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"PERHAPS WE SHOULD EXCHANGE SOME IDEAS ON THE SUBJECT": THE JOURNEY OF A SOCIOLOGIST, WOVEN BETWEEN (SELF)REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

ABSTRACT: "Where, therefore, do you come from, as a researcher?" Faced with this question, which is part of the invitation to write this text, I answer: I'm a sociologist. From this intellectual background, I construct my autobiographical narrative, where I give particular importance to the way in which my contact with this science permeates the academic field in which I practise my profession, and the intellectual field in which I do research. But I also define myself as a civically committed sociologist because I refuse to stay on the side of the road, just observing social reality. I believe I have a duty to help transform society into a better place to live. My identification with a "sociology of action" comes from multiple influences, which I try to portray here. This text is also a tribute of recognition and gratitude to some of the persons who have populated my intellectual landscape, many of whom are still there. They range from authors I've never met in person, but have read with the greatest interest, to author-friends with whom I've had the pleasure of exchanging enriching conversations and ideas. I don't always name them, but I hope they recognise themselves in my words.
KEYWORDS: sociologist, Portugal, autobiographical narrative, sociology of action, emancipation.

Introduction

Mário de Carvalho, an anti-fascist activist, advocate of causes and novelist dedicated to portraying Portuguese society with fine irony and good humour, wrote the novel *Era bom que trocássemos umas ideias sobre o assunto* [trans. Perhaps we should exchange some ideas on the subject] in 1995 (De Carvalho, 1995). After his new boss sends him to an unimportant office, Joel Strosse Neves, the novel's main character, recovers his youthful political ideologies and decides to join the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP). In this endeavour, he comes across a party functionary who repeatedly uses the catchphrase that gives the novel its title.

"Perhaps we should exchange some ideas on the subject" is also the phrase I chose as the title of this text. Not because I'm in the habit of verbalizing it, but because I see it as summarising an important part of my attitude and way of thinking. I believe in dialogue and the exchange of ideas as one of the main driving forces behind social composition and change.

I have no experience of writing about myself. And I know little about autobiographical writing, or the exercise of self-socioanalysis (Bourdieu, 2008), even though

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I have spent a significant amount of my time analysing pieces of other people's lives, which have come to me in the form of lengthy narratives or telegraphic answers to questionnaires or semi-directive interviews. On the other hand, I hesitate about the rhythm and tone of this prose. When faced with the question posed by the students as to whether the results of their own research should be presented in the first person ("I did it", "I analysed it"), or whether scientific writing should adopt the impersonal infinitive mode, the difficulty in answering this doubt with conviction stems from the very dichotomy I find myself struggling with.

The first lessons I received on what sociology "should" be, in its claim to be a science, and the Durkheimian view that its method should "... consider social facts as things whose nature, however flexible and malleable, is nevertheless not modifiable at will" (Durkheim, 1984: 9) are still with me today. And also, the consequent requirement to make a demarcation between "two cognitive continents – the vulgar and the erudite" (Silva & Pinto, 1986: 30-31), recognised as pragmatically impossible in its entirety, even not entirely useful because it would block the analysis of symbolic social processes, but still a desirable stance for anyone seeking to contribute to a science that is as neutral and objective as possible.

But I was also early introduced to other views that openly question this vision:

> Does this mean that the sociologist observes the passing caravan from the side of the road, without sharing the hopes and sufferings of those who act and suffer? A very poor and very disappointing image because there is no roadside and the very image of the caravan, far from being neutral, reduces society to a mere enterprise (Touraine, 1982: 41).

I am much more sensitive to the conviction that the social sciences, and sociology in particular, have the task of bringing societies back to the knowledge of their action, helping to activate them. A sociology of action that is itself a form of action.

Despite everything, it is still my habit to use impersonality when writing my scientific texts. However, I understand that in the context of this challenge, or the "invitation to discuss/illustrate/explain/analyse the 'place' you write from and do your research in", I must make an exception and resort to the "I" to revisit my trajectory.

In short, I fit this text into the methodological guidelines that have always guided my approach to sociology, namely those that are more identified with the phenomenological or action research approaches, in order to produce a "life story" that is not merely narrative but is obliged to fulfil scientific criteria. To do this, I follow the recommendations made by those with more experience in developing "critical autobiographical research" (Bullough Jr & Pinnegar, 2001; Taylor & Settlemaier, 2003; Graham, 2004). On the one hand, the autobiographical construction must result from the compromise between biography and history: "When biography and history are joined, when the issue confronted by the self is shown to have relationship to and bearing on the context and

ethos of a time, then self-study moves to research" (Bullough Jr & Pinnegar, 2001: 13). In other words, for autobiography to be powerful it must contain and articulate "nodal moments" that reflect the relationship between personal experience and the context in which it takes place. On the other hand, to understand this exercise in critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 2006) as examining the unconsciously incorporated assumptions that shape who I am as a person and as a researcher. Finally, to value autobiography as a fundamental element of our understanding of the scientific process because I believe that revealing the "...hidden biases that had influenced the way I was endeavouring to conduct my research" (Taylor & Settlemaier, 2003: 240) reinforces the commitment to an ethos of transparency and, as such, scientific credibility itself.

