflation targets, and a pension reform that increased the time of contribution of civil servants, left many of those who had supported the Workers' Party (PT) somewhat perplexed.

Among the main analysts of the phenomenon of the Workers' Party's conversion to neoliberalism, sociologist Francisco de Oliveira (2003; Oliveira, Braga & Rizek, 2010) emphasised the fusion of social movements (in particular, the trade unions) with the state apparatus and pension funds, while political scientist André Singer (2009) focused on the electorally seductive effect of redistributive public policies that ensured a significant income transfer among those living on earnings from work. In short, both described the main features of the hegemony of Lulism.

Additionally, the combination of the expansion in the Bolsa Família programme with a real increase in the minimum wage and with credit subsidies to poor people interacted with economic growth, helping strengthen the formalisation of Brasil's labour market. In fact, between 2003 and 2013, an average of 2.1 million formal jobs were created annually, strengthening the main labour market trends in the country over the last decade: formalisation, low wages, outsourcing, a significant increase in women's salaries, incorporation of non-white young adults, increased employment in the service sector and higher rates of job turnover (Antunes & Braga, 2009).

A cycle of relative material progress has been observable, therefore, which has nonetheless presented very precise limits. After all, under neoliberal globalisation, the Brazilian labour market has faced serious difficulties in creating better occupations than those readily available in personal services or construction, for example. Furthermore, working conditions have deteriorated, with a higher turnover rate and job flexibility, not to mention an increase in the number of work-related accidents in the country (Filgueiras, 2014).

However, until the definitive arrival of the global economic crisis in the country in 2015, the most deleterious effects of job instability were offset by the conservation of formal jobs. Despite the economic slowdown experienced by the economy since at least 2012, in other words, the labour market in Brasil remained relatively stable and the tendency towards income deconcentration at the base of the wage pyramid was not significantly reversed until 2015. Indeed, the base of the wage pyramid was rapidly widened, strengthening the labour market.

However, about 2 million of the 2.1 million new jobs created each year paid workers 1.5 minimum wages at most (Pochmann, 2012). Here is the open secret, then: the economic growth of the past decade has relied upon an abundant supply of cheap labour. All in all, it is important to remember that the deterioration of working conditions verified in the 2000s became more salient due to the fact that most of the new jobs were filled by young adults, women and non-whites – that is, groups historically more susceptible to cyclical market fluctuations (Pochmann, 2012).

Among the practices that have leveraged the precarisation of the recruitment conditions inherited by the Worker's Party (PT) administrations from the

preceding Fernando Henrique Cardoso government, the most notable are the establishment of flexible contracts, expansion in the use of fixed-term contracts, and part-time contracts, including the replacement of full-time contracts with part-time ones and the corresponding cuts in wages, costs and benefits, in addition to the suspension of fixed-term employment contracts.

In summary, it is possible to identify two major contradictory tendencies in terms of the precarisation of labour under the PT governments. On the one hand, the process of occupational precarisation, with a view to increasing the formalisation of the workforce. On the other, an expansion in the outsourcing of productive activities to all economic sectors, which ended up making contracts and salaries more precarious, depriving workers of some of their social rights (Krein & Santos, 2012).

As we can see, the PT governments left an ambiguous legacy in terms of the labour market in Brasil. Although no new labour rights were created, formalisation advanced, accompanying the country's economic growth and the generation of new jobs. Although precarisation of labour was more or less directly associated with informal employment until the 1990s, from the 2000s onwards a new reality emerged in which employment, including formal jobs, was outsourced and low-paid. In fact, the more or less latent tensions between the regime of accumulation and the mode of regulation that had weakened during the period of economic boom intensified with the first impacts of the global economic crisis in the country, to the point of stimulating popular unrest, which in turn transformed into a challenging social movement.

