Theorizing the Practice of Social Movements:

'Changing the Paradigm of Politics'

or

'How Common Grounds Are Only Possible Through Diversity'

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Abstract

Political theorists have being increasingly suspicious that the recognition of identities, instead of leading to the development of a culture of toleration in society, ends up in increased social fragmentation. In this theoretical suspicion is more at stake than the perception that the recognition of group rights are in tension with the maintenance of individual rights: the very celebration of diversity seems to be incompatible with maintaining the value of equality of all human beings. The tendency in political theory has being, therefore, to favour an overarching identity that offers the necessary 'social glue' among different fragmented identities, which would enable also the protection of individual rights while allowing group identities to rise. This overarching identity commonly appears as the national state or, in a more cosmopolitan vein, as efforts for the global recognition of the value of the inviolable dignity of all human beings.

However, in contradiction with this development in political theory, the practice of grassroots organisations has shown increased support in favour of the recognition of particular identities, and, notably, a great suspicion of theoretical efforts in supporting overarching identities. On the one hand, the maintenance of national identities from the point of view of the practice of social movements seems to mitigate social oppression of disadvantaged groups of society and, by restraining the rise of social conflicts in order to maintain social cohesion, to impute the burdens of proof in the very victims of oppression to the point of negligence or even criminalization of the demands of particular groups. On the other hand, although the cosmopolitan proposal is widely acknowledged by grassroots organisations in order to justify their own actions, there is a great suspicion of the manipulatory potential of the claim of universal dignity of all human beings by others, generating the fear that the language of human rights ends up leading to similar undesirable outcomes as the maintenance of national identities.

In my paper I argue that a better understanding of the practice of social movements shows that it is not so much that the recognition of particular identities is undermining the possibility of political community and social justice – as commonly argued in political theory – but is rather *transforming* them. It is the theoretical inability to perceive broader political implications of the project of politicization of differences that leads to the above identified disparity between developments of the discourse on the recognition of identities in theory and in the practice of social movements.

1. Introduction

This paper proposes to take the political practice of social movement's networks at the World Social Fora seriously in order to try to understand why grassroots activists insist supporting the politicization of differences despite great theoretical suspicion in relation to its potential as an appropriate tool for the achievement of real social justice.

This paper is divided in two main parts: first, I analyse a series of problems in theorizing on the politicization of differences from the perspective of the practice of social movements; and second, I analyse how the practice of social moments responds to the challenges theorists point out to the rise of the politicization of differences.

The tension between social cohesion and politicization of differences, as well as between individual and collective rights, will be scrutinized on the basis of the nationalist and cosmopolitan proposals. Afterwards, this analysis will be contrasted with the political practice of social actors at the World Social Forum.

I conclude by showing that another paradigm of making politics – in which common grounds are only possible through diversity – is necessary in order to enable exploring the politicization of differences in its full potential, that is, as a tool in the achievement of real social justice.

2. Stating the problem: the theoretical suspicion of the politicization of differences

In the last decades, whereas social movements tendency has been to intensify their support in favour of the politicization of differences, political theorists have mainly moved in the opposite direction. The recognition of particular oppressed or disadvantaged social groups[1] as legitimated political subjects has been increasingly putted into question. For, by giving more weight to what divide us than to what unify us, the politicization of social groups seems to reify differences in society, generating greater social fragmentation instead of social justice. Even classical supporters of maintaining a group-based approach in order to deal

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[1] For instance, social groups based on 'race', ethnic affiliation or gender. In this paper I am following Iris Marion Young's concept of social group. See I M Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2002, pp. 42-8.

politically with social inequalities – notably, feminist political theorists – seem to agree that it is either necessary to go 'beyond identity politics'[2], or to assume the negative effects of a 'strategic essentialism' as the only possible mode of political action under certain historical conditions[3]. It means that, despite all theoretical efforts, group-based politics – as well as group rights – continue to be in polarized tension with the value of equality of all individuals, to the point that even the mere celebration of diversity as a positive social value can be regarded as a potential threat to social cohesion.