Following the perspective of "nodal moments", each subtitle of the text reflects a turning point and the passage to a new stage of life, perhaps in a different place, but always associated with new challenges. The reflection on each moment that I consider relevant in my life journey is not dissociated from a context (sometimes socio-historical, but which can also be the student and work environment, or that of a new intellectual challenge), which interferes with it and helps to mould it. Therefore, these elements of the context will also be the object of my scrutiny.

Before sociology

In this exercise / essay of looking in the rear-view mirror and observing the path travelled, I propose to look back to the moment when Sociology entered my life. But there are elements of influence, I realise today, that came from before.

When I went to Lisbon to study Sociology at ISCTE (*Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa*), I moved away from my childhood and youth in a small village in the inner country. Like Didier Eribon (2019), I haven't returned to the place where I was born, but the environment I came from has never left me. Unlike the philosopher, who wanted to keep his past at a distance and with which he acquired a sense of denial, I feel that returning to the village – which I visit regularly and where I maintain some of my closest friendships – is a return to a part of me that I want to preserve. For the same reason, I don't feel like a *transfuge* either, in the sense of someone who abandons one side to ally with another. I don't follow Pierre Bourdieu in what he defined for himself as the creation of "a kind of invisible barrier" as a consequence of his academic career and success (2008: 84-85).

Despite all the distortions that we are subjected to through the lens of time, I think I can find some influences there that have lingered on in my life and personality. Firstly, from a social environment where rurality and the proletariat coexisted, not always harmoniously.

The historical period was, in turn, the time following the revolution of 25 April 1974, in which Portugal freed itself from a 48-year dictatorship – the *Estado Novo* – and began to live in democracy. Briefly, the Carnation Revolution, so known because it was carried out without bloodshed and the iconic image of children putting carnations on the barrels of the military's rifles became famous, was also a rich moment for Portuguese society to debate itself. To quote the philosopher Eduardo Lourenço:

> It was the ideological image of the Portuguese people as idyllic, passive, amorphous, humble and respectful of the established order that the 25th of April finally challenged in broad daylight. The truth that emerged through it was such as to finally readjust our authentic reality as Portuguese to itself, as a reflection of and response to a disfigurement as systematic as that which had characterised the hypocritical idealism and, under the colour of realism, the absurd unrealism of the Salazarist image of Portugal (Lourenço, 1992: 57).

In any other circumstance, it wouldn't be so common to see 14- or 15-year-olds arguing heatedly about politics and antagonising each other because they didn't share the same convictions. But that's what happened in those post-74 days, due to various circumstances: i) because Portuguese society was experiencing a period of high politicisation, with numerous parties vying for the attention and votes of citizens, and political leaders who cultivated a populist personality, as opposed to the austere and distant profile that was characteristic of the leaders of the *Estado Novo*; ii) because we lived in a community with a long tradition of associativism: sports clubs, neighbourhood clubs where people socialised but political discussion was also common, organisations linked to the Church – the Catholic Workers' League, the Catholic Workers' Youth – but with a trade unionist profile, public spaces (cafés, taverns, the central square) filled 24 hours out of 24 since the companies also worked continuously; iii) and, not least, because these young people were already living the life of "adults", they had left school early, at the end of the 4th year of schooling, they were already working in the factory and they already had their financial independence.

The inculcation of the proletarians' mentality, amplified by left-wing ideological convictions, helped to feed their perception that the world was divided into two parts: "us" and the "others". "We", the factory workers, and those who were "with us" because they shared a common identity and way of life. And the "others", who could be either the "rich", the "big shots" or those "who lived off the land", all of which were the object of rejection and some animosity. In the case of the latter, it was mainly the social devaluation of a way of life that became undesirable because it was perceived as poverty, hard work and imaginatively associated with past times.

However, it is still surprising how, at least in my eyes, this other way of life, that of the labourer, was an encounter with a new straitjacket, a social determinism that was stronger than individual will. Not just because the system (labour or otherwise)

imposed itself on the individuals, but because they didn't have the resources to challenge it and look for alternatives. I felt the pressure of a pre-formulated destiny, which I eventually escaped. Of my elementary school classmates, I was one of the few who managed to do so by extending my studies. As I was the son of a couple of elementary school teachers, their plans for my future were different. A few others managed it too, following the path of emigration.

