

# Before and after the walls: what is common among women in the outskirts of São Paulo<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article recounts the vicissitudes of members of the Movement of Homeless Workers, the MTST, according to an ethnographic approach that, by exploring the collective construction spaces of daily life, according to the meaning of Maria Gallindo, reinterprets social problems and urban struggles as political practices of experimenting with being together and managing individual and collective vulnerabilities.

**Keywords:** Homelessness politics. Collective construction. Daily life.

*“When I got up there, I saw down below a crowd of old people, children, women building their stalls, a breath of wind came into my ears and I thought it was God saying: stay there and make roots. I started cooking for everyone at the camp and after that I did not have any more depression. I think the movement healed me”. (Tereza, 57 years old)*

### Clues to a homeless policy

Tereza’s words could only be inscribed in a speech of “militant of the labor movement” and it would not be totally wrong if we did so. Tereza met the Landless Workers Movement (MTST in Portuguese) ten years ago during an occupation at the south district of the city of São Paulo and since then she has been present in almost every act, assembly, meeting and reunion. In contrast, the word “Militant” seems not representative of the heterogeneous universe of the continuous process of production of subjectivities of these women. These women insist on erasing the borders that separate the various spheres of life: family and domestic life, collective life, religious / spiritual life and also the bodily life, so to speak, where the experiences of suffering, fears and cures dwell.

Our ethnographic guiding thread therefore follows these destabilizations of frontiers from peripheral and feminine contexts to what is usually under-

stood as “politics” or even “social movements”. We intend to do this alongside with one of the largest urban movements in the country today, the Landless Workers Movement – MTST, following, however, what the Bolivian feminist theorist Maria Galindo calls “daily spaces of collective construction”. This paper discusses another “political spatiality” in the occupations of empty lands capable of reinterpreting the problem of social reproduction and care, of suffering and also of the dimension that circumscribes what we can call, provisionally, “faith”.

It is about understanding what would be a homeless policy that thinks and manufactures possibilities of resistance from its invisible places: kitchens, relationships, cures and new corporalities, shifting and redistributing the usual gender roles, of the singularities and collectivities in an always provisional daily routine of an occupation. This homeless policy is updated in possible living together.

It is made from raw material of a shared vulnerability and is, above all, a composition of women – maids, housewives, cooks, nannies, mothers, grandmothers, and housewives. These women sell cake and coffee at the exit of the train or subway stations – the people who take care – and with them we follow several paths opened up here.

As Isabelle Stengers (2009) warned, our investigation concerns not to finish “the work of capitalism”, that is, the destruction of ties from great conceptual devices that make invisible this everyday construction of connections, implications and relationships. It is a matter of thinking of the new resistances and urban struggles from a territory of relations. Our hypothesis is that these experiences constitute a common urban, in which interdependence becomes an unavoidable aspect of the new political struggles.

Tereza is a 57-year-old black woman, she is from Bahia, and came to São Paulo seeking a better life, like many others. Her life tells the story of the working class in the city of São Paulo in the last 40 or 50 years. In her childhood, she experienced rural work. In São Paulo, she worked at a metallurgical factory until when she and other workers lost their jobs in this segment due to the crisis in the industrial capitalism not only in the capital city of São Paulo state and its great São Paulo city. Tereza worked as a janitor, while her husband continued working at the factory where they met. Tereza, her husband and their two daughters left

São Paulo in the early 2000 as they were unemployed and went back to Bahia to rebuild their lives “I barely remembered the North, I left when I was very young. But when we got to Cruz das Almas, nothing worked out”.

Without a job nor survival conditions in Bahia, the family went back to São Paulo once more, but before that, Tereza “adopted” a boy from Cruz das Almas, because his mother “did not have living conditions, and decided to give the boy to me to bring him to São Paulo”. As the anthropologist David Graeber (2014) likes to remember, the “curse” of the working class is to “care too much”. For him, the “working class” has never been the factory working class, but the “class that takes care”, the one that takes care of others and other’s works: feeding, cleaning, caring for the elderly and children, health care, safety, etc. In the case of women, too much “caring” acquires a much more constitutive dimension of the female experience. No wonder, almost all of the people who “fight” for other people are women<sup>2</sup>.

