

A “Thompsonian” pattern of labour unrest?

Social movements and rebellions in the Global South

Um padrão “thompsoniano” de agitações trabalhistas?

Movimentos sociais e rebeliões no Sul global

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Abstract: In this article, we will argue that the so-called Fordist pattern of labor unrest was a historical and geographical exception and that the focus on this model made it difficult to identify alternative patterns of worker mobilization, especially in the so-called global South. We consider that the problematization elaborated by Beverly Silver regarding the dominant labor unrest patterns in the 20th century overcame the Eurocentric bias of the analysis of labor conflicts, redefining the field of studies of global work. However, in view of the resumption of forms of collective mobilization of workers on a global scale after the advent of the crisis of capitalist globalization inaugurated in 2008, we believe it is necessary to rethink the models (“Marxian” and “Polanyian”) of labor unrest suggested by Silver. In short, by highlighting the contemporary resistance to commodification, especially on the part of the “global precariat”, we should expect to find the class struggle, but not in its industrial or Fordist guise. Therefore, a recovery of the work of the English historian Edward Palmer Thompson seems to us useful to think about the current pattern of labor unrest on a world scale.

Keywords: Precariat; globalization; unionism; crisis; class struggles; Thompson.

Resumo: Neste artigo, argumentaremos que o chamado padrão fordista de agitação trabalhista foi uma exceção histórica e geográfica e que o foco nesse modelo dificultou a identificação de padrões alternativos de mobilização dos trabalhadores, sobretudo no chamado Sul global. Consideramos que a problematização elaborada por Beverly Silver a respeito dos padrões de agitação trabalhista dominantes no século XX superou o viés eurocêntrico da análise dos

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conflitos trabalhistas, redefinindo o campo de estudos do trabalho global. No entanto, diante da retomada das formas de mobilização coletiva dos trabalhadores em escala global após o advento da crise da globalização capitalista inaugurada em 2008, entendemos fazer-se necessário repensar os modelos (“marxiano” e “polanyiano”) de agitação trabalhistas sugeridos por Silver. Em suma, ao destacarmos a resistência contemporânea à mercantilização, em especial por parte do “precariado global”, devemos esperar encontrar a luta de classes, mas não em sua roupagem industrial ou fordista. Para tanto, uma recuperação da obra do historiador inglês Edward Palmer Thompson parece-nos útil para pensarmos o atual padrão de agitação trabalhista em escala mundial.

Palavras-chave: Precariado; globalização; sindicalismo; crise; lutas de classes; Thompson.

Introduction

MARX UNDERSTOOD CAPITAL as an alienated social force formed by abstract labour whose constant impulse of self-valorization does not stop at national borders. In addition, in the chapter of his opus magnum dedicated to primitive accumulation, he directly associated the formation of the working class in England with the expansion of slavery in the Americas and the exploitation of Irish immigration by British industrialists. For his part, Weber identified in the immigration process of the Polish rural worker to eastern Prussia in the second half of the 19th century, both a threat to the social reforms he aspired to and an alarming stimulus to the class struggle in a newly unified Germany. An expanded historical and geographical perspective capable of challenging the conflict between capital and labour as an evolving process unfolding on an international scale, contrary to what many may imagine, has been at the heart of sociology’s concerns since the 19th century.¹

However, although intuitively obvious, it has always been very difficult to investigate empirically the intertwining between the political behavior of the social forces of labour and the global flows of capitalist investment, due to the lack of sufficiently broad data to cover the world market. In addition, information regarding labour unrest, that is, forms of resistance to prolongation, intensification and degradation of work, low wages, unemployment, forced proletarianization and the destruction of traditional ways of life, on a global scale, were always very heterogeneous, making it impossible to make a well-established scientific comparison.

This scenario has changed considerably since the construction of the World Labor Group database at the Fernand Braudel Center, associated with the University of Binghamton, published in 1995 in the form of a special edition of *Review* magazine. Beverly Silver was responsible for expanding and updating the database produced by the team of the project and summarizing some of the main findings of the research in the book *Forces of work: workers’ movements and globalization since 1870* (1999).²

1 Cf. ARRIGHI, Giovanni. Globalization and Uneven Development. In: ROSSI, Ino (Ed.). **Frontiers of Globalization Research: Theoretical and Methodological Approaches**. Boston: Springer, 2007.

2 Cf. SILVER, Beverly. **Forças do trabalho: movimentos de trabalhadores e globalização desde 1870**. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2005.

Before the database produced by the World Labor Group, we had very partial and spatially concentrated information, in addition to being limited almost exclusively to the use of official strike statistics, for example, to examine the fate of unionism, the title of the work of the former pioneer in the field of global labour studies in Brazil, Leôncio Martins Rodrigues. Published in 1999 and supported by an admirable accumulation of data collected at the International Labour Organization, Rodrigues’ book argued that union power would inevitably be weakened, eroded by new forms of contracting out and technological adjustments brought about by neoliberal globalisation. According to Rodrigues, the unions would continue to exist, but without significantly influencing the political life of the different national societies in which they were inserted.³

This was not an obvious conclusion for Brazilian scholars, which may help to explain the somewhat rough reception of the book, corroborated by critical reviews from some of his former students.⁴ After all, despite the sharp decline from the point of view of unionization rates, both in Europe and in the United States, the Brazilian union movement ended the 1990s with good chances of electing a former union leader as President of the Republic. And the same was true in other countries of the so-called global South, such as South Africa, where there was still hope that the Congress of South African Trade Unions, Cosatu, could help reverse the neoliberal course that the government of Thabo Mbeki imposed on the country.⁵

In fact, Rodrigues’ book reveals both splendor, that is, a painstaking analysis of the data and an outstanding effort of theoretical synthesis, as well as the main weaknesses in the field of global labour studies in the 1980s and 1990s: an almost exclusive focus on the countries of the global North, in the Fordist trade union movement as the main agent of mobilization of the working class and in the workplace as a space for intervention *par excellence* of class politics. From different theoretical and methodological perspectives, studies of global labour usually reproduced these weaknesses.