The crisis of Lulism was first announced when the Free Fare Movement (MPL, Movimento Passe Livre) in the city of São Paulo organised its fourth demonstration against the raise in municipal transport fares. Infamously, the protest of June 13, 2013, in São Paulo turned into a pitched battle in which only one side was armed. The brutal repression of protestors by the Military Police (PM) responded to the calls of the *tucano* (PSDB) governor Geraldo Alckmin and Lulist mayor Fernando Haddad, as well as numerous local political leaders, including all the city councillors from PT and the Communist Party of Brasil (PCdoB), for immediate restoration of 'order' in the city.

The Lulist leaders seemed to sense that the reproduction of popular consent was being seriously challenged by the acts of the Free Fare Movement. In fact, during approximately three weeks of protests in June 2013, a true social earthquake shook the Brazilian political scene, leaving a trail of destruction in terms of the popularity of numerous municipal and state governments, as well as the federal government.⁴

The success of the demonstrations reached its climax when more than 50,000 people participated in a demonstration in Sé Square, forcing the municipal and state governments to suspend the ticket price rise on 19 June. From this undeniable popular victory, the street movement spread through the main

cities of the country to the point that a national survey published on June 21, carried out by the Brazilian National Confederation of Transport (CNT) and the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics (IBOPE), indicated that 75% of the Brazilian population supported the demonstrations and 6% of respondents – equivalent to 12 million people – reported having participated in the protests in some form (Souza, 2013).

The cycle of protests that began in June 2013 not only helped fuel the appetite for strikes in the most precarious and peripheral groups, but also evolved in a spiralling dynamic, moving from the centres to the peripheries with the demonstrations in the main squares and avenues attracting the participation of residents from the outskirts. At the same time, when the protests eventually lost strength in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, they remained active, albeit on a smaller scale, in cities like Porto Alegre, Recife, Fortaleza and São Luís.

The combination of the intensification of social struggles after the June Days of 2013 and the crisis in the post-Fordist and financialised development model in the country stimulated the Homeless Workers Movement's (MTST) arrival on the scene: while between 2011 and 2012 little more than 200 occupations took place in São Paulo, between 2013 and 2014 this number jumped to 680, especially from the second half of 2013 onwards. In fact, the MTST revealed that housing insecurity is directly linked to the vicissitudes of precarious employment, which, just as in the peripheral Fordist past, continue to force workers to irregularly occupy land in peripheral regions in order to minimise the risks inherent to the alternation between employment and unemployment (Boulos, 2015).

In sum, the June Days revealed the presence of a social protagonist, the young urban precariat, approximating the traditional forms of mobilisation of the subaltern classes in Brasil, which, since the consolidation of peripheral Fordism, have protested through the language of social and labour rights. This tendency has tended to bring the young urban precariat closer to the more organised sectors of the Brazilian working class, especially the trade unions.

In fact, the massification of protests galvanised trade union activism among the most precarious sectors of the working class. According to the Strike Monitoring System of the Inter-union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (SAG-DIEESE), Brazilian workers, in 2013, staged a wave of strikes unprecedented in the country's history, totalling 2,050 strikes.⁵

The decline in the number of strikes in Brasil was reversed in 2013, therefore, and the trade union movement once more began to play a more prominent political role. In several capitals, for example, bank strikes have become routine. In addition, street sweepers, teachers, civil servants, steelworkers, construction workers, drivers and ticket collectors all became involved in union mobilisation between 2013 and 2015.

The year 2013 thus saw the spontaneous convergence between the political struggle of the urban precariat demonstrating in the streets in defence of their social rights, and the economic struggle of the working class mobilised through unions in defence of better wages and working conditions. In other words, the combination of these two dimensions of class struggle in the country simultaneously impacted both the Lulist mode of regulation and the post-Fordist and financialised regime of accumulation that guaranteed the reproduction of Brasil's capitalist model of development until the parliamentary coup of 2016 (Dieese, 2015).