Tereza’s story, and the story of many others, is about how to go through crises. Migrations, unemployment, return migrations, relationships of comings and goings with the formal labor market, marital separations, and frequent evictions. In the case of women, however, the only permanent condition links them to the work of social reproduction. This includes not only the care, the reproduction of male labor and its maintenance for

2. “Fight for the other” – normally children or siblings - is when, even with a house of their own, or some other more favorable housing arrangement (or by various other bureaucratic restrictions that prevent access to housing programs) – a person decides to follow the movement, to go on demonstrations, acts, and assemblies, to conquer housing for someone else rather than himself.

the wage labor market, domestic work in others' homes, but also the daily work of making relationships, (re)building communities. The latter aspect is the focus of our research.

The reports have an abundance of these relationships in the struggle for housing in an occupation – cooking together, taking care of sick people, sharing information about necessary red tape for the waiting list of their own home; they take the risk of weakening domestic family ties while producing others. “In the street”, “in the fight”; “to spend the night in the camp”, listening to the suffering of others and to offer their account of suffering as a permanent exercise of otherness. They take care of the safety of the group, children and the elderly. In this work, we shed a light on this fundamental dimension of collective struggle – what the philosopher Isabelle Stengers calls “experimental togetherness” (Stengers 2003) – a phrase that defines occupation as a common urban.

I was in bed; I could not do anything else. I saw all that movement, the people going to build a stall. A woman came to my house with a little baby in her lap, she was desperate, without a job, or anything. I told her: “go there in this invasion, they seem to be honest”. I told her to go because I could not do it myself, I could not leave the house, and I was very depressed. One day I went, I got it. I saw things all happening. I forgot the depression. (Luciana, led an occupation on an east district of the city of São Paulo)

In this essay, we will reflect on women who have had the experience of an occupation and who have managed to conquer their home through the program “Minha Casa, Minha Vida” (translated freely to “My House, My Life”)<sup>3</sup>, a more recent housing program that transfers the totality of housing management, from construction to resident choice to the social movements to fight for housing. Before conquering their own home, however, they went through nine years of struggle: “in this fight you need hard work and faith. Nobody’s ever believed. My husband did not believe it. When I took the key and showed them: this is my faith”.

This place, on the outskirts of the city of Taboão da Serra, in the state of São Paulo was built in 2014 and it has 192 apartments. It is therefore a very singular case in which people who have gone through a fight of almost 10 years, had the dream of a home of their own come true. How have these women narrated the experience of this transition? The reports and the various intense ways of telling this story by women take place in an affective space, full of “raw material of speech,” as Svetlana Aleksievovitch (2016) suggests.

These ways of telling the stories reveal – along with the disposition of the furniture, the television programs, the portraits and religious symbols in their new house – new subjectivities, rearrangements and a recent memory produced about the differences between life in the occupation and “life in the building”.

3. The Minha Casa Minha Vida Entidades (My House and My Life Entities) program is planned in the housing program “Minha Casa Minha Vida” (2009) and aims, according to Caixa Econômica Federal, a public bank that finances the construction, “to promote the production or acquisition of new housing units, or the re-qualification of urban properties. The modality called “entidades” (entities) was designed to “make housing accessible to families organized through housing cooperatives, associations and other entities ...” (...) “it encourages cooperativism and the participation of the population as protagonists in the solution of their housing problems”.

### Now, these walls

“Before it was all together. When one was crying, the other was already listening. Now there are these walls, everyone in their place, no one knows anything anymore”. (Cristina, 37 years old)

The first time I talked to Cristina, she was alone in her apartment. She did not demonstrate much excitement to show the rooms, to explain about the refurbishing she was planning – as is usual in the first visits – and she was visibly shaken, had a more drawn-out speech. Cristina a 37-year-old black woman, an unemployed school inspector was an important leader in one of the camps that today no longer exists in the city of Itapeverica da Serra in the state of São Paulo.