In this article, I will argue that the so-called Fordist pattern of labour unrest, guided by collective bargaining between workers, companies and governments, and focused on collective action by unions, was a historical and geographical exception and that the focus on this model made it difficult to identify alternative patterns of worker mobilization, especially in the so-called global South. This scenario changed substantially in the 1980s and 1990s, with the internationalization of the crisis of Fordism and the emergence of so-called global labour studies, with Beverly Silver’s book collaborating in a remarkable way for the evolution of the field through the identification of dissonant patterns of labour unrest throughout the twentieth century, especially after the Second World War.⁶

After the appearance of a set of studies dedicated to the supposed emergence of the new transnationalism of workers in the 2000s, the crisis of neoliberal globalization inaugurated in 2008 sowed new studies of global labour whose most striking feature was to value the political practices of informal, poor and precarious workers, inserted in a historical context

3 Cf. RODRIGUES, Leôncio Martins. **Destino do sindicalismo**. São Paulo: Edusp, 1999.

4 Cf. BOITO, Armando. A crise do sindicalismo. In: SANTANA, M. A.; RAMALHO, J. R. (Eds.) **Além da fábrica: trabalhadores, sindicatos e a nova questão social**. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2003.

5 Cf. WEBSTER, Edward. The politics of economic reform: Trade unions and democratization in South Africa. **Journal of Contemporary African Studies**, 16:1, 39-64, 1998.

6 Cf. SILVER, Beverly. *Ibidem*.

marked by the resurgence of neoliberal policies. From a perspective informed by the changes in the investigative agenda of the field of global labour studies, as well as by my own research experience in countries like South Africa, Brazil and Portugal, I aim to update the field through an alternative hypothesis to the problematization elaborated by Silver on the dominant labour unrest patterns of the 20th century.

1. The limits of the Fordist labour agitation pattern

WITH SILVER, WE LEARNED that post-World War II American hegemony was not only geopolitical and economic, but also theoretical. If we look at the 1950s, for example, both in Europe and in the United States, we may see the flowering of a theory of industrial relations focused on the action of Fordist unionism and shaped by the experience of collective bargaining. Whether we're talking about the well-known work of Arthur Kornhauser, Robert Dubin and Arthur Ross, *Industrial Conflict* (1954), the work of Arthur Ross and Paul Hartman, *Changing Patterns of Industrial Conflict* (1960), Ralf Dahrendorf's influential book, *Class and Conflict in Industrial Society* (1959), or even a classic like *Political Man* (1960), by Seymour Lipset, the predominant theme in the analysis of industrial relations in a context of the globalization of Fordism was the "institutionalization of labour conflict" via strengthening union power.⁷

Probably Richard Hyman, in *Strikes* (1972), was the first labour sociologist to consciously face this limitation when comparing data from different Western European countries in order to widen the too narrow focus on the institutionalization of labour conflict. To this end, he highlighted the dual nature of unionism, that is, treating it not only as an institution, as specialists in American industrial relations did, but also as a social movement. Hyman dealt primarily with the relationship of unions with broader social forces and with different political traditions of the international workers' movement, criticizing those corporatist unionists who usually accepted "... the capitalist fragmentation of social identity, separating the issues of labour from homes, communities and workers' culture, prioritizing the union and collective bargaining over everything else" (1972: 235f).⁸

However, even Hyman relied exclusively on data from Western European countries, that is, the social movements and political traditions to which he alludes were modulated by the experience of the formation and evolution of the subaltern classes in countries of advanced capitalism, whose Fordist stage was inescapably marked by corporatist relations between unions, employers and states. In these countries, protests by non-union workers, especially immigrants, or spontaneous mobilizations, especially by young workers, are still rejected *in limine* by the union movement today.

It is worth noting that we are not reducing corporatism to the function of – as Antonio Gramsci reminds us in "Notebook 22" – the "negative element of 'economic policing'".⁹ For the Italian Marxist, corporatism linked to Fordism is the economic policy capable of enabling

7 Cf. KORNHAUSER, A., DUBIN, R., ROSS, A. M. **Industrial conflict**. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954; ROSS, Arthur M., HARTMAN, Paul I. **Changing Patterns of Industrial Conflict**. New York: John Wiley, 1960; DAHRENDORF, Ralf. **Class and Conflict in Industrial Society**. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959; LIPSET, Seymour M. **Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics**. New York: Doubleday, 1960.

8 HYMAN, Richard. **Strikes**. London: MacMillan, 1972, p. 235f.

9 GRAMSCI, Antonio. **Quaderni del carcere**. Torino: Einaudi Editore, 1975, p. 2157.

“the transition to more advanced political and cultural forms without the kind of radical and destructive cataclysms that are utterly devastating”.¹⁰ In other words, Fordist corporatism is the economic policy characteristic of a world context marked by the construction of capitalist relations of production. And, even in countries of the global South, such as Brazil, South Africa and South Korea, union corporatism was decisive for the consolidation of class identities that strengthened industrial relations in the post-World War II.¹¹

To focus only on the Brazilian case, mobilization by unions of the organizational traditions of recently arrived rural migrants in the main industrial centres inaugurated what Francisco de Oliveira called the democratic “era of inventions” in the country.¹² Even so, the focus on the collective action of the unions, based on the pan-European model of industrial relations, ended up leading the vanguard of professional sociology of Brazilian labour, always counting on Leôncio Martins Rodrigues at the front, to identify the resilience of rural backwardness in the strike patterns of the populist period and not the presence of an ardent democratizing drive rooted in popular neighborhoods and workplaces, capable of conquering, strengthening and expanding universal social rights.