The other influence, which I still feel, was that of the family environment. Of the many memories I have, I remember above all the discussions between my father and me at mealtimes, long skits that prolonged the time at the table, much to my mother's despair. An avid reader, well-travelled, with an above-average general culture, but with convictions that were very different from my own, it wasn't easy to have a debate with my father. And it was even more difficult to reach a consensus at the end of it. However, these discrepancies never undermined my respect for him, which I know is mutual. I learnt the importance of separating ideas from complicity (or friendship) and how to deal with different points of view, choosing instead to use them to enrich my own vision of reality. And because my father was very resistant to the idea of social differentiation, whether classist or otherwise, I also learnt from him to blur the boundaries between "us" and "others". I began to think from the perspective that "we" are also part of those "others" (the disadvantaged, minorities, interest groups, *etc.*) to whom we so often refer when doing sociological analysis. It was at home that I acquired this sensitivity to dealing with the different.

Meeting sociology

The "mental place" from which I research and write is unequivocally influenced by my background as a sociologist. ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon, the school where I did my undergraduate studies in Sociology, was an institution that stood out in the 1980s, particularly in terms of its academic environment and teaching and learning methods. When it is said that the Bologna Process confronted the higher education system with an unprecedented challenge, that of shifting the focus of the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the student, with the students and their project becoming the centre of all activity (Guedes et al., 2007), I would point out that my school was already practising it when I arrived: the predominance of tutorial classes and individualised support, freedom to select priorities in terms of topics to study in depth, self-regulation of learning and its pace, valuing group work over written tests.

In this context, the real contact with sociology took place in the subject of Sociological Theories and, in class, the encouragement given by the teacher to us students to choose the authors and schools of thought about which we wanted to deepen our knowledge:

I chose Jürgen Habermas and Symbolic Interactionism. Happy choices that have greatly influenced my career.

In 1981, Habermas published one of his fundamental books, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, which was translated into English in 1984 under the title *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1984). Thereafter, more accessible to readers who don't speak German, it was precisely in that year, or perhaps at the beginning of 1985, that the Theories professor introduced me to the work and invited me to accompany her in discovering Habermas's project of outlining a theory that reconstructed the concept of reason, not grounded in instrumental or objectivistic terms, but rather in an emancipatory communicative act. The construction of a two-level concept of society that integrates the lifeworld and system paradigms, the attention given to oral language as a means of coordinating social action, but above all the importance that the author gave to communication as a constructive act, simultaneously, of the individual personality and of social reality, were points of his theory that attracted my interest from the very beginning. As his English translator reflects, "… Habermas is after a notion of ego identity that centres around the ability to realize *oneself* under conditions of *communicatively shared intersubjectivity*. The moment of universality requires that actors maintain a reflective relation to their own affective and practical natures, that is, that they act in a self-critical attitude" (Habermas, 1984: xxiii).

Fortuitously, because I was unaware of this liaison at the time, I also chose symbolic interactionism as another theory to delve into. In fact, I think I started reading Mead, Goffman and Blumer before looking at Habermas. Only later did I realise that Habermas recognised Herbert Mead as one of his most significant influences (Honneth, Knödler-Bunte & Widmann, 1981).

Both the Theory of Communicative Action and Symbolic Interactionism have provided me with perspectives that emphasise the importance of the self-concept, which is the way in which individuals perceive themselves in relation to others. This self is mutable and evolving, moulded through social interaction, particularly communication. And that, in the opposition between agency and structure, the individuals and their will are determining forces in moulding societies.

Any of my choices was also a search for alternatives to the limitations I identified in the more structuralist theories, not only the Parsonian approach but above all the Marxist view. The latter was, and to some extent still is, the recognised dominant reference in sociology in Portugal (Silva, 2022: 324). However, as I perceive it now, this distancing and even rejection of more deterministic visions of society was not so much based on theoretical observations, given the incipient knowledge I had of these other paradigms, but above all was due to the way I noticed the transposition of Marxism into the field of political and ideological struggle. In the post-25 April period, the

Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) managed to establish itself as one of the most prominent political forces, defending Marxist socialism as the ideological alternative for the country. The PCP was led by a brilliant politician, Álvaro Cunhal, but the party has always been marked by ideological immobilism and proximity to the doctrine of the USSR. And this alignment is still visible today, for example when, faced with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the PCP advocated its legitimacy[1]. This inability to understand the changes taking place disappointed me, just as the analytical limits imposed by Marxist-Leninist ideology when applied to understanding social reality. I was later confronted with this incompatibility again during the defence of my doctoral thesis. And the epistemological break ended up being accentuated.