I was responsible for the documentation of the whole staff, 340 families. I was responsible for a lot of things, and gradually as I was having problems. I underwent surgeries, one surgery after the other, my tasks were divided among other people and I was left with no task at all. And then I closed myself.

Cristina faced health problems due to an unsuccessful bariatric surgery that ended up pasting her intestines, the cause of her frequent pains. After that, she discovered that she had fibroids and she would have to undergo another surgery to remove the ovaries. Because of her weak health condition, Cristina was moving away from vari-

ous tasks of the movement, a painful process that lead to a very strong depression. Today Cristina is attended by a psychiatrist at the Hospital das Clínicas in the city of São Paulo and takes antidepressants daily. The problem of depression is far from being an isolated case among the people living in MTST camps. In Cristina’s case at first, the movement caused her “not to have time to recall the problems”: conflicts and marital separation, caring for the young child, lack of money to pay the rent. Her memory of the “camp time” is filled with images of what we might call “experimental togetherness”. These are spaces of daily practices of being together, sharing the care of self and others with strong bonds between people who share this same experience.

Reports of illnesses cured in the process of an occupation are not uncommon. Two important leaders, one from the districts of Capão Redondo and Pirituba in the city of São Paulo report how the occupation “did not feel the effects of chemotherapy “. For them, the daily tasks, the new relationships obstructed the symptoms in some way: “here we know that it is important, we cannot miss it. We end up not even thinking about the disease”. Also in the occupations they learn about the Brazilian Public Health System and how to find the best provision of services with nurses or doctors and health care. Not to mention all the remedies and medicines to treat some diseases.

They also talk about taking care of younger chil-

dren. As Cristina tells us:

At the camp it was much easier to leave Cauê. (her youngest child). I used to leave him there, or even outside of the camp, if I had something to do. We lived, some of us ended up living close by, next to each other, so we used to hang out at each other's house. "Take care of him because I have to run some errands". And so we carried on. Here at the condo it is not a good idea to knock on someone's door every time asking for it.

We do not want to suggest a "romanticized" life in the camps. The memories also have the experience of suffering, muddy feet, rainy days, resilience. Rosa, another woman who has always been a housewife tells about the difficulty of cooking with "leftovers" in the camp, about the anguish of "putting the wrong amount of ingredients" or not having food for everyone. However, the life experiences of these women (and how they elaborate themselves the narrative of that experience) are better understood from Judith Butler's (2011) idea of "precarious lives". The feminist philosopher, in a discussion with the thought of Hanna Arendt, argues that the Western view of the "political sphere" is marked by a certain conception of "male citizenship". For her, such conception is due to an extension of the separation between the spheres of production and social reproduction, a division which establishes the "political" domains of those who are "pre-political".

Butler's proposal is that we can remake our political ways of thinking from a new ontology that is founded on the initial assumption that we share a fundamental condition of precariousness. Although some bodies are more exposed to precariousness than others, what can move our political lives, is precisely this shared condition of bodily precariousness. This condition always reveals the importance of thinking through interdependence. "Now it is not me, it is not you", the speech of an important woman leadership in the south part of the city of São Paulo, does not say so much about the erasure of individualities, but calls attention precisely to what exists in between.

The occupations produce daily reconstruction of the shattered world in a context of intense and differentiated production of dispossession that includes various forms of violence – institutional and domestic – the constant dumping of their own homes by the real estate capital and the difficult access to the world of rights. In this sense, the encounter with the movement and the collective experience are the elements that end up traversing their trajectories tracing new brands, producing strong meanings of bonds and life in common beyond the restricted domestic space, as Tereza says:

T: "The money was over, my husband used to earn a very bad salary, then the depression struck. I had three children, a granddaughter ... I lived more sedated than alert"

P: “And how did you find out you were depressed?”

T: “Well... I started getting very nervous and wanted to die. I used to cry night and day. Until a doctor discovered that it was depressed and followed me up until I discovered the movement. One day, a neighbor knocked on my door: Look, there’s an invasion, let’s know the movement? I asked what this movement was and she said: “Look, there are a lot of people ... We can get a small land for us”. It was in the city of Itapecerica in the state of São Paulo. I saw a lot of people, the tents, it seemed like a dream, that did not exist in my mind (...).That moved me so much. I went down the hill and a young man said he would help me make a bamboo tent. I started to care about those people. My family said that I had gone crazy (laughter).