Notably, the tenuous support for the politicization of differences in theory seems to be reason enough to disqualify, without previous exam, any social movements' attempt of introducing group-based politics. For, if a defence of the politicization of differences is already a slippery slope in theory, the reality of political practice in the process of introducing group-based politics, according to theorists, will unavoidably be much more likely to involve essentialism and lead to social fragmentation[4]. Hence, the insistence of social movements in supporting the politicization of differences is, in theoretical debate, commonly attributed to one of the following two reasons.

First, it is argued that, although social movements' activists have 'good intentions', they are not aware of broader consequences of their practice. An example that illustrates this line of reasoning is the criticism of an alleged paradox in using 'race' as a category to combat racism. Or, to give another example, that in introducing group-based politics activists will unavoidably end up imposing, inside the group itself, the same mechanisms of exclusion they urged to combat[5]. Implied in this argument is the idea that social movement's activism is short-sighted, whereas theoretical reflection allows a general and more distant view[6] that

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[2] For the purposes of this paper I will use the terms 'politicization of differences', 'politics of difference' and 'identity politics' interchangeably.

[3] Three important works related to the mentioned theoretical feminist discussion are: M Lloyd, *Beyond Identity Politics: Feminism, Power & Politics*, Routledge, London, 2005; G C Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in *In Other Words: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Routledge, New York, 1988, pp. 197-221; R Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994.

[4] See B Barry, 'Second Thoughts – and Some First Thoughts Revived', in *Multiculturalism Reconsidered*, Paul Kelly (ed.), Polity, Cambridge, 2002, p. 211.

[5] See, for instance, Brian Barry's argument that activists are imposing 'on its members uniform beliefs and standards of conduct' in B Barry, *Culture and Enquality*, Polity, Cambridge, 2001, p. 129. This line of reasoning ignores or merely rejects as doomed to failure the rich internal process of social movements in questioning their own structures and hierarchies, as well as the implementation of alternative organisational structures that are inclusive and non-hierarchical. For an overview of the diversity internal to the structure of social movements, see Chapter 5 of I M Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, pp.155-95.

[6] For the purposes of this paper, I will abstain of entering in the discussion about the (im)possibility of impartiality in political theory.

enables to foresee the consequences of political practices before coming into reality. Needless to say, theoretical reflection – in this argumentation – stands in evident supremacy over the experience of social movement's activism.

If the first reason political theorists attribute to social movements' support of the politicization of differences lies in an alleged naivety of activists, who are in need to be prevented by theorists of the consequences of their own practice, the second reason transforms activists themselves into motivators of the problem: it is argued that social movements' activists are aware of the problems of essentialism implied by the politicization of differences, but insist in keep on 'manufacturing conflict' against a 'politics of solidarity'[7], promoting social fragmentation for the sake of their own egoist interests. An example is the argument that, in the name of the whole group that comes to be politicized, a small elite within the group will be pursuing their own interests, without solving the problem that affects the real disadvantaged members within the group[8]. According to this line of reasoning, activists, instead of being regarded as agents of social change, become, in contrast, an obstacle towards the achievement of real social justice.

Before setting out the consequences of an a priori disqualification of the practice of social movements on the grounds of an alleged supremacy of the theory over the practice, as well as on the basis of activists perceived as an obstacle in the achievement of social justice, I want to draw closer attention to the available alternatives in normative political theory in order to prevent social fragmentation whilst allowing group affiliations to rise, and how social movements react to these alternatives.

3. Overarching identities

The general tendency in political theory has been to favour an overarching identity that offers the necessary 'social glue' among different fragmented group-based affiliations in society. This would suffice to guarantee the protection of individual rights whilst allowing collective identities to rise. In particular, there are two dominant models of conceiving this overarching identity in political theory: first, the national identity; and second, in a more

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[7] See B Barry, 2001, op. cit., p. 21 and 300.
[8] ibid., p. 21.

cosmopolitan vein, efforts for the global recognition of the value of the inviolable dignity of all human beings[9].