Joining the academy

Entering an academic career was not the result of an assumed vocation, but was imposed from outside, as a way of taking advantage of an opportunity that had arisen in the meantime. Initially envisaged as temporary, it ended up becoming definitive.

It was preceded by a brief stint in a local intervention project to fight poverty, implemented in four villages in the interior of Portugal and part of the *European Poverty 3 Programme – Medium-term Community Programme for the Economic and Social Integration of the Least Favoured* (1990-1994) (ILO, 2004). As a member of the operational team, I came into contact with poverty and the dynamics of local development, as well as with new options in terms of social intervention, where the principles of participation, partnership, multidimensionality and research occupied a prominent place in the methodology to be implemented. The multidimensional approach, put into practice through locally based partnerships (*i.e.*, territorial and not sectoral) bolstered the local development approach in the fight against poverty.

When I started teaching at the University of Beira Interior (UBI), Covilhã, in 1990, I took this experience with me and deepened my interest in research in the areas of poverty and social exclusion, as well as regional/local development. However, with some surprise, I immediately noticed sociology's indifference (or even resistance) to action research methodology, participatory approaches, or the local development perspective. A glaring example was the fact that the methodologies for the social sciences manuals adopted in sociology courses did not include action research as a scientifically valid

[1] "The Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) announced on Wednesday that they will not be present in parliament during Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky's speech, according to CNN Portugal. The party voted against having the president make a speech in the Portuguese parliament. (…) Paula Santos from the PCP has provided an explanation for this reaction, arguing Zelensky 'personifies a xenophobic and belligerent power" (Silva, 2022).

option. I interpreted it as an orthodoxy that, I thought, was worth challenging. For this very reason, in my first exam for academic career progression, I chose precisely the topic of action research: *O lugar e o papel dos actores num processo de Investigação-Acção* [trans. The place and role of participants in an action research process] (Monteiro, 1995).

From then until today, I have maintained some of my research priorities: studies on poverty, social inequalities and social exclusion, as well as on local development processes, both of which were part of my doctoral thesis (Monteiro, 2004); and an interest in "participation", both from a methodological perspective (action research and other participatory methodologies) and from the perspective of social activism (citizen participation, associativism, partnership dynamics, local governance, *etc*.) (Monteiro, 2004; 2008b; 2014; 2019a; 2019b).

Along this journey, I identify some influences that I consider to be decisive in shaping my path as a researcher: some of a more theoretical nature, others of a more experiential design.

Dealing with the phenomenon of *poverty*, but above all from the perspective of social exclusion, led me to read carefully and be influenced by the theories of post-modernity and about the risk society. From authors such as Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman and Charles Tilly, I came to realise that "risk", "individual" and "reflexivity" are characteristics of contemporary societies and the type of individuals they produce. In French authors such as François Dubet, Jean-Claude Kauffman, François de Singly, Danilo Martuccelli, Alain Ehrenberg and Bernard Lahire, some of whom I read later because they were more recent, I found pertinent reflections on the possibility of a "sociology of the individual". As they point out, the relevance of such an approach lies in the very configuration of modernity:

> As one of us has written [Martuccelli], modernity has given rise to 'the formation of a societal singularity, [a] process of singularisation at work in economic structures, political organisation or law, in relations to others or to history, in personal aspirations or urban constraints.' It exists only because the whole of society – in its institutions, in its norms... – asks it to exist (Martuccelli & Singly, 2012: 11).

These approaches have been widely criticised, especially within sociology, by those who believe that their "post-social" colleagues, by decreeing the end of social orders and the advent of individual decision-making, have allowed themselves to be contaminated by the characteristics of the neoliberal era. And that they are even helping to consolidate its influence (Silva, 2008; Molénat, 2011). In response to this criticism, I would argue that sociologists with a more classical approach are participating in the inertia of this world by refusing to evolve categories of thought that have become insufficient, and in some cases inappropriate, for interpreting the social change underway. The type of individuals that today's societies produce and the life experiences they go

through cannot be interpreted solely based on their class position, stratum, sexual role, or the type of family they belong to. Therefore, a perspective that looks at those who are the cells of the social body [the individuals] and their singular action, in a context in which the reflexive act has become not only an option but, above all, an imposition of the new social order, will be a fundamental contribution to a better understanding of these same societies. This is how I perceive it.