Because it corresponds to a very limited historical form in space and time, the Fordist pattern of unionism should not be interpreted as “economic policing”, nor as the economic policy *par excellence* of the subaltern classes. In reality, the patterns of workers’ agitation linked to the world dynamics of accumulation and capitalist crises, revealed by the World Labor Group, allowed us to expand the historical and geographical focus of the sociological analysis of labour, considering different temporalities in terms of class formation while retaining the importance of unions for the collective mobilization of the subaltern classes. Thus, the pan-European model of industrial relations based on the Fordist commitment was finally able to be desublimated, becoming a condition of historical exception that had a profound impact on a limited part of the world and for a relatively short period of time.¹³

We are thus dealing with a necessary, but terrifying, desublimation. For Jan Breman and Marcel van der Linden (2014), for example, when we broaden the historical and geographical focus of sociological analysis, we clearly perceive that the norm of work in capitalism is insecurity, informality and precariousness. In addition, its central characteristics are part-time work, temporary work, intermittent work, outsourced work, self-employment, slave-like work, long hours and the lack of security in jobs and in the work process. Breman and van der Linden argue that this precarious work regime, which has predominated in semi-peripheral and peripheral countries for the past 200 years, is advancing rapidly in central capitalist countries.¹⁴

However, as Sarah Mosoetsa observes, the correct diagnosis regarding the historical and geographical exception of the Fordist wage relationship does not need to flow into a discouraged view regarding the possibilities of organizing precarious and informal workers.¹⁵

10 Idem. *Ibidem*, p. 1089.

11 Cf. WEBSTER, Edward. Race, labour process and transition: The sociology of work in South Africa. **Society in Transition**, v. 30, n. 1, 1999; and CHUN, Jennifer J. **Organizing at the Margins: The Symbolic Politics of Labor in South Korea and the United States**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.

12 Cf. OLIVEIRA, Francisco de; PAOLI, Maria Célia (orgs.). **Os sentidos da democracia**. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2000.

13 Cf. LINDEN, Marcel van der. **Trabalhadores do mundo: Ensaio para uma história global do trabalho**. Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 2013.

14 Cf. BREMAN, Jan, LINDEN, Marcel van der. Informalizing the Economy: The Return of the Social Question at a Global Level. **Development and Change**, 45: 920-940, 2014.

15 Cf. MOSOETSA, Sarah. **Eating from One Pot: The Dynamics of Survival in Poor South African Households**.

In other words, despite the exceptional nature of the Fordist commitment, it can and should serve as a standard to be preserved by workers in central countries and won by workers in peripheral and semi-peripheral countries. Even so, in both cases, we found it to be a detour and not a safe path.

And this lesson learned after the decolonization of our theoretical goals had the effect of valuing precarious work and the non-canonical forms of organization of subalterns, as we can see in Rina Agarwala's research on the electoral movements of informal workers in India or in the comparative study by Jennifer Chun on redefining the working conditions of outsourced workers in the United States and South Korea through innovations in collective mobilization.¹⁶ In general, the organized action of the unions is no longer opposed to the disorganized action of spontaneous movements. After all, remember Gramsci in "Notebook 25", if we want to understand popular mobilization, we need to value "the autonomous formations of subalterns, even if only in relation to partial claims".¹⁷

In a way, the Italian Marxist's focus on these "autonomous formations" accentuates the relatively indeterminate nature of the relationship between class structure and class formation, an indeterminacy explored by E. P. Thompson in his work dedicated to the formation of the English working class. In this sense, the class structure must be considered as a structure of social relations capable of generating a matrix of interests based on both social plunder and economic exploitation. However, to the extent that many positions in this structure embrace complex sets of these interests, shaped by national values and cultural traditions, they configure different evolutionary patterns of labour unrest.¹⁸

By classifying these patterns since the nineteenth century, Beverly Silver helped us to clarify the limits of the widely held idea that the advent of neo-liberal globalization in the 1970s would imply an inescapable decline in union power. Using the theory of multiple capitalist adjustments, that is, the spatial, technological, product and financial adjustments, Silver elaborated an alternative thesis to the "race to the bottom" embraced, among others, by Leôncio Martins Rodrigues in the 1990s, with her well-known synthesis, "where capital goes, conflict goes after". In other words, for the sociology of global labour, it is not correct to speak of the collapse of the union movement, but of a permanent transformation of the working class's organizational patterns:

The perception that labor and workers' movements are made and remade continuously provides us with an important antidote against the common tendency to be too rigid in specifying who is part of the working class (be they 19th century artisans or mass production workers in the century). Therefore, instead of seeing a 'historically outdated' movement (Castells, 1997) or a 'residual and endangered species' (Zolberg, 1995), our eyes remain open to emerging signs of a new working class formation, as well as of a 'counterattack' of those working classes that are being 'undone'. One of the central tasks is to identify new responses from below, both for the creative side and for the destructive side of capitalist development.¹⁹

Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011.

16 Cf. CHUN, Jennifer J. Idem; e AGARWALA, Rina. **Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

17 GRAMSCI, Antonio. Idem.

18 Cf. THOMPSON, Edward P. **A formação da classe operária inglesa: a maldição de Adão (v. 2)**. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2012.

19 Cf. SILVER, Beverly. Idem, pp. 34-35.

In fact, if the relationship between capital and labour evolves on a global scale subsumed by multiscalar adjustments intertwined with geopolitical dynamics, as well as cyclical economic crises, then the national working classes experience a permanent process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of their identities and their organizational forms. Thus, phenomena usually associated with the general crisis of unionism – such as the decline in strike activity, the weakening of union density, the flattening of labour earnings and the crisis in the political protagonism of workers – can be better interpreted as moments of the deconstruction of a specific working class, that is, the Fordist one, and not as clear evidence of the decline of the labour movement as a whole.

