

CHANGES IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIETY AND THE STATE, AND THE TREND TOWARD ANOMIE IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND IN POPULAR ORGANIZATIONS

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Everything seems to indicate that we are entering a stage in the country's social and political history that is marked by certain inversions in the relationship between the civil society and the State. The history of independent Brazil has been a history of the State's tutelage over society, a society whose historical landmarks derive from processes that flow so sluggishly that the changes they bring about impress only very slowly upon the awareness of most of its members – even those who, for their transforming political militancy, might be expected to be closer to understanding them. Circumstances peculiar to the recent dictatorial period (1964-1984) have awakened the creative possibilities of society relative to the State. Social movements and popular organizations disseminated, and everything seemed to suggest, and still does, a new stage in our social history, with society playing the leading role. However, this short-lived social vivacity seems to be facing a crisis, as the State proved itself to be more agile in defining the circumstances of historical action.

For those who have followed the emergence and workings of social movements – and, within them, of the so-called popular movements – such an inversion lays open the need to understand not only the changes but also the status of these movements in the new context and in the new political scenario that emerged with the end of dictatorship. If this trend is confirmed, such movements will become anomic. Already there are not few evidences of this: their ideological references correspond neither to the historical circumstances nor to the possibilities of transformative interventions that are opened within it.

The inversion and the anomie may, perhaps, derive from society's increased conservatism and from its backwardness vis-à-vis the historical possibilities that surfaced as the all-encompassing State's retrenched or, at least, was modernized. It is certainly cause for concern that society and its agents are misunderstanding the historical possibilities of this moment – especially because as the State recoils from its substitutive tasks for society, an unregulated environment for social and political life is created that, in the absence of effective, universal, constructive and less rhetorical interventions by groups and parties from the left, tends to favor rightist or even extremist groups.

What was a crisis of the State during the dictatorship and a crisis of the dictatorial State in its final stage, when the liberal sectors of the oligarchies sought to detach themselves from the ruling party, has now become the crisis of civil society as it shies away from taking the political step that circumstances require. It remains to be seen only whether the social movements and the organizations that speak and act in the name of society are capable, in the short run, of understanding their new functions that arose from the recent changes. Apparently senseless impasses between society and the State indicate how difficult it is to establish such an understanding and this is the problem-issue that has motivated my considerations.

During the dictatorship, a unorganized society, deprived of full political expression, fought against an authoritarian State, often in the name of vested interests, i.e., interests of singular, not always majority groups – such as proletarians, rural workers, middle class youth, feminine and feminist groups, community and neighborhood groups etc. Society, accustomed to populist domination, was slowly forced to understand its subaltern role vis-à-vis the State and the institutional limits that historical circumstances placed upon its claims and demands.

The emergence of both urban and rural social movements outside the party framework was, in a way, something quite novel in Brazilian society, a new form of social expression linked to a flourishing of new social and political players. Restrictions on political parties made for the emergence of a host of protagonists in the historical plot who had been buried by the populism of previous decades in the common grave of all who had previously benefited from a purveying State. Every kind of social demand was gaining expression and solution in the anticipations of government officials and politicians.

Even demands that were to become explosive in the dictatorial period, and particularly in the post-dictatorial period, such as land reform, did not actually express the true needs of the rural poor. These, for the most part, had been accommodated by a system of co-optation and paternalism intent on keeping them in convenient subservience, acquiescent to a regime of work that resulted from trial and error – veritable experiments to assure the legitimacy of a long transition period from slave labor to free labor.