Similarly, there are authors (Oyen, 1997; Hickey & du Toit, 2007) who believe that the concept of social exclusion does not make any significant contribution to the ongoing debate on the phenomena of poverty and social inequality. There are authors who, once again, interpret it as giving in to the neoliberal vocation to devalue the problem and shift attention away from the various forms of inequality (including income inequality) that characterise capitalist societies (Silva, 2008). Another argument used is that the perspective of social exclusion favours an emphasis on individual responsibility, leaving more and more poor people to fend for themselves and limiting public investment in social security systems.

Unlike these authors, I sought and found in the thinkers of social exclusion, again from the French-speaking tradition, those explanations that I couldn't get from the theorists of inequality and poverty. For example, Alain Touraine (1989), André Gorz (1997), Pierre Rosanvallon (1995), Robert Castel (1995) and Serge Paugam (1991). It's no coincidence that I found more affinity with the French authors. Seen from Portugal, I realised the similarities between the social systems and culture of the two countries. Firstly, because post-revolution Portugal was largely designed by political leaders who had passed through France, some of them exiled there to escape the Salazar regime (Mário Soares and Álvaro Cunhal, for example). Others, in turn, had studied in France. So, the Portuguese welfare state model and laws, as well as the health and education subsystems, were inspired by the French model. On the other hand, the population itself also accommodated this influence: at the time, French was the most widely learnt foreign language in schools, the Portuguese community in Paris exceeded one million inhabitants and made it "the second largest Portuguese city"... In short, French authors reflected on social realities that were very similar to ours.

This influence helped me to define social exclusion as a whole process of breaking the fundamental social ties that bind the individual to his closest community, but also to a society made up of institutions and norms, and which place him as part of a triangle where, under normal conditions, he is one of the vertices and establishes transactions with the other two that shape social exchanges and sustain social cohesion. It is the ties that bind him to the other poles that sustain his full integration into a society (Monteiro, 2004). In other words, a perspective on social exclusion that is more focussed on social ties and exchanges.

At a later stage, within ESREA (*European Society of Research on the Education of Adults*) and influenced by some authors-friends who encouraged me to make this discovery, I came into contact with visions that, within the framework of educational dynamics and other social realities, give particular centrality to processes of awareness, emancipation, individual reflexivity or the biographical approach. The perspective of a "transformative education" led me to value Paulo Freire (1997) and his conviction that people, even those from marginalised groups, are capable of critically analysing the world as long as they have the tools to perceive and act on reality. In turn, gaining control over one's own life requires prior critical awareness of the sources and nature of inequalities and exploitation (Oliveira, Monteiro & Ferreira, 2019). Jack Mezirow (2006) also understood that transformative learning begins with critical reflection or critical self-reflection on assumptions (critical assessment of the sources, nature and consequences of our habits of mind), our own and those of the others. This subjective approach takes on particular centrality as we are increasingly confronted with "ill--structured problems" (Merriënboer & Stoyanov, 2008) that are determined by new societal challenges and defy our ability to understand the world.

But, as a sociologist, I also believe that this is only one part of the equation, since the whole process of critical reflection takes place in the context of broader dynamics, which are collective and dialogical. The personal reflective project, or the individual management of their biography, takes place within communities where interpersonal ties are established, and is not immune to the influences that arise from the latter. According to Peter Alheit and Bettina Dausien (2006) reflexive learning processes (or biographical learning) do not exclusively take place "inside" the individual, but also comprise biographical setting up of networks and social processes, of collective knowledge and collective practices. When reflection happens together, shared insights deepen and extend that experience. But with the major distinction that today they are increasingly meaning ties rather than belonging ones. Emancipated from the original groups of belonging that were imposed on them, today's individuals potentially benefit from more freedom to choose who they relate to and when that interaction takes place (Monteiro, 2011).

These reflections, of a more theoretical and conceptual nature, were always accompanied by my immersion in forms of social activism, especially when, since the 1990s, I joined and participated in networks such as ANIMAR – *Portuguese Association for Local Development* and EAPN – *European Anti Poverty Network Portugal*. Each of these networks seeks to integrate the "biodiversity of civil society", bringing together agents and organisations to build strategies that promote citizenship and local development, against poverty and social marginalisation. As I've already mentioned, I share Touraine's conviction that Sociology has a duty to act, actively participating in the accomplishment of the solutions it advocates. In my teaching and lecturing activities, as well as in

fundamental research, I feel obliged to multiply the perspectives from which a social phenomenon can be observed and understood. Particularly, by going beyond my own perspective and often being confronted with others that oppose it. And I have no doubt that taking part in the real debate on needs and possible solutions (EAPN, 2015) permeates and interferes with the perspective of the sociologist that I am. But I also realise that these approaches to concrete reality give me invaluable and irreplaceable resources, as there is no literature capable of giving us "the colour", "the smell" and "the volume" of personal and daily lives. And to give me the privilege of hearing first-hand the stories of those who have the "experience of poverty".