Such experiences are part of a central dimension of collective struggles and mobilizations that are almost never given due attention or are completely understood as mere “backstage to the political struggle”. The occupations of vacant lots on the outskirts seem to us to be a well-finished example of what Antonio Negri (2005) et al. calls the production of singularities – no longer the idea of an individual-individualized, but the existence crossed by the relation with the other.

Without erasing once more, however, the marks of gender in this process of singularizations, it is

a question of investigating, as Julia Di Giovanni (2017) described “in the essence of what we call politics are, for example, all the ordinary, anti-heroic and unpaid operations and tasks that women do and redo every day”.

It’s too hard, too crazy. We know who is hungry, who cannot buy food anymore. You can see it in the eye, the person speaks low, you know? Today there was a woman with three small children alone. You feel bad, then comes back home and thinks about the person. We even arranged to buy some diapers for her yesterday. (Aunt Angélica, led the occupation in the city of Embu.)

The passage from the camp to the “condo or the “buildings”, as they are commonly referred to, is reported as the result of a rewarding and “deserved” individual victory after “nine years of struggle”, a result from the “faith” and, as an experience of weakening the tissues of collaboration and sharing a life – which also reveals a set of values strongly anchored in community experience as a production of other ways of living. In Cristina’s case, her depression intensified on the way to the “building” and her mobility is now greatly reduced due to heavy medication.

These relationships daily produced build an infrastructure capable of reproducing the most basic material life – from the collective kitchens with food, the “security” of the land responsible for the protection of the group, to the sharing of child



care. Sharing the toothpaste, developing an electrical wiring device to heat the coffee water and thus save gas. The affective work of the women who support the occupations is an indispensable work for the daily operation and has to do with overcoming the most difficult moments. “I had to hold him. Toninho was very angry; I thought he would kill Fábio”. This ethics of care is far from being a pacified dynamic of relationships, but involves a bodily disposition that often leads to exhaustion, as in Aunt Angelica’s report above.

Many of these women who passed through the camps did not actually live in the camps. In fact, most of the MTST campers pay the rent in precarious and unstable housing arrangements, “maintaining” the existence of the camps as a form of political pressure to conquer the land. In such sense, they were able to experience a “double life” in one sense –one marked by this community fabric of life reproduction and another still crossed by domestic and family organization, by the ever-intermittent relationship with the labor market, and by more strictly mediated relations of capitalism.

Two elements appear recurrently in the reflection on their own experiences. The first has to do with a certain radical otherness produced at the moment of the encounter with other families, the “founder” moment of a displacement of one’s own subjectivity. According to them, they realized then that “there are people with much more difficulty” than themselves. When I ask what they

felt when they entered the camp for the first time, there is a recurrent type of report:

I think it is about living in group and sharing each other’s difficulties. Because you go through things and think that life is horrible, but you discover situations that makes you learn and appreciate your life more. You go through something difficult, but you cannot complain because there are people in worst situations than you. (Vilmena, 35 years old, mother of three, and janitor).

This shared condition of the precariousness of bodies, life stripped of its vulnerability; eventually produce a common existential territory. More than that, as Judith Butler reminds us in her recent work, the exposition of our bodies in a common space produces fundamental interdependence relations, a sociality that surpasses us (Butler, 2011). It is important to allege that for most people who are now part of the MTST and its dynamics, the most collective experiences were limited to the relationship with the evangelical (mostly) or Catholic church. Many of the women have been unemployed, relating to the labor market through temporary housework.

The encounter with the movement, on several occasions, is reported as a possibility of “cure” - a moment in which individual suffering and despair, precisely, find a new dimension capable of producing implications and interdependencies. The “cure” is produced by these various displace-



ments. The first has to do with the recognition of the vulnerability of the other. The second, with the new spatiality lived beyond the home and the domestic space and a new radical communality. The third has to do with the moment of new implications and responsibilities with the collective life, the “becoming one who matters” because one is able to “make work” the demands of the camp.