The discourse on land reform was localized and constituted a means to frame and give political meaning to an equitable and immediate plea for survival, but was lost amidst conflicts with the police, and local and localized arrangements. It corresponded much more to the view of social problems held by radical sectors of the middle class, both from the left and from the right, than properly to what thought (and still think) and needed (and still need) the various and diverging categories of rural workers: sharecroppers, tenant farmers, leaseholders, crofters, temporary or permanent laborers. Not by accident, the vocabulary of these struggles – *agrarian, commoner, latifundium, bourgeoisie* etc. – is historically absent from our rural world: these words do not express the actual conflicts and social polarizations that flow in another ways and stem from other means of creating awareness of social contradictions. *The vocabulary of this struggle does not coincide with the vocabulary of life*; in other words, the awareness of the struggle is diverse from the awareness of those who want to lead the struggle. This muddling can be seen in the peasant struggles of many countries, a consequence of the historical peculiarities of this social category, as Marx would say. Moreover, it is also a consequence of the impotence peculiar to an undefined social *class* that wants to lead other classes, namely, the middle class – a class that sponsored the enlightened intellectuality, a class to which Marx belonged but never said so.

The social problems of the land would eventually seek answers and solutions in a very undefined social reform: the land reform. To this day, the militant middle class (i.e., the radical sectors of the middle class) strives in different ways to frame the problems of the land and of the rural workers into an Agrarian Issue, propounding as solution a kind of land reform that depends on prolonged prologues that attempt, ultimately, to merely define what land reform is. This severance between the proposal and the agent that will fulfill it is peculiar to claims that are mediated by the interests and concepts of a different social category than the one in

whose name the claims or pressures are made. This discrepancy, a serious one, is at the heart of what I call “trend toward anomie” of popular land reform movements. It does not invalidate the enlightened motivation of the middle class who, rightly so, is deeply upset with the poverty and gruesome living conditions of the poor. Nevertheless, such intervention confounds the very yearning for justice of the victims of a very long process of exclusion from development process, inasmuch as the fantasies cultivated by the middle class about poverty, however generous, are out of tune with the world of those who supposedly would be the beneficiaries of such effort.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the interests of the various groups unevenly affected by the various interventions of the dictatorial government at various times have manifested themselves as vested particularistic interests, disconnected from each other. The cause for delay in agglutinating every particular interest were the plunderous and repressive heterogeneous interventions by the dictatorial State in the various sectors of society, economy and politics.

The military dictatorship, however, was not a cohesive and coherent political block. The abrogation of political rights did not occur at once; it happened in time, ceased, resumed, ceased again, always according to some topical repressive measure. Policies for the land, in turn, were always enforced as an exception, not the rule, contradictorily expunging large landed estates in areas of social tension while nurturing business latifundia in new regions – producing simultaneously new tensions. If, on one hand, the State implemented topical land reforms of a military and repressive character, evoking reasons of national security, on the other it also complied with the demands of precarious local social movements, sprung from the emergency of unexpected conflicts, and at the same time repressed, arrested and prosecuted the leaders and supporters of those movements. In a fashion, this was a befuddled acknowledgement of an undeniable historical fact, namely, that the agents of political struggles for land reform were not necessarily the same as those who needed the reform of the land.

However, there was a certain articulation in these particularistic efforts, not so much by their own intent and design, but because the antagonistic stance was what assured the relative unity of oppositions. A certain residual “oppositionism” was thus engendered, a coalition of the remnants of repression and authoritarianism, in the absence of which it would have been impossible to overcome the military

regime and perform the transition toward a democratic State. It was the mediation of the adversary, the dictatorial State, that assured the strength of the opposition forces, although these tended to be a coterie of corporative endeavors. This articulation came from outside, from broader nonpartisan institutional groups that were not always rooted in the same social situation of those in whose name they made claims. To this day, much of the debate on land reform expresses this disconnect between the dramatic situation of those who most need it and an imprecise awareness of their situation by those who defend reforms in the very name of those who most need it.