The cotton test

"The cotton test" is an expression widely used in Portugal, meaning that something (product, work, idea or other) is subjected to a test of purity. In my case, the "cotton test" to which my ideas were subjected was a decade-long adult education and training programme. During that period, I was invited to be an evaluator and consultant for various education and training courses aimed at adult women, all of which were run by the *Solidários Foundation*, a small non-profit civil society organisation, but one that was big on the ambition to change the lives of the people it worked with.

The social reality in which the *Solidários Foundation* was immersed was that of a rural region where, at the time of the intervention, 71% of the resident population did not have a 9th grade education. For this reason, the organisation prioritised its intervention with women over the age of 18 who had left the education system prematurely without having completed the compulsory 4, 6 or 9 years of schooling, depending on when they stopped attending school. And it took on the general mission of "creating opportunities for children, young people, men and women in the rural world to take the lead in their personal, social and community development". Under this priority, between 2000 and 2010 the organisation invested in the implementation of EFA courses, that is, Adult Education and Training. These courses were promoted by the *National Agency for Qualification* (ANQ), as an offer of education and training for adults, according to a relatively constant structure: prior recognition and validation of competences that the adult had acquired throughout their life; the articulation between basic education and vocational training, which conferred dual certification, at school (1st or 2nd cycle of basic education) and professionally (level 1 or 2); a curriculum structure organised in modules and which respected a model of competences to be acquired. In the case of *Solidários*, the courses were focused on professional qualifications in areas such as gardening, organic farming, and personal care.

However, observing the stability of the basic structure was not incompatible with making training strategies more flexible and open to experimentation and innovation. This was the path that the *Solidarity Foundation* took, with a very specific objective: the development of transversal competences that qualify and (re)define the role of women as responsible and active citizens in the decision-making processes regarding their development and the development of their communities. In turn, the strategy followed was based on three pillars: "autonomy", "(self)reflectiveness" and "co-responsibility" (Monteiro, 2008a: 150). All of them orientated towards the personal and social empowerment of the trainees: "Being a citizen, empowering yourself to learn and be an entrepreneur, is a path".

The commitment to the autonomy principle was reflected in the way *Solidários*, alongside the objectives of school and professional qualifications that are typical of the requirements of EFA training, established its own agenda around a very specific purpose: "learning with autonomy". In other words: for each woman to develop a sense of self-esteem and positive self-affirmation, as part of a redefinition of women's social roles; to invest in interpersonal relationships, within the family or the community; to develop decision-making skills, negotiation, group motivation or the affirmation of entrepreneurial capacity; and, to learn how to learn.

This autonomy of thought and decision was in turn articulated with processes of self-reflection and self-determination. From the first skills recognition and validation session to the individual construction of a reflective portfolio and the successive development of personal and professional projects, each trainee was encouraged to contribute to an individualised training path. For their part, the teaching team committed itself to respecting and helping to implement the individual project, with all the successive adaptations that this entails.

This idea of commitment leads to the third pillar of the training strategy, that of "co--responsibility". In fact, the pursuit of the previous principles would only be effective if the training took place within the flexible framework of "mutual questioning" and the negotiation of commitments. On the trainees' side, they were called upon to "answer for themselves", but also to "answer to others" (fellow trainees, the teaching team, but also to the expectations of their family and community). The teaching team, in a way that was quickly seen to be experimentalist and demanding, committed themselves to respecting requests, incorporating new tasks, and complying with the rules under construction.

Looking back at the decade-long experience of the *Solidários Foundation* in organising adult education and training courses, the main idea behind its intervention is that autonomy is a necessary "condition" for the lives of those who do not experience full inclusion in society. To this end, *Solidários* has used education as a means of promoting

this social inclusion and "preparing trainees for life, so that they become autonomous and adapted to various contexts". This conviction was consolidated in parallel with another, that what was experimented with is always provisional and that each audience, each situation of exclusion, requires new experiments and successive critical evaluations. Although always guided by the values that give education its emancipatory character (Monteiro, 2011).

As far as I was concerned, the main gain was realising that change was possible, in the direction and according to the agenda I had conceived as desirable from my more theoretical reflections. I see it as an opportunity, lived as an experience of action research and co-construction, in which I was given proof that an educational process orientated towards awareness, critical self-reflection and mutual questioning can be transformed into an education for emancipation. But I also realised that the tools at our disposal to evaluate change – namely employability rates, school diplomas or satisfaction measurements – are not enough to encompass the transformative power of these processes.

I am a creation of a slow time

As I approach the end of this autobiographical reflection, I don't think it would be complete without focussing my gaze on the present and some glimpses of the (desirable) future.