In short, the crisis of Lulism meant the collapse of a hegemonic mode of regulation tied to the expansive cycle of the post-Fordist and financialised regime of accumulation. The advance of the global crisis in the country ended up eliminating margins for offering concessions to workers, radicalising the redistributive conflict and precipitating a reactionary outcome: a parliamentary coup whose ultimate reason is to deepen neoliberalism through social spoliation policies focused on eroding social spending, labour and social security rights, subverting the expectations of Brasil's subaltern classes.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As can be seen from the cases analysed here, the new social movements led by young unemployed – or underemployed – workers in the Global South represent a challenge to the conflict between political regulation and economic accumulation. In fact, the advance of commodification has proven to be both a source of precarisation of the proletarian condition and a stimulus to the emergence, on a national scale, of plebeian insurgencies of precarious workers. In this article, I have sought to analyse processes in which social unrest in neighbourhoods and communities spilled over into public spaces, manifesting itself in a more or less organic way in popular uprisings whose target is invariably the state.

In general, poor workers have engaged in grassroots activism through popular assemblies, the formation of independent unions, direct and rapid action against state representatives, or the creation of new social movements. Crowd resistance has without doubt reincarnated in contemporary conflicts led by precarious workers in various parts of the world, reinvigorating the interest of E. P. Thompson's (1971) notion of a "class struggle without class."

It thus seems to me more useful to interpret the political praxis of the precariat inspired by Thompson's famous essay on the 'moral economy of the crowd.' As we know, the original formulation of the notion of 'moral economy' sought to explain the political behaviour of the crowd during the so-called 'food riots' in eighteenth-century England, setting out, in general terms, from the observation of the centrality of traditional values or non-economic cultural norms in orienting the political action of the 'rebellious plebs.'

Hence, the first wave of commodification of nature and money promoted by the state through the liberalization of the corn trade and, consequently, by the change in the traditional form of bread price formation was accompanied by large-scale plebeian uprisings that challenged the governments and sought to control prices as a means to safeguard the moral economy from the threats posed by the market. This aim in mind, the plebeian uprising resorted to the grammar of customary English law, which, at the time, subordinated the right to property to the right to life (Thompson, 1991).

It is here that I identify a certain parallel between, on one hand, the political praxis of the insurgent crowds of the eighteenth century seeking to defend their subsistence by invoking the right to life from the threats of the first wave of commodification by setting controls on the price of corn and, on the other, the political praxis of the insurgent precariat in the first decades of the twenty-first century seeking to ensure their survival from the harmful effects of the 'third wave of commodification' through the defence of social rights threatened by the implementation of neoliberal policies. Moreover, in the eighteenth century and the twenty-first century alike, the nation state appears as both an instrument of commodification and the final recipient of demands related to the reproduction of the moral economy.⁶

Finally, it is important to emphasize another parallel between the two historical contexts. Following on from Thompson's well-known formulation concerning the permanent making and unmaking of the social classes, it seems to me that the leading role of the precariat in the current global cycle of protests reveals a moment when, at world level, the Fordist working class has been to some extent 'unmade' by neoliberalism, whether from the viewpoint of the dynamics internal to the private sector – outsourcing, automation, contractualization – or from the viewpoint of the dismantling of labour protection in different national contexts. Hence we can observe a significant increase in protests in different countries today that bear similarities to the neo-Polanyian social disturbances described by Beverly Silver (2005).

In this sense, what succeeds the dismantling of the Fordist working class is something still relatively 'formless,' as Chico de Oliveira (2006) would say, alluding to that stage prior to the formation of the English working class in the nineteenth century, when the class struggles took place 'without classes,' that is, in the absence of a historically more precise differentiations of the social classes fundamental to capitalist society. This was the moment in which a semi-urban plebeian class formed by the amalgam of different popular strata, heir to past social relations, confronted the threats posed by the commodification of the prices of subsistence goods driven by a gentry in the process of transforming into a bourgeoisie, vocalizing the grammar of customary rights rooted in feudal power relations.