This last element – produced by the experience of being valued and recognized by a task – is as a dense layer in Cristina’s suffering. Cristina’s depression, which was an important coordinator of her camp, is produced by this “emptying”.

Because in the last year, especially in the last year of occupation, who took care of it was me. There were other coordinators, of course, but then, everything that was going to be done came first “Cristina, can we do this?” So I ended up taking over the camp, it was hard. People would come into my house at two in the morning, or come to call me to solve a problem somewhere. So I did not have time to think about myself, there was no time to be me, I had to show a leadership attitude, right? And when we came here I lost it. Now I’m more isolated, I cannot be what I used to be. I spend most of my time in the apartment alone. (Cristina)

The new MTST condominium is only three years old and it is interesting to realize now a new universe of conflicts that emerges: defaults, noise, annoy-

ances in relation to “drug use”, the relationship with “naughty children” in common spaces. What women feel the most is a certain absence of a collective space for regulating life: “people think that now they own the apartment and can do whatever they want to”. Even if they pride themselves in having their “own home”, they do not fail to identify that private property brings, on the other hand, a certain shattering of collective dynamics and a radical emptiness in the role of some of the women who took on important tasks in the camp phase.

In Cristina’s case, this emptying is so deep that it is expressed even in a physical disease. Going to the condominium not only affected her in this dimension but also, somehow, affected her relationship with her husband who, according to her, “is increasingly violent,” moving his mother and sister away from their own company. “He does not believe very much in my illness”. With severe insomnia, body aches, Cristina told us that she can no longer sleep or wake up without the medicines and that, lately, she can only leave home to take her youngest son to the front door. Negri & Hardt (2016) say biopolitics consists of “events and resistances and articulated by a discourse that links the political decision-making process to the construction of fighting bodies”. Resisting is to make an organism, a new corporeity capable of escaping from many powers of obstruction, paralysis, and isolation.

Cristina told me about suffering too difficult to be pronounced, “the difficult thing is that people do

not understand this disease”. I thought quickly about how “this disease” really is a weapon of war against women, an expression of what encloses us in enclosed territories and which weakens us insofar as capitalism and its way of life expropriates us not only from our means of producing life, but also from our imaginative organization that escape the walls of domesticity.

Otherwise, to take the disease to the collective space of occupation as well as the permanent creation of a corporeity is to intuit another operative process, constituting an urban common. The operative principle of the logic of care (Mol, 2008) proposes vulnerability of the body and creates a zone of relationship from the disease, an area in which we can engage together, with complicity, where we can think for the specificity of the relation of each disease with a certain body. To think about illness is to stop being an “autonomous subject”, but to share an expectation of attention and care.

The paradigm of modern Western citizenship is understood as the ability of people to control their bodies – leave the body outside the public arena and continually choose the best representatives. But the sick body, the depressive body is uncontrollable, it is erratic, it needs permanent care, it needs to be thought permanently. It is not a matter of servitude in relation to the disease or the caregiver, but rather to seek a heteronomy that strengthen ties and relationships.

In her report of Soviet women, Svetlana said in the midst of World War II: “What helps me is that we are used to living together in community. We are people of communion. Everything between us happens in the presence of others – both joys and tears. We are able to suffer and share the suffering. Suffering justifies our hard and bland life. For us, pain is an art. It is necessary to recognize that women take this course with courage” (ALEKIÉVITCH, 2016).

The experiences of these women reveal, on the contrary, a layered political ecology that mixes elements of faith, suffering, and estrangement from conjugal relations – many husbands threaten women who are in occupations with violence or even marital separation – the production of other relations capable of producing a collective life, healing, fatigue, but also a strong sense of “fight”, which is perhaps even a synthesis of these various elements. Avtar Brah (2006) emphasizes it is necessary to affirm the “whole body, in its physicality, mentality and spirituality” as producer of power, and for it “it is within this relational space that the dualism separating mind and body”.