In his book *Social acceleration: a new theory of modernity* (2015), Hartmut Rosa uses the perspective of critical theory to formulate the thesis that both the structural and cultural aspects of our institutions and practices are marked by the "shrinking of the present", *i.e.* facing a process of acceleration. Quoting the author:

> Our society seems like the utempian city of Kairos in many ways, and yet it is also radically different. But why? The 'tempo of life' has increased, and with it stress, hecticness, and lack of time. One hears such complaints from all sides, even though like in Kairos, in almost every sphere of social life there are enormous gains in time by means of technology. *We don't have any time although we've gained far more than we needed before*. The aim of my book is to elucidate this monstrous paradox of the modern world (Rosa, 2015: xxxv).

Transposing the analysis to the field of scientific knowledge, it is also possible to observe signs of this acceleration, of which I would like to highlight the tempo of scientific publication. "Publish or perish" (van Dalen, 2021) is the biggest symptom of the pressure to publish a lot and quickly, pressure that is not only institutional, but is increasingly understood as "normality" by those who embrace an academic career.

I am a creation of a slow time, or at least a slower time than the present. Against the voracity of instant publication, and with some academic and personal costs, my option continues to be to delve deeper into the debates I'm involved in, seeking inspiration

from those who reveal something new to me and force me to think. On this journey, I adopt what René Descartes already recommended in his *Discourse on Method*:

> For it is not enough to have a good spirit, the main thing is to apply it well. The greatest souls are capable of the greatest vices as well as the greatest virtues, and those who walk only very slowly can advance much further, if they always follow the straight path, than those who run and distance themselves from it (Descartes, 2011: 5, author's translation).

I'm following this path, in parallel with my personal commitment to development dynamics and civic causes.

Despite other influential references, it is in this group of inspiring discoveries that I include a visit to the work of Jacques Rancière, as part of a choice that has increasingly valued a return to philosophy. And with him, or because of him, I have become more and more interested in emancipatory processes (Monteiro, 2018).

Critically analysing the role of the school, Jacques Rancière accuses it of not being run according to the presumption of equality but of imposing partitions that separate those who are considered to be capable and those who are considered to be incapable of thinking, and therefore only as objects of knowledge at the disposal of the former, who do science or philosophy. Rancière believes that the school should be dominated by the figure of the *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, who "is ignorant of inequality" (Rancière, 2010: 5) because his teaching is guided by the principle of the "equality of intelligences" (2010: 5). Without elaborating a pedagogical method for this (Pelletier, 2009), the author's concern is above all philosophical, in defence of a school that, based on a relationship of intelligence to intelligence, instigates the capacities already possessed, the capacities that each person has already demonstrated. But the inequality/equality dilemma is not only present in mainstream schools, it is also observable within the framework of so-called emancipatory pedagogies, which strive to reverse the primary structures of power and in defence of the "pedagogy of the oppressed" (Freire, 2018). As Rancière observes, then seconded by Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta, critical pedagogies have focused on analysing oppressive structures, practices, and theories, contributing to their "demystification". But "It also means that in order for us to achieve emancipation, *someone else*, whose consciousness is not subjected to the workings of power, needs to provide us with an account of our objective condition." (Bingham & Biesta, 2010: 30). We are thus faced with an intervention that is not only operated from the outside but, once again, is based on a fundamental inequality between the emancipator and the one to be emancipated. As Theodor W. Adorno (1998) also advocated in his vision of an education for emancipation, the contestation of the dominant model seems to give rise to a counter-model that is also shrouded in tics of paternalism and the violence of imposed models.

Although in a different way, Sophie Haine, in her work *Pour un individualisme de Gauche* (2013), is also very critical of the way in which, in the face of a right-wing individualism – which is selfish, rational and competitive – left-wing currents have been unable to oppose anything but a discourse "...directed at sacralised collectives, such as 'workers', 'proletarians' or 'the people'" (Haine, 2013: 17). At most, the left has advocated alternative individual action as a way of improving society, whether in the form of small-scale singular acts (buying from local shops, not travelling by plane, signing petitions...) or through virtuous individual behaviour, such as promoting social and solidarity economy initiatives. Opposing neoliberal individualism, but also sporadic or exemplary individualism, the author defends the need for a project that allows everyone to live according to their own needs and aspirations, framed within a collective action that must be political and orientated towards the rehabilitation of sovereignty: "In other words, the individual should be the priority, and collective action its humble servant" (Haine, 2013: 22).