The role of the Church in this articulation was and continues to be extraordinary, with its local pastoral committees, such as the pastoral of the Indians, the pastoral of the land and the labor pastoral. These committees were accurately defined by the bishops as pastorals of subrogation, a mere temporary aid. The recrudescing social and political tensions of the dictatorial era acquired a face, a protagonist, in pastoral mediation. Popular clamor, as the bishops so rightly defined in one of their documents, resorted to the apparatus of the Church, to its channels, for expression and communication – as the only means of assertion in a country where radical political expression, that which strove to arrive at the root cause of problems, was considered criminal.

Even clandestine political parties sought refuge under the protective mantle of the Church. Even avowedly atheist party members did likewise. Parties or tenors, as they were called, with restricted and narrow scope, increased their visibility and range thanks to the popular penetration of the Church and to the legitimacy it preserved, after a fashion, throughout the dictatorship. Overall, practically every one of these groups disdained the role of the Church. They based themselves on the assumption that everything that was outside the party milieu, and specifically outside the leftist party milieu, was depoliticized and contributed to atrophy social demands by confining them in ideological frames unsuited for political action.

There was a certain encroachment in this nonpolitical mediation that fulfilled an undeniable political function. The result was an attempt to laicize the initiatives of the Church groups or even to institutionalize them as secular groups – as happened with the MST, the movement of landless rural laborers, converted into semipartisan groups. When the opportunity arose, there was great resistance, even from the bishops, to found a Catholic Party in Brazil, something that would have

been possible. Thus, catholics began to express themselves through the party that opposed the dictatorship and, within it, preferably through the so-called tenors of the left. That is how the Workers' Party came into being – inheriting most of these parasitic and overstepping encroachments, even if not all of them.

Well before the end of the dictatorship and in the days prior to the meeting of the episcopate that published the document *Igreja e Problemas da Terra* (*The Church and the Land Problems*) in 1980 (defining principles and concepts of the agrarian issue and land reform), the State showed that it was taking steps to acknowledge the historical role of community groups and the new forms of societal efforts, at least as they related to the social land struggles. Coinciding with the first visit by the Pope, general Golbery do Couto e Silva, the regime's ideologue, in a speech at the War College, underlined the political risk and the anomaly of a society that had begun to express its demands through nonpartisan channels such as the Church. Thus, even before the extinction of the military regime, the Brazilian State became aware of the changes in the relationship between the society and the State, and propounded to reconstitute the State's hegemony by means of a political opening that might incorporate the new social vitality as a politically positive and manageable factor. That is, the State opened itself to the possibility of making society its ancillary agent, so as to eliminate the conflict that existed between them and that had been aggravated by the regime itself. This, however, was still the concept of a centralized State, the selfsame logic of our dictatorships, that encloses, patronizes and directs society.

Undoubtedly, an acknowledgement of the changes in this relationship was beginning to emerge, albeit in a still disorderly manner, if only because this was also happening in other countries, above all in the hegemonic nations, as a result of the often misnamed neoliberalism. I must recall, very much in passing, the reemergence of nationality in countries such as Spain and Great Britain, among others, and their acknowledgement of their own political legitimacy, after decades of smothering and even repression. In Brazil's case, the equivalent was the acknowledgement, even during the military regime, of the tangible reality of Indian populations and their territorial rights, and of the legitimacy of the territorial claims made by rural populations through the Statute of the Land. To this must be added the decision not to intervene in the Contag (National Confederation of Agricultural Workers), which assured rural workers a channel to politically express their

identity. It is obvious that the State also imposed the legitimacy of its own sovereignty over territorial issues, thus establishing as a point beyond which no overstepping would be tolerated.