3.1. Nationalism

For scholars such as David Miller[10], a shared national identity is the source of ethical standards of justice, through which social stability and the pursuit of the common good in society can be guaranteed. According to Miller, 'a common nationality provides the only feasible background against which diverse groups can resolve their differences'[11], that is, the national identity becomes a precondition for 'the solidarity that democratic politics require'[12]. A common nationality, therefore, serves to avoid the rise of conflict by preventing particular interests from entering in the public realm, for, the incommensurability among different particular interests would necessarily lead to social fragmentation. Without a common nationality politics becomes, according to Miller, a mere form of interest-group pluralism. The aim of a public dialogue, instead, should be at reaching 'consensus or at least fair compromise between the range of views held in the community'[13].

How do social movements view the national identity proposal? In general, they tend to be very sceptical, arguing that the nationalist model preserves social stability at the expense of the perpetuation of social oppression of disadvantaged groups in society. The argument here is analogous to the criticism commonly used against the politicization of social groups, as already seen above: that the building of a community on the basis of the national identity entails the same undesirable consequences as the building of a social group identity. In other words, just like a specific collective group seems to run the risk of 'freezing' its own identity, and, consequently, of homogenizing their own group members, a shared nationality will similarly hide, under the mask of universality, structural inequalities and hierarchies that disadvantage, exclude or even oppress certain groups of the society whilst advantaging others. Moreover, the tendency, in the name of social stability, to avoid conflicts to rise in the public

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[9] For the purposes of this paper, I will present nationalism and cosmopolitanism in archetypical forms. They are, of course, far away from being antithetical models. For an attempt to combine cosmopolitanism and nationalism see for example S Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006.

[10] See D Miller, 'The Ethical Significance of Nationality', *Ethics*, 98 (4), 1988, pp. 647-62; D Miller, 'Group Identities, National Identities and Democratic Politics', in *Toleration, Identity and Difference*, J Horton and S Mendus (eds), Macmillan, London, 1999, pp. 103-125; D Miller, *Citizenship and National Identity*, Polity, Cambridge, 2000.

[11] D Miller, 'Group Identities, National Identities and Democratic Politics', op. cit., p. 120.

[12] ibidem, p. 103.

[13] ibidem, p. 121.

realm, results in enormous burdens of proof for the victims of oppression: it is imputed to them the task of convincing other country's fellow citizens (including those who profit from their social disadvantage) of the common importance and 'universality' of their cause[14]. As far as the rise of conflict in the public sphere implied by the politicization of differences will put social hierarchies into question – a threat to social stability –, the cause of disadvantaged or oppressed groups tend to be ignored, neglected, or even criminalized[15].

3.2. Cosmopolitanism

The second dominant model of conceiving an overarching identity that would guarantee the protection of individual rights whilst allowing collective identities to rise places human rights – instead of the national identity – as the ethical standard of justice. This position, known in political philosophy as cosmopolitanism[16], is concerned with the equal moral status of all human beings independently of their affiliation to citizenship or a particular nation. In other words, the cosmopolitan view places human rights not only as a legal standard for generating and evaluating political action worldwide, but also as a moral standard that links a local violation of human rights to the whole global community. This contrasts with the nationalist view, in which the obligation toward others are restricted to the national borders.

How do social movements react to the cosmopolitan proposal? Their perception of placing human rights as the moral standard of justice beyond borders is much more ambivalent than their answer to the nationalist proposal. On the one hand, the cosmopolitan proposal is widely acknowledged by grassroots organisations in order to justify their own actions, and human rights are taken as a powerful instrument of contra-hegemonic action. On

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[14] In Brazil, for example, the black movement spent several years of struggle trying to prove the very existence of racism in the country, as this affirmation was seen as a threat to the national identity itself, and, therefore, a threat to the country's social cohesion. Black movements were, therefore, regarded as separatists, radicals, opportunists, hystericals. Only recently, in the 1990's, the existence of racism in the country was officially recognized by the Brazilian national state.

[15] At this point one important question may arise: what is meant by social stability? Is it possible to defend stability when a society is grounded on unjust social relations? To give an answer to this question goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth to observe that 'social stability', despite of being a widely used term in political philosophy, has been little interrogated. 'Social stability' or 'social cohesion' are in general defined by what they are *not*, namely, 'social fragmentation'. In this paper, I understand 'social stability' as the conditions for the working together in society despite of internal differences among individuals or groups.