In short, and inspired by these and other contributions, I continue to deepen the view that the desirable future does not lie in capitalist individualism, but neither can it be based on expressions of messianic individualism, which keep the ordinary person in a passive and dependent position, instead of encouraging them to free themselves from any tutelage and take an active and reflective stance on their own destiny. With the fundamental condition that individual freedom is achieved, mediated, and enriched by collective action, in the context of a dialogical democracy (Lucio-Villegas, 2022). Through my experience within the training project developed by the *Solidários Foundation*, I have had the privilege of proving that this idea is possible. I am now trying to identify similar possibilities in other fields, such as local governance and entrepreneurship/social innovation.

As far as the field of entrepreneurship / social innovation is concerned, the challenge has been more complex. Specifically, the intellectual and civic field from which I come and with which I share the greatest affinities, including social and solidarity economy approaches and emancipatory initiatives, offers significant resistance to considering the entrepreneurial mentality as a hypothetical support for new ways of acting and providing innovative solutions to social needs.

Within the social and solidarity economy (SSE), the main perception is that entrepreneurship is a creation of the capitalist economy, largely supported by the latter in the name of individualism and competition. And as such, even a more social "version" of the entrepreneurial spirit – social entrepreneurship – because it puts innovation and the entrepreneurial mentality at the service of social missions, is seen as not daring to overcome a dominant economy that is fundamentally unjust and produces inequalities. In other words, it is still just a market solution that does not respect the

heritage of the SSE: "The central object of the social economy is the grouping of people, simultaneously thought of as a place of production and/or distribution, a place of education and a place of non-violent change" (Draperi, 2007: 12). Also, in the field of adult education, the orientation towards the "entrepreneurial spirit" or the valorisation of "entrepreneurial skills" has been seen as a compromise with purely economic rationality, with obvious losses:

> In the specific case of the European Union, the subordination of adult learning and education to employability targets, economic competitiveness and increasing workforce productivity places greater stress on adaptation, competitiveness and rivalry between citizens than on the values of social transformation, solidarity, dialogue and cooperation (Lima, 2022: 20).

I have wondered, however, whether "entrepreneurial skills" can be put at the service of social missions and social transformation. Even more so, whether an entrepreneurial mindset can help strengthen social initiatives in terms of their efficiency and effectiveness. Following some concrete experiences, as well as the conceptual proposals developed within the framework of the so-called EMES Approach (Hoogendoorn, Pennings & Thurik, 2010: 10), also based on the concrete cases of social cooperatives in Italy and Poland, social initiative cooperatives in Spain, or collective interest cooperative societies in France, today I propose to explore the potential for a virtuous relationship between the values and principles of the SSE and an entrepreneurial culture. To this virtuous relationship, entrepreneurship can contribute with skills associated to strategic management, creating innovative solutions to emerging needs, taking a stand on environmental issues or the importance of measuring the social impact generated by interventions. In turn, the history and principles of the SSE encourage reflection on the importance of the collective dimension of entrepreneurship: even with great qualities and skills, social entrepreneurs do not act alone. Their talent lies in their ability to mobilise different stakeholders, both in defining needs and in finding formulas to meet them. The ESS also brings an unavoidable political dimension to the debate, which it expresses through warnings about the responsibility of the Third Sector in co-constructing public policies, creating public spaces for debate and consolidating learning communities, and building alternatives that promote collective emancipation.

A brief recapitulation of who I am and what I'm looking for

I'm a sociologist. Perhaps I could have been a historian, as that was my preference in high school, but I ended up following this option through the influence of someone who saw in me an inclination for the subject. Today, Sociology is not only the academic field in which I practise my profession, but also the intellectual field in which I do research. It's that too, but much more than that. I take it on as a way of life because Sociology

has that beauty of being the matrix of my ego, or the filter that stands between me and what surrounds me. Not unique, but decisive. Scientific rationality, which I live with daily, has led me to try to give maximum coherence to the above narrative about my biographical construction, influences and choices. I doubt, however, that such coherence has always been present in my path, but I still feel honestly portrayed in what I've just written.

It is also this coherence that I try to bring to my choices, both in my personal and academic life, but also in my civic life. I refuse to just stand on the side of the road and watch. I believe that I have a duty to contribute to making society a better place to live. A society that accepts and encourages the individuality of people and their choices, in accordance with the values of freedom, participation, dialogue, tolerance, democracy and humanism. These are also the values that populate my intellectual landscape, within which I occupy different positions (or perspectives) and experience different viewing possibilities (Gomes & Monteiro, 2009; Monteiro, Gomes & Herculano, 2010). But because coherence is also made of change and is not the result of the immobility generated by certain convictions, as is often described, I remain attentive to the challenges that other people pose to me, with their perspectives, and am always available to engage in dialogue and to "exchange some ideas on the subject". Without being in a rush.

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