I am conscious, of course, of E. P. Thompson's own rejection of the historical 'expansion' of the notions of 'moral economy' and a 'class struggle with-

out class.’⁷ Nonetheless, I am not advocating his work as an interpretative orthodoxy but as a source of theoretical inspiration. In other words, I take these concepts as signposts capable of orienting our analysis, in particular in relation to the dismantlement of the Fordist working class and the advent and expansion of an urban precariat. The characteristics of the latter also suggest an amalgam of different popular strata, heir to past social relations, that confronts the threats posed by the third wave of neoliberal commodification.⁸

It should also be emphasized that the notion of a ‘class struggle without class’ refers to a type of social conflict based on the action of insurgent social groups that directly challenge governments without the mediation of state-recognized political representatives. In my view, this form of eclosion of social conflict is closely in turn with the current cycle of mobilizations experienced by the three national cases analysed in this article. Finally, the insurgencies of the Brazilian, Portuguese and South African precariats resist the kinds of commodification that threaten their subsistence and their social rights through forms of collective consciousness very different from that of the Fordist working class, fundamentally shaped by the collective negotiation of wages and labour conditions.

Here, perhaps, resides the main lesson left by E. P. Thompson in his essays on the eighteenth-century crowd: we need to recover the universality of the notion of ‘class struggle’ (at that time, gentry-pleb) as an element prior to the appearance of sociologically differentiated ‘classes’ (bourgeoisie-workers). By highlighting the importance of the political praxis of the precariat in the current cycle of social insurgencies at global level, I hope to have captured this transitory moment in which the class struggle becomes more central every day, in spite of the dismantling of the working class in the previous period.

Emerging in the place of the latter are social groups of poor workers and middle-class sectors of society, especially the younger population, more or less permanently shifting between increased economic exploitation and the threat of social exclusion. Hence the contemporary relevance of E. P. Thompson and, especially, his notion of ‘class struggle without class.’ In sum, in focusing on the contemporary resistance to commodification, we should expect to find a class struggle, but not in its industrial or Fordist guise. Indeed, it does not amount to a working class politics in any traditional sense. However, it is necessary to recognise that the current antagonisms have evolved, amid dialectical polarities and reconciliations, within a field of social forces that oscillates between traditional forms of organisation of subalterns and new movements that are distant from a well-defined class identity. Still (or perhaps, consequently), it is possible to make out a certain revival of popular and rebellious political culture stoking plebeian insurgencies in many national contexts.

The actions of the crowd suggest a complex model of popular uprisings, combining organisational discipline, behaviours inspired by the past, and pro-

tective demands. All in all, the insurgent crowd often seeks merely to ‘impose the law,’ that is, to regulate the market or simply slow down the ‘demoralisation’ of their economy, expressed in higher prices for basic services, public transport and rents. Usually, the procedures of the crowd are aimed at fixing prices and forcing negotiation – that is, restoring the ‘moral’ economy of the poor and ensuring their subsistence.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that this is still a lingering classist experience that both shapes and is shaped by neoliberal hegemony. Notably inorganic, the political agency of the subaltern classes evolves through an amalgam of social practices that gives voice to new categories through old ways of thinking. The language characteristic of this plebeian culture often wavers between trust inspired by direct action and disbelief in any kind of more enduring victory against the onslaughts of the dominant classes.

Nor could it be otherwise. This political culture can only flourish within boundaries demarcated by a collapse of trust in traditional forms of Fordist solidarity. Hence its romantic nature: an attempt to legitimise its protest against the post-Fordist dictatorship of finances, which, in turn, is forced to resort to a defence of Fordist regulations. It seems valid to assert, therefore, that an active and potentially organic conflict between neoliberal logic and non-economic behaviours linked to citizenship rights is emerging from the insurgent populace’s resistance to commodification. Faced by a state that is increasingly weak as a protector of labour and strong as an instrument of accumulation, it is the specific combination of institutional weakness and the collective strength of this plebeian culture that provides the ‘general illumination,’ including shedding light on key aspects of the crisis of globalisation.