With the vanquishing of the dictatorship, the State became liberal, or recovered its liberalism, at the municipal and local levels, apparently revitalizing oligarchic traditions. In a certain way, this was once again the recurring pendular motion in Brazil's Republican history between political centralization and decentralization, between republican absolutism and oligarchic federation, between dictatorship and democracy¹. But now the State also saw itself face to face with a mobilized society, expressing itself through social movements and popular organizations. Limits to the political strength of these new players, by the way, could be seen in the campaign for immediate direct elections, the *Diretas Já* movement. On one hand, the new players revealed themselves unprepared to act autonomously. They had to make alliances with more traditional sectors of society, sectors from a middle class of liberal tradition, and fell under their hegemony. It became clear that these new players were in no conditions to play a hegemonic and decisive leading role. On the other, the social movements and popular organizations had, at the same time, come to bear the burden of encroachment in the parties, because during the dictatorship political parties were unable to act with their own identity. They became captive to hierarchical and corporative political concepts that jeopardized their novelty and creativity. The social movements, by letting their apparatus derive from the parties, ended by impairing the very possibility of hope.

While the State opened itself to a peculiar liberalism (this being also an expression of its frailty in face of the political pact made by its antagonists, leading to the end of dictatorship), the civil society swiftly became corporative and authoritarian. Social movements often became aggressive, authoritarian and intolerant organizations, with their own bureaucracies, hindering the emergence of new and authentic social movements. The vested interests became rigid: they did not evolve toward the universality of values that their practice seemed to announce, nor did they perceive a proper dimension for their practices.

1. The idea of pendular motion in the Brazilian political process may be found in Leal, Victor Nunes. 2. ed. *Coronelismo, Enxada e Voto*, São Paulo, Alfa-Ômega, 1975, *passim*.

At the limit, social movements and popular organizations began to deny politics itself and the discussion and co-responsibility that must pertain to a civil society aiming to take upon itself the strengthening of society vis-à-vis the State. Quite the opposite happened: they organized themselves as the State (e.g., the Workers' Party, which largely represents popular and labor organizations, and its self-styled "Parallel Cabinet"; or the MST and its effort to establish particularistic sovereignty in the portions of territory it presumes to conquer, assuming they are *liberated* territories, similar to the efforts that founded the PCdoB [Communist Party of Brazil] in the 1950s).

They do not posit this clash as a confrontation between civil society and the State, pervaded by the historical possibility of strengthening civil society and making it instrumental in a modern version of the social inclusion of the poor as agents of their own destiny, i.e., a civil society that is diversified in the composition of its social classes and that, in becoming progressively the category that imbues and guides the historical process, takes away from the State a large portion of its specific class content, reducing its ruling status and placing it more at the service of society – something similar to what the Catholic Church, in countries such as Brazil, claims to be and strives to be.

Most of the difficulty stems from the interpretative reductionism that traverse the praxis of these hybrid social movements and popular organizations, which are themselves also strongly influenced by churches. The Catholic Church and some Protestant churches have elected the poor and destitute as the protagonists of contemporary history, as human figures whose needfulness are evidence of the risks imposed by degrading economic regime upon the human condition, the universal values of man and the humanization of mankind. It is on this plane that they resemble the traditional political parties of the left. In spite of the equity of the values of this frame of reference, such view of poor is an abstraction. It does not take into account that in today's world there is a broad diversity of poverties, well beyond the mere lack of what is essential for a person's physical survival. The poor of this social figment is a squalid but photogenic pauper – who, alas, indeed exists in many places around the world: indigents below the threshold of poverty but also below the threshold of active participation in the destinies of society. A society of the wretched is not a society of citizens, nor can it be.

In the gradations of poverty, one must recognize that many are poor not because they suffer material privation of what is essential for survival. Popular crea-

tivity has concocted survival strategies that snub conventional economic logic and offer solutions where technicians and economists see no way out. Modern poverty is greater and quite different from the definitive poverty in religious imagery. Or from a middle class fancy whereby the poor are reduced to a squalid scheme of social and political interpretation. The core of modern, capitalist poverty lies in the transformation of people into things, in their dehumanization. In capitalist societies, the poor are those who are poor in humanity. When a lack of materials or provisions strikes someone, we are seeing nothing but the extreme exacerbation of the objectification of the human being: men and women have become throwaway items, their lives not worth the morsel of food they eat – the machinery of wealth production has no place for them, first and foremost because this same machinery prevents them from participating in the utopian universe of hope. The churches, furthermore, have been withdrawing wholesale from any social ideal of hope and are being instead co-opted by feeble and senseless material ideals – even those within them who consider themselves *progressive*.