[16] Some of the most expressive works on cosmopolitanism in political philosophy are: S Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders: A Global Political Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005; D Held, *Cosmopolitanism: A Defence*, Polity, Cambridge, 2003; M C Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Belknap Press, Cambridge, 2006; T Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, Polity, Cambridge, 2002; K-C Tan, *Justice Without Borders: Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism and Patriotism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004.

the other hand, the manipulatory potential of the claim of universal dignity of all human beings makes grassroots activists suspicious of cosmopolitanism, for the language of human rights has being used at both national and international level in order to legitimate actions that activists would rather classify as massive violations of human rights.

I will start by pointing out in more details four relevant problems perceived by social movements in the use of the language of human rights worldwide. This will help us later in the task of exploring the potential of human rights as a tool in the achievement of real social justice.

3.2.1. The problem of abstraction in cosmopolitanism

The first problem of the cosmopolitan position is the danger of becoming ineffectual, reduced to a mere moral ethos, as there is no superior authority that could translate in concrete issues what is meant by human rights, or guarantee its implementation worldwide.

However, even if a higher authority could be generated, for instance, in form of a worldwide government or a world federation, a second problem still remains: Who decides what counts as human rights violations in each particular context? The danger pointed out in this argument is related to the difficulty of avoiding falling back on some conception of a fixed human nature in the attempt of implementing human rights worldwide. Just like the above seen examples of group essentialism and national identity essentialism, a decontextualized and abstract language of human rights could be manipulated to mask groups privileges and interests, allowing the legitimation of social and political despotism. Moreover, a decontextualized and abstract conception of human rights could promote insensibility to the particularities of human rights violations in specific contexts, leaving these unnoticed by the international community.

3.2.2. The problem of precedence of individual and negative rights over collective and positive rights in cosmopolitanism

The third problem detected by activists in cosmopolitanism is the tendency of reducing human rights to negative rights (civil and political rights), relegating social, economic and cultural rights (positive rights) to the background, or even affirming an incompatibility

between positive and negative rights, with precedence of the latter. This tendency in the cosmopolitan debate arises from the enormous redistributional implications of introducing positive rights in a worldwide human rights regime[17].

However, even in recognized democratic regimes, as Santos rightly notes[18], the formal recognition of the civil and political rights of individuals can easily coexist with enormous withdrawals in social, economic and cultural rights. In fact, the demand for positive rights is a central issue in the struggle of social movements nowadays, and activists are afraid that the cosmopolitan approach will end up reducing the importance of their struggle.

Finally, and analogously to the previous problem, activists are also suspicious that the priority of an individual-based over a collective-based approach to human rights will result in negligence of the central importance that the recognition of collective-based rights has for the exercise of individual human rights[19].

If, on the one hand, cosmopolitans appreciate the expression of difference and cultural diversity, the recognition of group rights, on the other hand, could run the risk of generating the same problems cosmopolitans see in the nationalist approach, namely, the violation of individual rights legitimated by the recognition of group's rights[20]. Social movements' activists argue, however, that certain structural inequalities can only be rightly identified and confronted when a collective-based approach to human rights is allowed. For instance, without a 'race'-based approach it would not be possible to generate public policies that can efficiently change the disadvantage of blacks in societies shaped by racism, such as the introduction of quotas or the review of educational books under the perspective of blacks as a collectivity. Civil society activists, then, are suspicious that the cosmopolitan approach could neglect the importance of a collective-based politics in favour of a reductionist individual-based approach to human rights.

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[17] See for example the work of P Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2002; as well as the work of T Pogge, op. cit.

[18] See B S Santos, 'Nuestra América: Reinventando un Paradigma', *Casa de las Américas*, 237, 2004, pp. 7-25.

[19] As Charles Taylor has convincingly argued, 'we can flourish only to the extent that we are recognized', and, due to this condition, recognition can be considered 'a vital human need', which's absence 'can be a form of oppression'. See C Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in *Multiculturalism and 'The Politics of Recognition'*, A Gutmann (ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992, pp 25-73

[20] See for example S M Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999.

