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02

Reunión pública de la UPMS
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لقاء مفتوح للجامعة الشعبية والحركات الاجتماعية

Collected letters form the Workshop of the Popular University of Social Movements (UPMS), held in Tunis on 24-25 March 2013

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Spirituality

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We, participants in the workshop of the Popular University of Social movements, meeting in Tunis on 24 and 25 March before the XIII WSF, assume that dignity, the theme of this edition of the WSF, means the recognition of the moral worth of individuals and social groups that struggle against capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy and other forms of oppression and discrimination with the aim of building a more just and inclusive society. Dignity encompasses individual and collective human rights but goes beyond them in that it gives equal weight to individual and collective duties. It encompasses different cultures and identities but it does not claim any validity in terms of abstract universalism. It does not depend on Universal Declarations to be recognized because it is inherent to the lives of people no matter how precarious their livelihood. People are not entitled to dignity; they are the embodiment of dignity. The dignity of people affirms itself no matter how undignified the ways they are treated by oppressors and powerful state and private social actors. As inherent to the lives of people, dignity is contextual, embedded in the culture, history, memory and trajectory of those whose dignity is at stake.

Being contextual is no impediment to be understood across different contexts. Being in Tunis we acknowledge the relevance of the value of dignity in Islamic societies. But we are also cognizant of the equal relevance of dignity among indigenous peoples across the globe. There may be similarities and differences among these different contexts of dignity. For instance, for both Islamic and indigenous societies community comes first as the foundation of individual and collective life. But there are also differences. For instance, the value of dignity in indigenous societies is inherent to all living beings, human and non-human, men and women as well as rivers and mountains and the land to be tilled. And, being on the shores of the Mediterranean, we also acknowledge how dignity is present in the protests against the social and political devastation caused by neoliberalism and financial capital in Southern European.

Dignity is present in the indignation of the protesters, in their sense of wounded dignity, confronted with the arrogance, cynicism, immorality and authoritarianism of governments determined to impoverish the popular classes and to destroy their legitimate aspirations to a better life.

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Being a constitutive value of life, dignity is as basic as it is fragile. Under conditions of neoliberal capitalism, entrenched colonialism and patriarchy the politics of indignity tends to dominate, exercised, by those with power to deal with people in undignifying ways, that is, in ways that convert people, individual and collectives, into discardable entities, their suffering and death, into collateral damage, their legitimate aspirations to a better life, into a subversive will that must be violently crushed.

Being in Tunis we acknowledge the tenacity with which the Tunisians are claiming their dignity. In their current context, such claim is formulated as quest for democracy, democracy understood in its radical meaning: popular sovereignty, the rule of the people by the people and for the people. In their claims and struggles, our Tunisian friends are bearing witness of the close relationship between the struggle for dignity and the radical democratization of state and society. They don't discard the value of western conceptions of liberal democracy but enrich it or complement it with denser meanings that speak to their needs, their culture and their history.

Among such meanings, the relationship between politics and religion is probably the most complex one. The western secularism is foreign to a society in which Islam is by far the dominant religion. But, on the other hand, the role of religion in public life is a matter of heated dispute. For some, Islam grounds all private and public life and therefore religion cannot be shovelled away to the private life. For others, religion may have some presence in the public realm but the latter must keep some degree of autonomy not only because not all citizens are Muslims but also because Muslims understand the public function of religion in different ways. Common to all, however, is the idea that material life does not exhaust the meaning and the value of individual or collective social life. There is a transcendental dimension, a beyond-material-life dimension that evades definition. It is not to be confused with religion, but it also

points to the idea of a sacred dimension of life, a most intimate and meaningful life experience for both individuals and social groups. Spirituality is the name given to such an elusive dimension. In it resides the unconditional value of human dignity. Drinking in the deep waters of spirituality, dignity becomes a challenge to weak forms of democracy and the instrumental or even mercantile use of people inherent to them. It calls for stronger, denser, broader forms of democracy

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In this way, the struggle of the Tunisians for dignity is likewise a struggle for the expansion of the canon of democracy. Their struggle enriches the democratic experience of the world and in so doing it feeds into our own struggles for the democratization of economic, ecological, social, political and cultural life. We feel not just in solidarity with the Tunisians' struggles. We feel that their struggle is our own struggle. We are all Tunisians.