Believers should perhaps be reminded that God is not to be found essentially in the particularity of the *mouthful*, but in the universality of the *mouth* that can feed itself and can also speak for itself even when it has nothing to eat. And when this mouth speaks, it expresses a consciousness, a spirit, the utopian consciousness that eating is subsidiary to speaking and thinking, to wanting and to transforming. A mouth that does no more than eat is a poor mouth, not necessarily the mouth of the poor. A mouth that does no more than eat is no more than a mouth as conceived by the supportive awareness of political militants who cannot voice out the speech of their own oscillating and undefined class, and thus usurp someone else's class and awareness, that of the workers and of the poor, and attempt to speak in their name, in their place – which is not what the workers and the poor necessarily need and want. The radicalism of this usurpation does not even express the radical needs of society², let alone the needs of the poor. We might even say that in this

2. According to Heller, radical are the social needs that cannot be satisfied without profound social changes. Cf. Heller, Ágnes. *La théorie des besoins chez Marx*, translated by Martine Morales, Paris, Union Générale d'Éditions, 1978.

hellish inversion, *the poor are excluded because they were excluded and deprived of the right to speak for themselves*, victims of words usurped by a prefabricated discourse divorced from the praxis of a middle class with a strong authoritarian streak, even when proclaiming itself revolutionary and identifying itself with the holy principle of freedom of consciousness.

Changes that are occurring within the churches themselves – which, obviously, are not bodies apart from society – clearly indicate these gradations of poverty. Those who are upset, even rightly so, with the dancing liturgy that has proliferated in religious ceremonies, forget that it represents a serious and significant criticism of theological poverty. Liturgical dancing denies and explicitly criticizes the concept that the flagellated body of the poor is a hallowed body, that there is sanctity in poverty. The idea of a poor body as a hallowed body is a canny monastic idea in marked conflict with the popular concept that the sanctified and blessed body is not the emaciated body, but the satiated and jolly body. These new trends, which develop in the gaps left open by religious and political manicheism, reconcile body and faith because they restore to the body the joy of a body that is recipient of life and not only of politics.

The ample space for manifestation by the civil society during the postdictatorial period had not been decidedly occupied. This could only be done by an organized and active society, that is, by feasting and joy. Instead, the agents of popular assertion have distanced themselves from this possibility and retreated into populist and patronizing positions. They have become increasingly confined to the small remaining territory where poverty still plays the leading role. Curiously, the poor ceased to be a generic poor, a generic victim of capitalist development, to become a mere *residual pauper*: someone *excluded*, unemployed, with few opportunities – not the majority, not the poor that we are but the poor whom we pity. That is why the Brazilian population could generously and emotionally support many of the just and fair manifestations of the MST and, in the following election, vote for candidates who represented precisely the great landed estates and the oligarchic domination.

To these anomalies others must be added. The sector of the Church that conciliated or still conciliates a discourse about the poor with an incarnate praxis was progressively lacerated by the reductionism of *exclusion*. This led to a progressive distancing between the bishops and the so-called grassroots communities. The at-

tempt to ascribe a political dimension to the CEBs (Grassroots Ecclesiastical Communities) led, in truth, to assigning them a partisan dimension – and this in a country where the hopes of people who might identify themselves with the CEBs should, perhaps, also express their political will through *many* and not merely *one* political party – the Workers’ Party (PT) and the Party of Brazilian Social Democracy (PSDB), as well as the Democratic Labor Party (PDT), the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) and the Popular Socialist Party (PPS), among others. This ideological and political sequester carried out by the popular leftist vanguards *advanced* more quickly than the bases, and led mediation groups to become isolated *way up front*, separated from the people and from most of the bishops. They fell into a trap of incomprehension, divorced theory and praxis, and now seem to march toward the impossibility of reconciliation.