In summary, activists are critical to both nationalism and cosmopolitanism, as far as both proposals regard the politicization of differences as a threat to social stability and as an obstacle in the achievement of real social justice. Nationalists, on the one hand, relates the politicization of social groups to the rise of allegedly unnecessary social conflicts. Cosmopolitans, on the other hand, tend to hierarchize positive and negative, as well as collective and individual rights, in favour of the latter, as if positive and collective rights where a threat to negative and individual rights. An appeal to the ability of an overarching identity in solving the contradictions that are allegedly inherent to the rise of collective-based politics seems to have failed in both the nationalist and the cosmopolitan approaches.

4. Taking the experience of social movements seriously

Considering the insistence of social movements in supporting the politicization of social groups despite strong theoretical suspicion, and in face of their rejection of the nationalist model as an alternative, as well as their mistrust of the theoretical discussion on cosmopolitanism, I propose now to go beyond the allegedly supremacy of theoretical reflection in relation to the practice of grassroots organisations, as well as beyond the criticism of corporativism in social activism, in order to seriously try to understand why, for social movements, the politicization of differences seems to be the best available tool in order to reach real social justice without endangering the social conditions that enable the achievement of justice. Why activists do not associate the politicization of differences with the rise of unnecessary conflict, as in the nationalist approach? Why, for the practice of social movements, positive and collective rights seems not to be in tension with negative and individual rights, as in the cosmopolitan approach?

A closer observation of the so far largely undertheorized practice of recent network politics of social movements – in particular, the political practice developed in the experience of the World Social Fora (WSF) – will enable a better understanding of what moves grassroots activists, in contrast to political theorists, to support 'identity politics' as a legitimate mode of political action.

As I will argue in what follows, a better understanding of the practice of social movements shows that it is not so much that the recognition of particular identities is

undermining the possibility of political community and social justice – as commonly argued in political theory – but is rather *transforming* them.

As it will be seen, it is in the context of another paradigm of making politics that the recognition of differences reveals its greatest potential. Based on the considerations of Boaventura de Sousa Santos[21], as well as my own[22], on the experience of the WSF, I will briefly expose some of the most relevant patterns of this new paradigm of policy-making that arises from the experience of building social movements' networks at the WSF, and how it confers to the politicization of differences positive meanings and purposes that contrast with the common theoretical view above exposed.

Before it, it is important to start by elucidating what the WSF is. This is not an easy task, since there seems to be no adequate analytical concepts available to grasp the complexity and singularity of it[23]. The WSF, then, is better define by what it is *not*. As Santos points out[24],

> The WSF is not an event. Nor is it a mere succession of events, although it does try to dramatize the formal meetings it promotes. It is not a scholarly conference, although the contribution of many scholars converge in it. It is not a party or an international of parties, although militants and activists of many parties all over the world take part in it. It is not a nongovernmental organization or a confederation of nongovernmental organizations. It is not a social movement, even though it often designates itself as the movement of the movements. Although it presents itself as an agent of social change, the WSF rejects the concept of an historical subject and confers no priority on any specific social actor in this process of social change. It holds no clear defined ideology, either in defining what it rejects or what it asserts (...) Finally, the WSF is not structured according any of the models of modern political organization, be they democratic centralism, representative democracy, or participatory democracy. Nobody represents it or is allowed to speak in its name, let alone make decisions, even though it sees itself as a forum that facilitates the decisions of the movements and organizations that take part in it.

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[21] Cf. B S Santos, 'The World Social Forum and the Global Left'. *Focus on Trade*, 136, 2007, viewed on 10 February 2009, <http://alainet.org/ imagens/WSFandGlobalLeftFinal.pdf>.

[22] I was present in the first WSF (2001), in Porto Alegre, and then in 2002 active in the organizing committee of the WSF, as well as in 2003. After that I have being following more specifically the dynamics of networking of the Brazilian black movement, as well as Brazilian black feminists, and, recently, I had the opportunity of participating as a researcher in the WSF 2009 in Belém.

[23] Comp. with B S Santos, *The World Social Forum: A User's Manual*, Madison, 2004, viewed on 15 March 2009, http://www.ces.uc.pt/bss/documentos/fsm_eng.pdf, p. 7.

[24] B S Santos, *The World Social Forum: A User's Manual*, op. cit., p. 6.