Resistance

By Claudio Pulgar Pinaud

Dignity is a process that is socially constructed and from our perspective, this construction is enhanced especially when resistance processes rise and become alternatives. We can comprehend this resistance under the Foucauldian perspective of power relations, while stating that "where there is power there is resistance". From this approach we find the existence of a "disciplinary society", consisting of a network of devices and applications that produce and regulate both habits and customs as social practices. Today we understand this disciplinary society from the perspective of the hegemonic neoliberal society and the political project behind it, which it imposes globally. We must also understand how resistances are brought out in the context of a concept of power understood as a "network of relationships" rather than an object.

Resistance is nullified or made invisible by those in power, preferring to talk about resilience, especially under the official rhetoric, both from governments as international organizations like the UN. The poor should be "resilient" is constantly

repeated, but the poor themselves are repressed and contested when they seem "reluctant" to the austerity policies (or structural adjustment), abuses, lack of democracy, corruption, ultimately to oppression. It is then that collective action processes can be understood as resistances, in different degrees. Resistances to an ideological, political, economic, social and cultural model. Social movements besides often also acting resiliently, while adapting and recovering from various situations of oppression initiate "practices of resistance" from everyday life. Resistance is not reactive nor negative, but an ongoing process of creation and transformation.

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The concept of resilience in many cases neutralizes the potential for conflict, therefore we confront the concepts of resilience and resistance especially from the action of organized social actors: social movements. To understand these dialectical relationships between resilience and resistance in the territory, it is necessary to identify the practices of the actors, especially understanding conflict as an opportunity for transformation, as a process of emancipation

There is a time when social movements "evolve" and move from protest-welfare logic, and begin to develop practical alternatives to the hegemonic model, always starting from the territories, as a true self-determination of dignity. These processes could be understood as collective alienations, which are often linked to "dignifying" practices rendering the construction of autonomy and self-management processes. There are many worldly examples, especially since 2011: the occupation of squares and streets in protests in Tunis, Cairo, Madrid, Barcelona, New York, Santiago-Chile, Lisbon; land occupations of the landless in Brazil, of the people in Chile, Dakar; factory recovery and self-management by workers in Argentina, Greece and France; the housing cooperatives in Uruguay, Canada and Chile; rallies in high schools and universities by their students in Chile, Quebec, Spain, Greece, Portugal, among many others. Central to all these processes is space, territorial organization, therefore we are referring to territorial emancipation. Finally when we speak of dignity we refer to the exercise and the conquest of justice. There will be no dignity without resistances, these resistances build alternatives from the collective alienations and emancipatory processes, from the territories of dignity.

Dialogue

By Cristiano Gianolla

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People of the South and people of the North, believe and agree with philosophies, religions and cosmovisions sharing a very important common understanding: the people are in relation with themselves, others and beyond including Nature, God and the Ancestors. Also materialistic visions are not limited and include the relation with society and the impact of power relations in it. Dignity is accomplished when people are entitled with a dialogical approach. Dignity is dialogue of the people with themselves, the others, Nature, God, Ancestors, society and much more.

We aim to improve the dialogue we live every day in order to achieve human dignity. At a social level this is done if people voluntarily engage in open, non-instrumental communication based on listening, understanding and interacting. What does this imply in the democratic debate? We shall reject models, forms or concepts of democracy that forbids dialogue among the people, or among people representing institutions and the “People”.

The liberal representative model of democracy reduces the communication among the population and elected representatives within one of the following three moments: A. the electoral campaign, B. top-down mass-mediated communication streams or C. during a critical time when people struggling in society protest against the political situation and against their representatives. None of these three communication moments allows a true bi-directional dialogue and therefore also dignity is missing from this model of democracy. The reasons are: A. during the electoral campaign there is an instrumental use of communication which is manipulated by the candidates to attract voters and do not engage voters to establish together the priorities of the electoral programmes. B. with mass-mediated communication operated by elected representatives there is a pre-selection of topics discussed and a very little space for interaction offered to the people. Only few exceptions involving unions, NGOs social movements are included. By no means this inclusion comprehends the whole society. C. due to lack of democratic dialogue, social problems became

more and more important and people protest in the street or in other forms against the elected democratic bodies. In this kind of context there is a positive bottom-up perspective because for one time people can express their opinion. However there is no institutional obligation for the elected representative to uphold the complaint matters and engage with the demanded request. On the contrary, the passive attitudes opposed by government of southern EU countries to protests against the austerity demonstrate how closed to dialogue the elected representative can be when confronted with manifestations. It is discouraging that the elected representatives of the people are often very dialogical with the market and the financial institutions rather than with the people who elected them.