2. The 2008 crisis and new studies of global labour

HOWEVER, IF WORKERS ARE NOT IN A RACE to the bottom in organizational terms driven by neoliberal globalization, what would be the main characteristics of their contemporary reconstruction? A conjecture that became popular among labour sociologists after the success of the protests against the meeting of the World Trade Organization that took place in Seattle, in 1999, followed by the creation of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, in 2001, predicted the revitalization of workers’ transnationalism. In his well-known work, *Globalization and Labour: The New “Great Transformation”*, Ronaldo Munck, inspired by Karl Polanyi, stated that neoliberal globalization would drive the decline of old national forms of workers’ organization, but would stimulate new connections between labour movements at the global level, ensuring the advent of a real “new great transformation”.²⁰

The case most frequently cited in favor of the hypothesis of the emergence of this new workers’ transnationalism is the United States, where successive attacks by neoliberal governments on the union movement, especially after the approval of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), would have broadened the view of unionists, stimulating the emergence of new organizational strategies, such as transnational alliances with unions in the global South, especially Brazilian. According to Peter Evans, the formation of transnational networks of unions driven by the Brazilian union movement in the 2000s would be the best example of the new transnationalism of workers that emerged at the beginning of the 21st century.²¹

In addition to the strengthening of Global Union Federations, such as UNI and IndustriALL, the conclusion of global framework agreements by independent unions and the creation of workers’ networks in transnational companies, Evans saw in the alliances between unions in the North and South the embryo of a new pattern of labour unrest capable of combining institutional construction in the style of European unionism with corporate campaigns in the style of American unionism. And the Brazilian union movement strengthened by PT governments seemed to be the central link for the formation and consolidation of transnational networks of workers with the potential to stimulate a counter-hegemonic project to neoliberal globalization.

20 Cf. MUNCK, Ronaldo. **Globalisation and Labour: The New “Great Transformation”**. London: Zed Books, 2001.

21 Cf. EVANS, Peter. Is it Labor’s Turn to Globalize? Twenty-first Century Opportunities and Strategic Responses. **Global Labour Journal**, v. 1, n. 3, 2010.

Even so, Evans cautiously remembered to note: “National political contexts remain the greatest determinant of the fate of the movements, and the ability of the major workers’ movements in the South to bring key contributions to the overall architecture of the social forces of labour globalization is a possibility that depends on national political trajectories”.²²

The outbreak of the neoliberal globalization crisis in 2008, accompanied by a long global economic depression, updated this observation, significantly modifying the optimistic scenario proposed by the proponents of the thesis of the new transnationalism of workers. In this sense, the current weakening of international union networks driven by Brazilian unionism reflects the profound crisis that the union movement in the country is going through, facing numerous setbacks in terms of labour rights and with the reduction of its bargaining power due to the breaking up of its social bases, hard hit by unemployment, underemployment and informal work.²³

If the new transnationalism is not the answer, what would be the emerging form of agitation capable of modulating the current reconstruction of the workers’ movement? Silver argued that the relationship between labour unrest and capitalist accumulation produced two major patterns of worker mobilization throughout the 20th century: the Marxian unrest, which occurs when new working classes are built, and the Polanyian unrest, which occurs when old working classes are deconstructed. For her, the Marxian standard is one in which the class is formed from, above all, the conflicts that occur in the workplace. On the other hand, in the Polanyian pattern conflicts occur mainly outside the workplace, driven by the defense by workers of social pacts threatened by the market:

Our investigation of the long-term dynamics of labour in the world will, therefore, be attentive to Marxist and Polanyian workers’ unrest. Polanyian-type agitations are counter-attacks to the expansion of the global self-regulating market, especially on the part of the working classes that are being broken up and the workers who have benefited from social pacts that are abandoned by those above. Marxian-type unrest means the struggles of the new working classes implemented and strengthened successively as an unintended consequence of the development of historical capitalism, albeit simultaneously with the disappearance of the old working classes.²⁴

Schematically, in the Marxian pattern the targets of labour unrest would be companies and mobilizations would tend to be offensive. In the Polanyian pattern, the target would be the State and the unrest would tend to be defensive. The classification of these patterns, added to the historical analysis of capital mobility, led Silver to associate the Marxian pattern with the global South, that is, countries that attract capitalist investments because they have a cheap labour force, and the Polanyian pattern with the global North, that is, countries from which capitalist investments are repelled by costly social labour protection pacts.²⁵

In a way, the hypothesis of the new transnationalism of workers raised by Evans dialogued with the model proposed by Silver, in which an “insurgent South” rich in offensive agitations

22 EVANS, Peter. Is an alternative globalization possible? **Politics & Society**, v. 36, n. 2, 2008, p. 291.

23 Cf. KREIN, José Dari. O desmonte dos direitos, as novas configurações do trabalho e o esvaziamento da ação coletiva: consequências da reforma trabalhista. **Tempo Social**, v. 30, n. 1, p. 77-104, 2018.

24 Cf. SILVER, Beverly. *Idem*, 35.

25 Cf. *Idem*. *Ibidem*.

would assume authentic protagonism in the face of a somewhat decadent North, in which the working class would try to defend itself from the dismantling of social protection brought about by neoliberalism. To what extent has the advent of the globalization crisis changed this diagnosis, putting pressure on Silver’s model of two major patterns of worker mobilization? Could a dialogue between Marx and Polanyi be able to reveal the existence of a third pattern? In addition to knowing how classes are made – the Marxian pattern – and undone – the Polanyian pattern – wouldn’t the current crisis require reflecting on how they remake themselves?