These reflections are also strongly inspired by the work of Silvia Federici (2004) which insists the history of capitalism is also and, above all, the story of how capitalism acted in regulating the reproductive life of women so that it would be possible to produce one waged labor and one non-paid labor, that of women, and completely available. A life between walls. Similarly, based on

the thinking of Judith Butler (2006 and 2010) the struggles of these women can be understood in a corporeal ontology whose potential lies precisely in exploring what it has come to be called the “mobilization of vulnerabilities” in a world marked by new and more intense forms of production of precariousness and dispossession.

We would like to think together with women of this place which is precisely the border between the domestic and the family and the domestic audience (in the camps), between the reproductive work and the one that produces the very material possibility of the struggle (the difference between cooking at home and cooking in a communal kitchen, for example); the daily work of this material world that is always provisional and which can only be sustained by a constant practice of producing relations.

### **Occupation, gender and their displacements**

Contrary to what happens in the experiences of many occupations in buildings, in the most central regions of the city, in the land occupations of the MTST, the effort to think of a collective “we”, a common ground capable of producing identifications and belonging is part of a very central dynamics of daily life. It comes from the choice not to land lots, “it is bad the feeling that the person has to close a door and already think: this is mine,” a coordinator told me.

An important first question is the difference estab-

lished between married women and those who are not married. I have often heard from married women that single women are the ones who “fight the most”: “they are very hard-working and they have nothing to lose”, Tereza told me. Married women, however, always talk about the constant negotiations with husbands who are not in the fight. Sleeping in the camp for them, for example, is almost impossible. “I can do everything, I just cannot sleep”. The collective life of the “fight” holds a great zone of power and danger for women, and often the nuclear family is disturbed.

Maria de Fátima, a 54-year-old woman who was a married coordinator of a camp told me that when she started to go to the camp, her whole family said she was a “slut”. “They think we are in the camp to find a partner. They even sent members of the tutelary council to go and get my daughter. There is no use! I said: Do you think I am a slut? I’ll be a slut until the end!” Tereza went through the same conflict and said that he had to “prove that the camp was a family encampment”.

The accusations of being “sluts” by the neighbors and family members are constant and they have two important sides. On the one hand, she accuses this place of the “illegality” of the camps, the “taking the land from others”. On the other hand, it has to do with being in a “dangerous” place from the point of view of sexual relations and affections, which confuses intimacy with what is public, where, eventually, lead people to sleep together.

The camp and “fight” also become territories of negotiations, flows, and constant transformations of femininity/masculinity.

Cristina was also a married coordinator at the time and is facing marital crisis (aggravated even more because the new apartment is in her name) and tells us an interesting episode:

I used to go to the camp as a man, basically dressed as a man. One day I had a doctor’s appointment and it was very funny because I had to dress up. And when I got to the camp nobody recognized me. “No, you are not Cristina, Cristina is not like that”. I had make up on, my hair was down, I was wearing a dress, and people were all like “But it is not you!” and I said “Oh, if it was not me I would not be here, right?”

Cristina narrates another episode of a fight provoked by the “jealousy” of her encamped husband for having hugged another campmate when celebrating the conquest of the land.

Zeca got out of nowhere, and when I let go of my husband’s hand, Zeca grabbed me, hugged me and spun me around happily because I went to the negotiation. And my husband got it all wrong. My God! It was very hard to make him understand that nothing was going on between us!

The domesticity transposed to the most common scene of the daily life borrows several interest-

ing frontiers that separate a domestic-conjugal life from collective life, as well as a production of a shared intimacy that turns into a destructive “contaminating” substance of the economy that regulates women’s sexuality.

The kitchen and the collective preparation of food are a very interesting space of openness to the conversations and the strengthening of the bonds from the exchanges and conversations about sex, sexuality, pleasure. Perhaps one of the most strikingly feminine spaces, the kitchen also offers protection against the regulations of masculine moral economy, thus circumscribing a certain temporary autonomous zone for women. It was in the kitchen that I started hearing about sex in the camps: “there are a lot of children born because of the camp!”; “in the next occupation I want to go single, God forbid!”; “eat this part of the chicken, because it makes you horny”; “today I am stressed out, I need to have sex”; “don’t talk too loudly, the man is here”.