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A participatory model of democracy takes more seriously the idea that democratic dignity because it encourage a more dialogical approach. The very purpose of participatory exercises is to allow an open interaction among the people implied. As we know, dialogue cannot be imposed and therefore participatory examples of democracy would not be able to certify a perfect democratic and dialogical dignity because many people may choose to remain silent. Nonetheless the participation of people interested to the political debate in participatory exercise (eg. Participatory budgeting) is much better than the representative model of democracy in favoring a non-instrumental use of communication to identify democratic topics and discussion.

The new media of communication, including the Internet, may be an instrument to strengthen dialogical democratic dignity but they are also manipulated and thereby undermine the possibility that a true dialogical approach is put into practice. While the Internet permits the participation of a greater number of people and wider interaction, its use must be organised and moderated to be effective and avoid the possibility that this instrument becomes a purely manipulative instrument. Finally, dignity in dialogue is based on the identity of the interlocutors, therefore the new media of communication can contribute to democracy only when are able to grant the identity of the participants.

Democratic dignity is strictly related to the quality of the dialogue that democracy allows. When democracy is strengthen by dialogue, the people have the possibility to

interact among themselves and even with their representatives. This condition will allow a better dialogue also in other context where people are in relation to: themselves, the others, Nature, God, Ancestors and so on.

Violence, Resistance and Suffering

By Dhruv Pande

When one is inflicting harm to oneself, this self-infliction of violence in the form of self-immolation for instance, may be in itself a claim to dignity. Similarly, diverse forms of resistance in the form of armed struggles, which put forward a claim to dignity in a violent-revolutionary method or a peaceful one, do put in a differential-subjective meaning to the concept of dignity by expanding the concept to its experiential sense. Consequently, as an effect of violence and resistance, does appear visible the notion of suffering, wherein suffering lends a constructive meaning of dignity and deepens it to the extent of giving substantially-loaded interpretations and narratives of dignity in the form of an experience of suffering; the pain undergone by an individual or a community in this sense reflects an attribute of dignity wherein one does feel dignified in order to make his/her (individual/collective) voice heard to ensure its claim to dignity.

For instance, self-immolation bid by Tibetans is already a claim by Tibetans in a manner of which their dignity is attained by this act of self-immolation. The armed struggle by Naxalites in India against the State and State Apparatus, by indulging in violence against the State Bureaucracy, is an attribute of dignity by a collective (the Naxalites following the Maoist-Revolutionary Ideology) where the policies of the State have represented a lack of dignity or misrecognition to these groups by neglecting their 'local' interests in the name of 'development policies'.

Subsequently, other instances of peaceful struggle against the constructing of Dam in Narmada River (West India), in the form of 'Jal Satyagraha' (local villagers standing in neck-deep water for many days to the extent of their bodies getting affected) is a feature of dignity wherein he/she feels dignified in protesting against the local

authority in a peaceful manner, following Gandhian means of Satyagraha. Similarly, a large chunk of people standing neck-deep in sand on a beach of Tamil Nadu (South India) protesting against the construction of Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant, inspired by the Jal Satyagraha, signified similar claim and an attribute of dignity.

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Hence, with these instances of individual/collective violence and diverse manifestations of resistance/armed struggle, is implicit the notion of suffering. Suffering includes in its arena any kind of setting - local, domestic, national, international - the affected populace is what is called into question, and which rightly claims dignity through suffering. This is so because any kind of physical or mental suffering, as an effect of an action, or any kind of suffering which instigates action, both sides are 'two sides of the same coin' in a manifestation of dignity. Thus, we are led into democratizing the concept of dignity, widening it, expanding it, by attempting to build an over-arching framework which includes diverse manifestations of violence, resistance and suffering. All of the three are inter-related and inter-linked through specific instances or situations, location or context thus lending a new meaning to dignity, not just from a critical perspective but from a 'constructive' critical juncture.

The meaning and sense of dignity thus, is in dynamics, and it passes through contours of particular subjectivities of violence, resistance and suffering. The scattered notions of each of these at the ground-level make up for dignity in relation to participation and social movements. The roots of deliberation and need for a social movement are indeed triggered off by these miniscule instances of local drift, rigor and movement signified by an individual, a group or a collective subsequently affecting or transcending to a larger arena of social, political, economic or a cultural activity.

Struggle

By Isabella Miranda & Fabio Marladet

We are participant to the Popular University of Social Movements. We living in uncongenial times of dignity. Ecological crisis, Wars, Military occupations, Neoliberal

free-trade treaties, Unemployment and massive over-exploitation, Colonialism and neo-colonialism, Privatization of life in its various forms, Patriarchy, Sexism, Racism, Discrimination, and Violence of all kinds... to be indignant therefore, is the least human dignity can demand when it is condemned to be undignified. For that reason, to talk of dignity is to talk of struggles for dignity, concrete actions and mobilizations that insist on creating resistance, solidarity and justice in a world that has become a desert of homogeneous discrimination.