I am not proposing to return to Eric Hobsbawm’s criticism of the periodization of the formation of the English working class proposed by Thompson.²⁶ I would just like to highlight the point common to both, that is, the importance of observing the historical plasticity of classes through the perspective of their permanent unfinished state. It is what the crisis of neoliberal globalization has established as a task in the investigative field, which Marissa Brookes and Jamie K. McCallum have called *new global labour studies*.²⁷ Here, I refer mainly to the works of Alexander Gallas, Andreas Bieler, Ben Scully, Ching Kwan Lee, Gay Seidman, Immanuel Ness, Jennifer Chun, Jörg Nowak, Karl von Holdt, Marcel Paret, Marcel van der Linden, Michael Burawoy, Ruth Milkman and so many other sociologists housed in the *Global Labour Journal*. It is an editorial project dedicated to the analysis of the evolving forms of mobilization of organized and non-organized workers in unions in the current global context, which combines labour unrest and a long economic depression.²⁸

For Brookes and McCallum, the new studies represent a renewed field of investigation that was supported by the pioneering approach, and somewhat marked by neo-polanyian optimism, regarding the relationship between globalization and work elaborated, among others, by Beverly Silver, Edward Webster, Peter Evans and Ronaldo Munck. However, the new studies sought to temper the enthusiasm brought about by the rise of the “insurgent South” in the 2000s, with the working classes of the BRICS countries at the forefront, with the realism necessary to analyze the metamorphosis of workers’ mobilizations in both Northern countries as in the South in the long depressive cycle that began in 2008. For new studies, questioning the present moment of the working class implies realizing that their traditional forms of representation have followed a path in which the old Fordist organizational structures are no longer efficient in changing the directions of neoliberal governance of states and companies, while new organizational experiences are still in their embryonic stages.

Furthermore, as the authors argue in line with the new studies, not only do workers’ contemporary collective identities differ substantially from the former Fordist working class, but also their characteristic form of protest, that is, direct and rapid action, reveals a complete change in the regulation of labour relations. After all, the increasing deterioration of the Fordist wage relationship and the increase in unemployment in several countries have promoted the growth of labour informality, which has removed workers from the protection of laws, in addition to intensifying turnover and encouraging intermittent work. Collective bargaining has become increasingly decentralized and labour contracts are more precarious and individualized,

26 Cf. HOBBSAWM, Eric. **Mundos do trabalho**. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2015.

27 Cf. BROOKES, Marissa; MCCALLUM, Jamie K. The New Global Labour Studies: A Critical Review. **Global Labour Journal**, v. 8, n. 3, 2017.

28 Cf. <<https://mulpress.mcmaster.ca/globallabour/index>>.

undermining the protective capacity of the “moral” economy of the poor, to remember an increasingly current Thompsonian concept, and often transforming direct action into the only credible alternative for poor and precarious workers.²⁹

Even so, it is surprising that the encounter between the neoliberalization of the economy, the precariousness of work and the global growth of the workforce was followed, between 2008 and 2013, according to the detailed survey made by Isabel Ortiz, Sara Burke, Mohamed Berrada and Herman Cortes, by the intensification of social protests in all regions of the planet, with the exception of Asia.³⁰ In addition, for Thomas Carothers and Richard Youngs, these protests have become increasingly frequent since 2010 and have stabilized at a surprisingly high level since 2012 compared to the protests of the 1980s and 1990s.³¹ Hence the amazement: how to interpret the anomaly according to which Fordist unionism has declined, but the mobilization of workers has increased?

An important clue was suggested by Marcel van der Linden, for whom the main feature of the current cycle is that the overwhelming majority of labour protests in the database of the Institute for Advanced Labour Studies in Amsterdam (Aias) have addressed their complaints to governments, demanding that the national state, instead of looking after the interests of the big banks and business sectors, develop economic and social policies capable of stopping the “demoralization” of the citizens “moral” economy.³²

In a nutshell, new studies have shown that current protests revolve around opposition to the wave of marketization of labour, land and money, translated in terms of eliminating food and fuel subsidies, wage cuts, tax increases on the circulation of basic goods and services, attacks on social security, regressive reforms of the pension and health systems, job insecurity and control over the prices of public transport and rents. In addition, it has become usual to associate this agenda with criticism of the excessive influence of the power of finance and large corporations on the decisions taken by national governments. In short – and this is a common conclusion in this field of study – workers, especially in the global South, would be resignifying their class experience in order to defend, through direct action, their own subsistence threatened by the austerity policies stemming from the crisis of neoliberal globalization.³³

What heuristic advantage is it possible to achieve through this type of approach? After all, many influential sociologists, like Manuel Castells and Donatella della Porta, have been looking at the wave of global social unrest that started in 2010, comparing the movements that took to the streets in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, India and Brazil, to the events of 1968.³⁴ Yet these analyses end up relativizing, when they do not completely disregard, the importance of the role of strikes and the mobilization of workers in the general

29 Cf. THOMPSON, Edward P. **Costumes em comum: estudos sobre a cultura popular tradicional**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2016.

30 Cf. ORTIZ, Isabel; BURKE, Sara; BERRADA, Mohamed; CORTES, Herman. **World Protests 2006-2013. Working Paper**, Initiative for Policy Dialogue and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, New York, 2013.

31 Cf. CAROTHERS, Thomas; YOUNGS, Richard. **The Complexities of Global Protests. Working Papers**, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, New York, 2015.

32 Cf. LINDEN, Marcel van der. **Global Labour: A Not-so-grand Finale and Perhaps a New Beginning. Global Labour Journal**, v. 7, n. 2, 2016.

33 Cf. BURAWOY, Michael. **Facing an unequal world. Current Sociology**, v. 63, n. 1, 2015, pp. 5–34.

34 Cf. CASTELS, Manuel. **Redes de indignação e esperança: movimentos sociais na era da internet**. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2013; and DELLA PORTA, Donatella. **Social Movements in Times of Austerity**. Cambridge: Polity, 2015.

framework of demonstrations and occupations of public spaces by sectors unhappy with governments’ austerity policies.