Going to the condominium also brought this whole collectiveness of the kitchen – even more because the kitchens of the new apartments are of a model where there is an extension from the kitchen to the living room. As Silvia Federica (2004) on her reflection on non-monetarized pre-capitalist and feudal relations, where collective relations prevailed over family members, the sexual division of non-hierarchical work, far from being a source of isolation, constituted a source

of power and protection for women – what we call today pejoratively “gossip”, has always been an important space for information exchange and mutual empowerment of women.

In the case of the daily life in the camps and even in meetings and reunions outside the land, the fundamental tasks are those related to the care and maintenance of the interpersonal relations responsible for the dynamic process of a trust economy: cooking, cleaning, taking care of children, paying attention to the deadlines of the bureaucracies of registrations and demands for housing, taking care of the number of absences and presences that each person needs to have in the activities of the movement. All this ends up composing a feminine universe and a political field that has more to do with the production and maintenance of the relations of interdependence, a delicate cartography that needs to care for and move vulnerabilities and trusts than with a policy of discursive programs, resolutions and maps. What we can sum up in a phrase often said by women: “Men can only give opinions”!

### **Politics, social movements and some preliminary reflections**

The reflections in this work are also moved by the theoretical effort of important thinkers of the feminist political theory that, in different ways, have produced other understandings about political action and resistance from the experience of

women during the fight. The Mexican sociologist Raquel Gutiérrez has accumulated indispensable contributions from her experience with community struggles in Bolivia. It is a matter of thinking of these knowledges and capacities, which, according to Gutiérrez, are essential for the production of the most visible moments of social antagonism, the “plots that generate worlds”: “Cooperative knowledge nested in the most intimate and immediate relations of production of daily existence, especially in those relationships not fully subordinated to the logic of value valorization” (Gutiérrez, 2013).

From the same author comes an important critique of the notion of “social movements”. If the term played a key role in the early 21st century, especially in Latin America, as far as it managed to express the new collective subjects emerged in the region, understood history from the struggles that have complicated what would be the traditional “working class” as the subject of transformations, on the other hand, the notion of “social movement” eclipsed a very heterogeneous multiplicity of struggles into a “political subject” somewhat stable. Understanding the struggles from their “instability”, Gutiérrez suggests it is looking at the dynamics of collective reappropriation of what already exists, beginning with the time and means of existence (Gutiérrez, 2013).

Women in the legitimacy movement in the conquest of a house and in intra-familial negotiations

end up with their own space of experience and for many times also convince their husbands to engage in the “fight”. In most cases, they are called “crazy”, “sluts” and family and neighbors look at them suspiciously.

“Suddenly, I was not afraid anymore” is what many women said when they recall the experience of a first march or when they first arrived in a camp. In this sense, it is important to take into account the importance of the mobility for these women who recompose themselves between precarious domestic jobs, the whole universe of their family relationships, the painful activity of relating to public services and the market (enrollments for welfare, queues for consultations and examinations, the knowledge of a whole cartography over popular pharmacy, faster access, a vacancy at day care centers and schools, cheaper markets, etc.). Moving between worlds, from the domestic to the world of the movement and their relations is what produces important transformations in what the philosopher Rancière (1999) calls the “position of bodies”, i.e, the possibility of producing another corporality capable of displacing those roles and positions that are imposed on them on a daily basis. “Not to be afraid anymore”, seems to be the exact sentence that expresses the experience of this displacement.

Such silent displacements trace important paths that help us to think about new political forms beyond the great public acts and more “visible” crit-

ical events, which we are thinking of here as the experiences of a common urban. Recent reflections of Judith Butler (2014) are also very useful for pursuing a research agenda committed to the work of everyday composition of what it calls the production of interdependencies and exposure of vulnerabilities: understanding political action as an act of independence of the subject is to continuously reify a masculine view of politics itself.