As diverse are forms of violence and oppression, as diverse and potentially infinite are the concepts and struggles for dignity, so that no universal and monocultural conception can handle this plurality of perspectives, actions and understandings of dignity. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, drawn up without the participation of the majority of humanity, intended to establish a universal concept of dignity in an individualistic and passive shape, which should be widely respected and followed. The theoretical elaboration of the document has denied and made invisible all the existing plurality of knowledge and worldviews. Its application thus -- selective and uneven -- has been as imperialist and colonial as has been its theory.

We must oppose to this hegemonic liberal conception of dignity an active concept of dignified life that understands it as something that arises from our acts, gestures and thoughts, it is the way we treat each other and how we relate to other forms of life, who share with us the world in which we live. The struggle for dignity in the world dignifies those who struggle, but the struggle for dignity does not come out of a single and homogeneous project of social emancipation. It comes out of a desire and willingness to fight for a fairer society and for other worlds that we believe are possible.

The construction of an intercultural and active conception of dignity might therefore be a supplement for the intensification of debate, dialogue and encounter between the various principles of dignity and concrete struggles that promote them having the values and demands for emancipation as their main aspiration. Without pretending to exhaust all the dimensions of this convergence, we outline below six brief propositions for a counter-hegemonic concept of dignity:

1 - There is no dignity without struggle. Dignity is built from concrete actions and gestures of resistance and transformation.

2 - There is no dignity to be sustained at the expense of human suffering, competition, exploitation and oppression of other living beings. To be sustainable, intercultural and inclusive dignity must be built collectively from the dialogue, solidarity and intensification of the encounter with the other.

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3 - All cultures are incomplete and problematic in their conceptions of dignity. To build an active and intercultural understanding among different groups struggling for dignity there must be a profound intercultural translation capable of generating mutual intelligibility between knowledge and strategies that aim to fight against all forms of indignity. Therefore, it is only by self-learning with others who struggle for dignity, that conflicts and tensions between concepts and strategies of struggle can be translated and mediated. This learning takes place mainly at the concrete level of social struggle, where the imperative of social transformation and the end of oppression may contribute to mutual recognition and joint mobilizations that can broaden and intensify the force of the counter-hegemonic alternatives and of different grammars of dignity.

4 - The dignity can not be granted, much less enforced. Without autonomy, respect, recognition and sovereignty, we are subject to the most arbitrary forms of violence. For this reason, dignity can only exist as a result of shared and collective projects of social transformation.

5 - To expand the canon of citizenship and human rights, dignity needs to be built from those who are undignified. An intercultural and active conception of human dignity is capable of launching our desires and our utopias of transformation beyond the narrow aspect of human rights, or the rights of citizenship. Therefore, we move toward a more open, broad and intercultural concept of dignity based on a dialogue that emerges from various conceptions of the dignified life that comes out from the oppressed and their movements. This intercultural concept may give the strength

needed to widen the circle of inclusion, care, autonomy, and respect for the global community of beings.

6 - The construction of a dignified existence is part of the struggle for a high-intensity democracy. To build together a broad, intercultural and active concept of dignity means, in itself, the democratization of political grammar by bringing together the different perspectives of movements that struggle for social transformation. Such democratization of knowledge and strategies for emancipatory struggle has the potential to give political voice to those who were silenced, to give visibility to practices that were actively produced as impossible or non-existent and to extend the political imagination beyond the limits of each culture. A global counter-hegemony based on such broad and intercultural concepts of dignity, is the one capable to democratize democracy. Counter-hegemonic struggle for dignity is, in the words of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, that one that can "democratize the limits of democracy, in order to build a democracy without limits ...".

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Belonging

By José Manuel Mendes

The public dimension of personal, group and collective identities rests on the codification, institutionalization and symbolization of events that strongly mark individuals and communities. Social memories, to be effective, must be celebrated and commemorated. A crucial role is partaken by memory mediators, by memory entrepreneurs, that, in a continuous way, try to reiterate certainties and roots, to fixate and crystalize traditions, against the challenging effect of the improbable and the unforeseeable. By their own work, the identity mediators try to impede the thinking of alternatives, by closing the celebratory field. But, alongside official memories and identities, strive performative identities, activated and consolidated in the quotidian, in many practices of de-objectification and resistance.