However, a closer look at the cycle of protests inaugurated by the “Arab Spring” is soon able to identify the existence of an intimate relationship between the struggles for “real democracy now”, led by social groups formed by young people, and the global strike cycle that expanded, as Nowak argues, between 2010 and 2015, through time and space, calling other territories and actors to the center of the stage of national political scenes and forcing the sociology of labour to broaden its almost exclusive focus on the union movement, collective bargaining and the workplace.³⁵ To recall Rosa Luxemburgs conclusion regarding the dynamics of the Russian Revolution of 1905, social protests have the power to spur mass strikes and vice versa, in a dialectic that links politics and economics, union organization and popular spontaneity.³⁶

In passing, exploring the intimate relationship that exists between the specific type of action connected to the metamorphoses of work relationships and the new social forms of workers organization that emerge beyond the workplace has guided my own investigative effort regarding the formation of the post-Fordist Brazilian and, more recently, global, “precariat”.³⁷ Here, perhaps a quick clarification is in order. By precariat I mean those groups of the working class inserted in precarious living and working conditions, that is, more susceptible to economic crises and, consequently, more exposed to cycles of increasing poverty and inequalities between classes. In addition, I must add to that notion those intermediate strata from different social classes, especially the younger ones, which, due to the increase in social inequalities, are moving towards proletarianization.

In Marxist terms, I would say that the precariat consists of that fraction of the subaltern classes formed by the amalgam of the latent, fluctuating and stagnant populations of the working class, plus medium sectors in the process of proletarianization, especially young social groups, in more or less permanent transit between the increase in economic exploitation and the threat of social exclusion. When referring to the precariat, I do not intend to replace concepts such as “workers”, “subaltern classes” or even “plebians”, but simply to outline which subaltern groups emerge as the most promising for the analysis of the 2008 post-crisis protest cycle in relation to the identification of an emerging global pattern of labour unrest.

In this sense, it is important to note that I have distanced myself from the concept of the “multitude” developed by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt. Formed by all workers and “poor people” on the planet, increasingly interconnected in a world space “flattened” by declining national borders, the multitude would be for them the source of global constituent power precisely because it is a class with very similar characteristics in different countries, due to the process of productive globalization, and which would face the “empire”, that is, a global network formed by the amalgamation of global corporations with institutions of global governance (G-7, WTO, IMF etc.). Among the main characteristics of this multitude, we would

35 Cf. NOWAK, Jörg. **Mass Strikes and Social Movements in Brazil and India: Popular Mobilisation in the long Depression**. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

36 Cf. LUXEMBURGO, Rosa. Greve de massas, partido e sindicatos. In: LOUREIRO, isabel (org.) **Rosa Luxemburgo: textos escolhidos (Volume I)**. São Paulo: Editora da Unesp, 2011.

37 Cf. BRAGA, Ruy. **A política do precariado: do populismo à hegemonia lulista**. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2012; and BRAGA, Ruy. **A rebeldia do precariado: trabalho e neoliberalismo no Sul global**. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2017.

find engagement in the “production of differences, inventions and ways of life”, causing an “explosion of singularities” connected and coordinated by an “open constituent process”.³⁸

However, what the new studies have revealed with some clarity is that the precariat behaves as a dynamic source of protagonism not from corporations or global governance, but from national governments. Furthermore, I do not identify in the precariat a source of “global constituent power”, since its action consists in resisting the attacks of marketization through, above all, the defense of the protective pole of work and, consequently, of its own subsistence. Thus, the precariat does not place itself “outside” the institutions when “constituting” a new type of global society, but tends to show itself as a source of “instituting power”, that is, a reformist social force capable of challenging states through the grammar of social rights.

In our eyes, this instituting power is a key part of the current global cycle of protests, whose pace has accelerated since 2010 and which includes demonstrations, strikes, riots against famine and other forms of labour unrest. By following the evolution of this cycle in Brazil, South Africa and Portugal, for example, I could see that we are very likely experiencing a moment of “remaking” the working classes on a global scale that does not fit properly in the Marxian standard of “class formation” nor in the “Polanyian” pattern of class deconstruction, to which Silver referred to in the late 1990s. In addition, I would say that the social conflicts driven by the collective action of the young precarious workers that I had the opportunity to study in the book *The Rebelliousness of the Precariat* was apprehended as co-constituting the global conjuncture of which they themselves are a part, which allowed me to identify, despite the great national diversity, some common characteristics of this “remaking” of class.³⁹

In reality, the three national cases revealed the mix between social protests and mass strikes, in a kind of fusion of economic and political conflicts whose purpose was to resist the articulation of different forms of mercantile alienation through direct action. So, is not the increase in the social weight of the urban precariat in different national societies in the North and the South showing the emergence of an alternative pattern of labour unrest?

3. The emergence of a “Thompsonian” pattern of labour unrest?

IF MY HYPOTHESIS IS CORRECT, it seems appropriate to call this emerging pattern “Thompsonian”. After all, a crucial point in Thompson’s historiographic analysis was his ability to show how a plurality of actors, such as factory workers, ruined small rural owners, domestic workers and artisans, knew how to reframe their experiences of multiple identities rooted in the neighborhood, in the family, in religious associations, debating clubs and scientific communities, uniting into a relatively homogeneous class from the mid-19th century onwards. And are not the new studies of global labour calling our attention to the need to broaden our investigative focus in order to realize the importance of multiple actors, especially young precarious workers working in politically resignified territories?

38 Cf. NEGRI, Antonio; HARDT, Michael. **Multidão: Guerra e democracia na era do Império**. São Paulo: Record, 2005.

39 Cf. BRAGA, Ruy. **A rebeldia do precariado: trabalho e neoliberalismo no Sul global**. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2017.