It is important to remember that the occupational composition of women, who are now part of the MTST, if we want to think in terms of the relationship with the job’s world, is mostly made up of women working in occupations linked to care in a very direct way: housekeepers, caretakers, janitors, and nannies. Therefore, it seems unavoidable from the point of view of the new class configuration in contemporary Brazilian society to understand the modes of political production, of that subject that emerge in an incontestable way in the social landscape of one of the largest urban movements in Brazil today: the housekeeper, religious women, black woman from the outskirts. “Strong as a rock, like a northerner woman”, as many of them says (men and women) as a greeting in one of the southern occupations of São Paulo.

Among reports of healing, depression, suffering, but also those moments permeated by the joys of encounters, the impact of becoming important for the functioning of a community and being able to decide something, the displacements between

the domestic space and the own domestication of the collective spaces, experience of vulnerability management, faith – we can see a very heterogeneous composition of what can be understood today as “fight” for these women.

Besides the official grammar of “policy making” marked by agencies, complete subjects and willing to stage antagonisms in public spaces, we want to be on the lowest ground, in the one where even the subjects are being made from new relations, a continuous fabrication of relationalities capable of moving more subjectively those people who actually speak in two lives: a first “sick” life in which the feelings of impotence and incapacity function as substances anesthetizing and atomizing the subjects and another life, the one made by the relations produced in the “movement”, the relations of the “cure”, capable of offering strong senses of community, care, conviviality and even new conflicts.

In such sense, the fight acquires an extremely material and corporal sense – nothing more material than the physical sensation of healing, a new body constituting itself, a new body disposition made of others. Aparecida, a religious evangelical woman (in the intervals of assemblies and meetings, she turns on her cell phone and watches videos of evangelical services). She is a 53-year-old janitor who told us that the hardest thing for her was ‘to make the trail’ – the task of spending the night walking the grounds to keep everyone safe, without sleeping. It is precisely a new body

that can take care of these new inscriptions, “not to be afraid”, to experience different spaces, other than the house, the work and the church.

In a beautiful and strong manifesto entitled “The Sick Woman’s Theory”, Johanna Hedva (2015) speaks of what would be the most profoundly anti-capitalist gesture in our society:

The most anti-capitalist of the protests is taking care of someone and taking care of ourselves, that is taking the feminized and historically invisible practice of caring seriously, providing food and receiving. To take the vulnerability, the fragility, and the precariousness of each one and to give support, honor, and fortify seriously. Protecting each other, acting in community. A radical kinship, a sociality of interdependence, a policy of care. (Hedva, 2015)

The notion of “politics” is, to a certain extent, absent among women and almost always related to party institutional politics. “In the movement there is no politics!” If we wanted to radicalize a statement, we would say that politicians make politics and homeless women make relationships<sup>4</sup>. More than relationships, what we intend to explore in the course of ethnographic research, is the production process as Isabelle Stengers (2005) calls “technology belonging”: becoming able to do and think because one belongs to something. When they belong, the subjects are in a new territory of obligations and

4. The main figure of the movement, Guilherme Boulos, ran for president and the notion of “politics” began to change.



implications, an interrelated relational, but at the same time, they are able to locate and give meaning to common practices.

In an interview, Stengers (2009) brings an interesting reflection for us to think about the meanings of politics and collective assemblages. For the philosopher, it is necessary to think of a “policy of the environment” capable of connecting the micro-politics with the macro (for her, two dimensions involved in a truth-affirming game) from a pragmatic political ecology whose question is how to “make relationships work”. It is a field of invention of practices susceptible of “producing new perceptions endowed with new consequences”. Thinking with the homeless women in the outskirts of the city of São Paulo can help us create also those “environment” ways inhabited by experiments of being together and a deep relational sense.

Avatar Brah (2006) finds essential when he states that in order to reformulate the forms of “agency” it must be said that: “The “I” and the “we” do not disappear. What disappears is the notion that such categories are unified entities, established and existing, and not multi-location modes, continually marked by everyday cultural and political practices “ (Brah, 2006:130).

To think of the “we” is to understand its continuous mode of production – between walls and also when we knock them down.

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