Such closure announces and propounds a centralized and authoritarian state as the expression of social will and, through it, a subjugated society – not the opposite, which would be a State at the service of a sovereign, conscious, pluralist and modern civil society. Everything seems to indicate that the popular movements and organizations, and the parties that identify themselves with them, are not aware of the alternative and of the room that is being opened for action, shifting the key role in history from the State to society. Obviously, this only acquires meaning in a complex, pluralist and democratic society in which different vested interests – such as those that today characterize our social movements and our popular organizations – can gain political strength and historical legitimacy through the possibility of coalitions and of universal and historical values with an eye on the common good. Exactly the opposite of what has been happening.

A wide territory of freedom, of democracy and of society as agent of historical will has been opening up since the end of the dictatorship, resulting precisely from the action of social movements and popular organizations. But resulting also from the political maturity of social and political groups from the center, of liberals, of the independent left and even of sectors from the oligarchies that modernized themselves over the last decades and learned to revalue their liberalism – rooted in the ideological and political traditions of the 19th century, when they were the “left” of the monarchic regime. It is this territory that enables society to become active in managing the rights and the quality of life – basically the city and the community

groups – but that has been scorned at³ and abandoned to the initiative of other groups. This, by the way, is a positive fact in present-day historical circumstances, implying that a civilized *right*, conservative on some issues, liberal on others, is purporting to democratically dispute, on modern terms, the prospect of locally co-managing the relationship between society and the State with groups from the left and with rightist groups still remaining from the military government – groups with a tendency of populism, repression and, not infrequently, corruption.

The social movements and popular organizations, whose historical roots can be traced to the claims and clashes of the dictatorial period, seem now straitjacketed in the framework of past confrontations, while both society and the State are being transformed faster than they are able to perceive. These groups have sunk into practices worthy of the time of the dictatorship, namely, destabilizing the government, precipitating institutional crises, and questioning its legitimacy. But now there is a chance that they might become government (as has already happened in some cities and states). In this fashion they undermine their own political legitimacy, because their ideological references and that of the mediation groups that support and guide them are, on the whole, references established strictly on the surmise that every conflict is a class conflict and on the simplistic assumption that the political confrontations at the time of the dictatorship were the great and ultimate conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, between *good* and *evil*. This, as I see it, is the source of the notorious messianism that underlies the actions of these movements and organizations, that seem to be waiting for a president-messiah who will, at last, establish a mythical and propitiatory Republic of Belo Monte, suppress politics as lief and feed the poor with our daily bread and the ideological fundamentalism that will render politics unintelligible, make society docile, and punish with

3. Zander Navarro underlies this scorn in a relatively recent text. Cf. Navarro, Zander. *Políticas Públicas, Agricultura Familiar e os Processos de Democratização em Áreas Rurais Brasileiras (Com Ênfase para o Caso do Sul do Brasil)*, presented to the Grupo de Trabalho Sobre Processos Sociais Agrários during the XX Encontro Anual da Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Ciências Sociais, ANPOCS, in Caxambu, Minas Gerais, October 22-26, 1996, p. 20 (note).

a fiery sword those who inadvertently fulfilled to the best of their abilities the mission that history reserved them throughout time.

The anomie of this thinly disguised latter-day secular restorationism is evident. The enormous richness of the creative praxis of these groups and movements is lost in an ideology that is out-of-tune with, and unrelated to their very praxis. An ideology that, furthermore, has proven itself incapable of translating the practices of these groups into social awareness and a historical project, and, on the contrary, merely drains them of their vitality and of the rich consistency of the historically possible. Such ideological messianism desecrates the mystique of popular movements and corrodes the charisma of their leaderships, destroying the utopia that they harbor and progressively ceasing to be a critical frame of reference to renew and validate their praxis.

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