In this sense, it is worth noting that the advance of commodification brought about by the crisis of neoliberal globalization has proved to be both a source of precariousness for the proletarian condition and of stimulating the appearance, on a national scale, of plebeian insurgencies led by precarious workers. In the book *The Rebelliousness of the Precariat*, I sought to analyze processes in which social unrest in neighborhoods and communities overflowed into public spaces, manifesting itself more or less organically in popular uprisings whose targets were invariably governments. In general, the young Portuguese, South African and Brazilian precarious workers studied in this book became involved in social activism through popular assemblies, the formation of independent unions, direct and rapid, often violent, action against state representatives or the creation of new social movements that resisted the threats of marketization, usually with territory as a binding reference.⁴⁰

That is why it seems useful to interpret the current pattern of labour unrest using Thompson, especially the well-known essay dedicated to the “moral economy of the crowd”. As we know, in its original formulation, the notion of “moral economy” sought to reveal the political behaviour of the crowd during the so-called “famine riots” in 18th century England, based on the observation of the centrality of traditional values or non-economic cultural norms in orienting plebeian political action. Thus, that first wave of the commodification of nature and money promoted by the state through the liberalization of the grain trade and, consequently, the change in the traditional way of forming the price of bread was accompanied by great popular insurgencies that challenged governments and sought to control prices in order to protect the moral economy from market threats. To this end, the insurgent plebeians resorted to the English grammar of customary English law, which at the time subordinated the right to property to the right to life.⁴¹

It is in this sense that I perceive a certain parallelism between, on the one hand, the political praxis of the 18th century insurgent crowd that sought to defend its livelihood from the threats of the first wave of marketization through the control of grain prices and, on the other, the political praxis of the insurgent precariat in the first decades of the 21st century that seeks to protect its survival from the deleterious effects of, to recall Burawoy’s expression, the “third-wave marketization” based on the defense of social rights threatened by neoliberal policies.⁴² And in both the 18th and 21st centuries, the national state appears as an instrument of marketization and as a final recipient of the demands linked to the reproduction of the moral economy, although, as we have seen in South Africa, for example, at the expense of waves of xenophobic violence.⁴³

Finally, it is worth highlighting another important parallel between the two historical contexts. Accompanying the Thompsonian formulation on the permanent rebuilding of social classes, it seems to me that the current protagonism of the precariat in the global cycle of

40 Here, it is worth mentioning the always inspiring work of James C. Scott. Cf. SCOTT, James C. **Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts**. New York: Yale Press, 1992.

41 Cf. THOMPSON, Edward P. **Costumes em comum: estudos sobre a cultura popular tradicional**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2016.

42 Cf. BURAWOY, Michael. Facing an unequal world. **Current Sociology**, v. 63, n. 1, 2015, pp. 5-34.

43 It is interesting to remember that Thompson pored over the politically deleterious and xenophobic effects of the unsuccessful attempt to internationalize Jacobinism in the English context in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Among others, see THOMPSON, Edward P. **Os românticos**. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2002.

protests reveals a moment in which, on a world scale, the Fordist working class was, to some extent, “undone” by neoliberalism, whether from the point of view of internal dynamics in companies – outsourcing, automation, contracting out – or from the point of view of dismantling labour protection in different national contexts.⁴⁴ Thus, the relationship between younger workers and the political leaders traditionally associated with the Fordist workers’ movement is undone, without another type of relationship replacing it. It is unnecessary to underline the importance of this change for the interpretation of the current “populist” upsurges in different national contexts.⁴⁵

In an allegorical way, I would say that what happened in the dismantling of the Fordist working class takes us back to the stage before the formation of the English working class in the 19th century, when class struggles were fought “without classes”, that is, in the absence of a historically more precise differentiation of the fundamental social classes of capitalist society. It was the moment when semi-urban plebeians formed by the amalgamation of different popular strata, heirs of past social relations, faced the threats brought about by the commodification of the prices of subsistence goods, driven by the gentry in the process of becoming bourgeois, vocalizing the grammar of customary rights rooted in feudal power relations.

Evidently, we know Thompson’s own refusal of the historical “expansion” of the notions of “moral economy” and “class struggle without classes”. However, I do not advocate an interpretative orthodoxy, but only a source of theoretical inspiration capable of illuminating the current pattern of labour unrest in the context of the post-2008 crisis.⁴⁶ That is, I take these concepts as beacons capable of guiding analysis, particularly with regard to the process of dismantling the Fordist workers and the advent and expansion of an urban precariat that, due to its characteristics, comes close to an amalgam of different popular strata, heirs of past social relations, facing the threats brought by the third wave of marketization. Indeed, in this direction, Daniel Bensaïd sought to update the Thompsonian notion of the crowd’s moral economy in order to analyze the new forms of social plunder brought about by neoliberal globalization.⁴⁷

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the notion of “class struggle without classes” refers to a type of social conflict supported by the action of insurgent social groups that directly challenges governments without the mediation of political representatives recognized by the state. It is an emerging pattern of social conflict that is very much in line with the current cycle of mobilizations through which the three national cases analyzed in *The Rebelliousness of the Precariat* experienced. Finally, the insurgencies of the Brazilian, Portuguese and South African precariat resist the forms of marketization that degrade their livelihood and attack their social

44 Cf. MATTOS, Marcelo Badaró. **A classe trabalhadora: de Marx ao nosso tempo**. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2019.

45 It is worth remembering that E. P. Thompson emphasized, in the self-construction experience of the working class process, the analysis of the relationship between workers and the numerous forms of political leadership that existed between the 18th and 19th centuries in England, with special emphasis on religious, utopian and demagogic leaders. Cf. THOMPSON, Edward P. **A formação da classe operária inglesa (vol. 2): A maldição de Adão**. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2012; and THOMPSON, Edward P. **Os românticos**. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2002.

46 For further details concerning the possibilities of ‘expanding’ the Thompsonian concept of moral economy in order to shed light on modern civil society too, cf. GÖTZ, Norbert. Moral economy: its conceptual history and analytical prospects. **Journal of Global Ethics**, 11/2, 2015.

47 Cf. BENSAÏD, Daniel. Os despossuídos: Karl Marx, os ladrões de madeira e o direito dos pobres. In: MARX, Karl. **Os despossuídos: debates sobre a lei referente ao furto de madeira**. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2017.

rights through modes of collective conscience distinct from the consciousness of the Fordist working class, usually guided by the collective negotiation of wages and working conditions.