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NOTES

- 1 Beyond the simple geographical dimension, I interpret the Global South as a metaphor for the ‘demoralization’ of the ‘moral’ economy of the poor, capable of encompassing both the processes of national exploitation led by the forces of financialization and the battles for alternative projects of social and political change. In addition, in this article the expression Global South will be used as a way of locating the social struggles that occur in semiperipheral regions and countries subject to the policies of dispossession imposed by financial globalization. For more details, see Prashad (2012).
- 2 In the case of Europe, for example, see the general strike survey carried out by Jörg Nowak and Alexander Gallas (2014).
- 3 In other words, the possibilities open to a new cycle of worker internationalism do not result more or less spontaneously from the process of economic globalization, but are rooted in the difficult and entirely uncertain political construction that different national societies possess as an inevitable starting point. For more details on the concept of ‘instituent power’ cited above, see Dardot & Laval (2017).
- 4 Only a few days after the protests began, the popularity of former President Dilma Rousseff had dropped from 65% of respondents’ approval to only 30%. For more details, see José Roberto Toledo (2013).
- 5 This represented a 134% increase over the previous year, when 877 strikes were registered. This number surpassed the year of 1990, setting a new record in the historical series of SAG-Dieese. See Dieese (2015).
- 6 For more on the concept of the ‘third wave of commodification,’ see Burawoy (2014).
- 7 For further details concerning the possibilities of ‘expanding’ the Thompsonian concept of moral economy in order to shed light on modern civil society too, see Götz (2015).
- 8 Working precisely in this direction, Bensaïd (2005) sought to update the Thompsonian notion of the moral economy of the crowd as a means to analyse the new forms of social spoliation brought by capitalist globalization.

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RETORNO DA LUTA DE CLASSES SEM CLASSES? ECONOMIA MORAL E RESISTÊNCIA POPULAR NO BRASIL, NA ÁFRICA DO SUL E EM PORTUGAL

Resumo

Desde o advento da crise da globalização capitalista iniciada em 2008, a progressiva desconstrução da relação salarial fordista e o aumento do desemprego em vários países têm estimulado o crescimento da informalidade laboral, afastando os trabalhadores da proteção trabalhista, intensificando a rotatividade e estimulando a intermitência do trabalho. As negociações coletivas foram se tornando cada vez mais raras e descentralizadas, e os contratos de trabalho cada vez mais precários e individualizados, minando a capacidade protetiva da “economia moral dos pobres” e transformando a ação direta – isto é, a ação popular sem a mediação de sindicatos e partidos políticos tradicionais – em, talvez, a única alternativa crível para o “preariado” expressar suas demandas em um mundo marcado pela mercantilização do trabalho, dos serviços essenciais para a subsistência e da moradia. Um retorno aos tempos da “luta de classes sem classes”? É o que pretendemos avaliar neste artigo a partir da comparação da experiência de classe dos trabalhadores pobres e precários em três países do chamado Sul Global: Portugal, África do Sul e Brasil.

A RETURN OF CLASS STRUGGLE WITHOUT CLASS? MORAL ECONOMY AND POPULAR RESISTANCE IN Brasil, SOUTH AFRICA AND PORTUGAL

Abstract

Since the emergence of the crisis of capitalist globalization in 2008, the deconstruction of the Fordist wage relationship and the rising unemployment in various countries have stimulated the growth of labour informality, distancing workers from labour protection, intensifying turnover and stimulating intermittent employment. Collective bargaining has become increasingly rare and decentralized, and jobs increasingly precarious and individualized, undermining the protective capacity of the ‘moral economy of the poor’ and transforming direct action – that is, popular action without the mediation of unions and traditional political parties – into perhaps the only credible alternative for ‘precarious workers’ to express their demands in a world marked by the commodification of labour, basic services and housing. A return to the era of the ‘class struggle without class’? This is the conjecture that this article sets out to evaluate, comparing the class experience of poor and precarious workers in three countries from the so-called Global South: Portugal, South Africa and Brasil.

Palavras-chave

Protesto social;
crise econômica;
Sul Global;
preariado;
trabalho e globalização.

Keywords

Social protest;
economic crisis;
Global South;
preariat;
labour and globalization.