Although power relations are always present and embedded in symbolization and ritualization processes, special attention must be given to the capacity to resist, to

the counter-hegemonic discourses and practices that derive from subterranean individual and group memories that work, modify or refuse public and official memories.

Dignity is the possibility to live on and to express the multiple belongings of each individual and group. But, some questions must be put forward. To whom and to what do we belong? And what these belongings allow us to do, and what do they restrict or circumvent? Do the conventional democratic and representative spaces allow for the expression of multiple belongings? Which belongings are mobilized to oppress and suppress others?

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Beyond the conventional Western notion of public sphere, which is based on a normative and integrative vision, on the enshrinement of the bourgeois public sphere, an oppositional public sphere must be constructed. This oppositional public sphere seeks to make visible the collective and alternative forms that give public expression to human needs, which evade the straitjacket of dominant media representations. This overspill process allows a public space to be constructed that accommodates immediate, lived experience and enables an inalienable democratic order to be founded.

Recurring to the notion of belongings, some restoration of rhetoric and the art of persuasive discourse is needed to publicise grievances and protest. We need a broad notion of public space, which must necessarily include production, economics and the private sphere. This against the conventional notion of public sphere, where free discourse and the affirmation of freedom of opinion, in a profoundly European sense, are the factors that legitimise the bourgeois social order, strictly demarcated in terms of economic interests and the pressures of the state apparatus.

The potential politics of the production and private spheres must be worked on in order to mobilise them in the service of an enlarged public sphere. Polemical issues originating from production, work and the private sphere, and traditionally excluded from the bourgeois public sphere, are currently undergoing radical changes. The traditional concept of publicity is deliberately presented as the theoretical

idealisation of a form of politics based on recourse to violence and the exclusion of the majority of the population. The oppositional public space, which flows and consolidates itself in rebellious subjectivities and partial connections, restores, makes visible and projects the particularities and combinations of specific real-life situations. The aim is to start from fragmentary experiences, almost inaudible, unheard murmurs, speeches and discourse that take risks.

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Experiences that overflow from concepts and negate them are more important to a critique than the words used to positively name things. Rebellious subjectivity contains the obstinacy, authenticity and negativity of actors who resist the triumphal march of the winners. Whereas the bourgeois public space proceeds by generalised abstracts, the oppositional public space is directed towards the accumulation of unique experiences. In opposition to normative discourses, oppositional space is characterised by direct speech, which allows for the exchange of experiences and resolution by dialogue that is partial and always open to conflict.

Participation

By Micha Fiedlschuster

Dignity entails that everyone has the possibility to participate meaningfully in the political, social and economic life of a society.

The idea of dignity is a crucial benchmark in the struggle for democracy and democratization. The possibility of having a dignified life is necessary for the realization of substantive democracy. Participation and inclusion in the political, economic and social life is one way to experience dignity.

Participation and inclusion are democratic ideals that we must demand from the authorities and our governments. Participation in the political life of one's society implies the possibility to hold authorities accountable through free elections and other democratic means. In addition, establishing forms of participatory democracy is a necessary means to increase the inclusion of everyone in decision-making processes. Participation cannot be exclusive. As dignity should be granted to everyone, so should

participation in a society not be dependent on status of citizenship, gender, colour or socio-economic status.

Participation and inclusion in a democratic society bring responsibilities with them. Obeying the law that was drafted in a democratic process preserves one's dignity. The principle of inclusion entails the necessity to accept that one cannot treat the other in an undignified way. This includes showing respect for the tradition of one's own society and that of others, the tolerance for differing worldviews, religious beliefs and political opinions.

Participation and inclusion in the economic life is important for dignity to be possible. First and foremost, such an economic system is needed that allows people to earn in a dignified way the financial means necessary to make a living. Dignity in the economic life means also that workers show solidarity with other workers. Solidarity helps to prevent exclusion from the economic life of those who face lay offs or who are already unemployed. Dignity is a question of the nature of the economic system and the way we treat each other in the economic sphere.

Participation and inclusion is also something that we can grant each other in our daily life. In our social life, showing and practicing solidarity is key for allowing dignity to blossom. The support we give each other among family members and friends is vital to the feeling of being included in one's community. The help we provide to strangers in need is an act of inclusion. We help to make participation and inclusion of people in the social life possible when we actively listen to each others ideas, needs and problems.

Social movements have struggled for a long time in history to achieve a greater degree of inclusion and participation and there is still much need to continue pressuring for the further realization of participation and inclusion. Participating in social movements for more democracy is an act of dignity.