Here, perhaps, rests the main lesson left by Thompson in his essays on the eighteenth-century crowd: the universality of the notion of “class struggle” (at that time, gentry versus commoners) must be rescued as a prior element to the appearance of sociologically differentiated “classes” (bourgeoisie versus working class). When I stress the importance of the political praxis of the precariat in the current cycle of global labour unrest, I think I am capturing this transitive moment in which the class struggle is becoming increasingly central, despite the dismantling of the working class of the previous period. In its place, social groups of poor workers and middle sectors of society, especially the younger ones, appear between the increase in economic exploitation and the threat of social exclusion.

In reality, thinking about this transitive moment in these terms is nothing new for critical Marxism. In 1987, Étienne Balibar, Althusser's most famous disciple, in an influential essay entitled “From class struggle to struggle without classes?” already emphasized the “universality of antagonism” of classless struggles, when he stated that:

The disappearance of the classes, their loss of identity or substance, is both a reality and an illusion. It is a reality, since the effective universalization of antagonism ended up dissolving the myth of a universal class, destroying the local institutional forms under which, for approximately a century, the labour movement on the one hand and the bourgeois state on the other, had relatively unified bourgeois and proletarians in the Nation. An illusion, however, because the ‘substantive’ identity of the classes was nothing but an inverted effect of the practices of social actors, and that, from this point of view, there is nothing new: when we lose these classes, we do not actually lose anything. The current ‘crisis’ is a crisis in the forms of representation and certain practices of the class struggle: as such, it can have considerable historical effects. But it is not a disappearance of antagonism in itself or, if you prefer, the end of a series of antagonistic forms of class struggle.⁴⁸

In short, in highlighting the contemporary resistance to marketization, we should expect to encounter the class struggle, but not in its industrial or Fordist guise. In fact, this is not exactly a working class policy in the traditional sense. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize that the current labour unrest has evolved, between dialectical polarities and reconciliations, within a field of social forces that oscillates between the traditional forms of organization of the subalterns and new movements, still far from a better defined class identity.

The actions of the urban precariat imply a complex model of popular uprisings, linking organizational discipline, repertoires of conduct inspired by the past, such as strikes, for example, and protective demands. All in all, these plebeian insurgencies often seek simply to “impose the law”, that is, to regulate the market, slowing the pace of the “demoralization” of their economy expressed in the increase in the prices of basic services, public transport and rents. In general, the crowd's procedures are aimed at fixing prices and forcing negotiations, that is, restoring the “moral” economy of the poor, ensuring their livelihood.

48 BALIBAR, Étienne. Da luta de classes à luta sem classes? *Textos Didáticos IFCH*, n. 20, Campinas, fev. 1996, p. 54.

At the same time, as demonstrated by the mass strikes that took place between 2010 and 2015 in the Brazilian heavy construction industry and in the Indian automobile industry, analyzed and compared by Jörg Nowak, it is necessary not to lose sight of the fact that urban social protests intertwined with the strike activity of workers subjected to extreme conditions of labour exploitation, strengthening their demands and, often, ensuring partial victories.⁴⁹ I myself had the opportunity to verify this symbiosis between successful strikes and social protests during the strike of the street sweepers in the city of Rio de Janeiro, which occurred shortly after the so-called June Days of June 2013; during the strike of the Tele24 Health Line operators, which broke out in early 2014 in Lisbon and Porto in the context of Portuguese anti-austerity mobilizations; and during the Johannesburg postal workers' strike, also in 2014, which benefited from the support of poor communities immersed in a notable wave of protests against rising basic service prices.⁵⁰

Final considerations

THESE THREE CASES were analyzed in *The Rebelliousness of the Precariat* and showed a historic moment marked by a transition in which the subaltern classes remade their strategies, adapting to the changes brought about by the crisis of neoliberal globalization through the formation of new coalitions between organized and disorganized workers, unions and communities, political parties and new social movements. It is worth remembering that these strikes, which multiply at the initiative of the workers themselves without previously centralized coordination, transcending the workplace and reaching national repercussions, are repeatedly driven by informal networks constituted in friction with the leadership of the unions.

It is a type of strike capable of encouraging the formation of collective identities of subalterns and strengthening their autonomous initiatives, even though it is not capable of producing an organizational model alternative to existing traditional forms. In reality, even when successful, these strikes show the political fragility inherent in the current class-based reshaping of these subaltern social groups. In this sense, the analysis of precarious workers' strikes may help to explain why we have verified the existence of a global cycle of mass strikes, but not a mass strike on a global scale. After all, it is a class-based experience that is still limping, shaping and being shaped by neoliberal hegemony. Markedly inorganic, the political agency of the subaltern classes, even when they manage to build coalitions between organized and disorganized workers, evolves through an amalgamation of social practices that vocalizes new categories using old ways of thinking. The characteristic language of this subaltern culture often swings between confidence inspired by direct action and disbelief in any kind of more lasting victory through these means.

It should not be any different: this fragile political culture could only flourish within borders demarcated by the collapse of confidence in traditional forms of Fordist solidarity. Thus, it seems correct to say that an active and potentially organic conflict between neoliberal logic and non-

49 Cf. NOVAK, Jörg. **Mass Strikes and Social Movements in Brazil and India: Popular Mobilisation in the long Depression**. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

50 Cf. BRAGA, Ruy. **A rebeldia do precariado: trabalho e neoliberalismo no Sul global**. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2017.

economic behavior linked to citizenship rights is emerging from the resistance to marketization by precarious young workers. Faced with an increasingly weak state as a protector of work yet strong as an instrument of political repression and economic accumulation, it is the specific combination of institutional weakness and the collective strength of the urban precariat that provides the “general illumination” for the immense complexity of the crisis of neoliberal globalization.

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