Having characterized what the WSF is *not*, it is then possible to risk affirming what it is[25]: a transnational, national and local range of networks formed actively by different social actors (such as NGOs, political parties, social movements, activists, students, scholars) struggling – through an immense variety of concrete subjects – against the discrimination, exclusion and oppression that are perceived as a consequence of the neoliberal globalisation.

With this in mind, it is now possible to proceed to a more accurate analysis of two aspects of the political practice of the WSF that can help us to understand why social movements insist in supporting the politicization of differences despite growing theoretical suspicion.

First, how is it possible that such a range of different social actors with different views, causes, opinions, modes of life and action, come together in the WSF, aiming not only at exchanging their particular experiences, but also at building common agendas of action? As the citation of Santos above explains, it is the refusal of the WSF in imposing one single valid theory, *Weltanschaung* or program of action, as well as the refusal of classifying struggles or social actors according to hierarchies, that transforms the WSF in an open space, where a diversity of actors feel welcome to get together, in condition of equals. Moreover, by affirming that there is no single valid answer to deal with social inequalities, the WSF implicitly recognizes the uniqueness of each social actor and its particular form of struggle: once it is not possible or even desirable to arrive at one single answer or exclusive mode of action against oppression, each participant is not only led to recognize the limits of their own knowledge, but also to perceive the value of the singular contribution her own particular knowledge and experience can offer to others that also struggle against discrimination, exclusion and oppression.

To sum up, the rejection of a need for consensus about causes and forms of political struggle both a priori and a posteriori, as well as the absence of hierarchy among the social actors that is derived from it, create the conditions for possible exchange among an enormous variety of social actors, who come to the WSF not only open to learn from the others (given

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[25] The WSF is a range of convergent, pulverized and contradictory overlapping processes, and it is not the aim of this paper to provide a full account of them. My exclusive aim is to theorize certain patterns that emerge – not without contradictions – from the practice of social movements' networks at the WSF, as far as I am convinced it can challenge political theorists to constructively reflect upon their work from a different perspective.

the incompleteness of their particularity), but also to share what they know with others (given the uniqueness of their singularity)[26].

This considerations lead us to the second relevant aspect of the new political paradigm presented by the WSF: considering that the WSF is characterized by a broad and multifaceted conceptions of power and oppression due to the recognition of the singularity of each form of struggle in its particular context, the diversity of political practices is not only allowed, but becomes itself a strength in the struggle against oppression, discrimination and exclusion. In other words, the success of concrete political issues depends on the participation of a wide range of diverse fronts of political action. Rather than an obstacle to unity, diversity becomes, in this context, the very precondition for aggregation and inclusion[27], and for the possibility of effective collective political action.

From the considerations adduced so far, it is now possible to show how the new paradigm that is emerging from the political practice of the WSF radically differs from theoretical reflection.

First, it suggests that social justice requires the recognition of social groups as legitimated political actors, dissolving the polarized tension found in theory between the politicization of differences and the maintenance of the conditions for the achievement of real social justice. The WSF' paradigm contrasts radically with the one posed by theoretical reflection, in which, as already seen, the recognition of collective-based politics is in polarized tension with the stability of a political community, or, in a more cosmopolitan vein, is regarded as an obstacle – and not as a resource – for the common implementation of human rights. This lead us to the second point in which the mode of political practice at the WSF differs radically from theoretical reflection: it suggests that differences, instead of being an obstacle, become the status of initiators of transformative political action *par excellence*.

The model of political action at the WSF, then, can be better characterized as a mode of 'depolarized pluralities'[28], that is, several fronts and networks for action that, on the basis

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[26] As Santos states, in the WSF diverse forms of collective action 'interact in a non-hierarchical, horizontal manner that emphasizes mutual understanding'. See B S Santos, *The World Social Forum: A User's Manual*, op. cit., p. 16.
[27] ibid., p. 18-9.
[28] B S Santos, *The Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond*, Zed Books, London, 2006, p. 166.

of the particularity of each participant involved, interact around common issues, permitting particular forms of struggle against oppression to coexist with other political collective practices.

From this considerations it is possible to conclude that it was the theoretical inability to perceive broader political implications of the project of politicization of differences that led theorists to be so sceptical about the insistence of social movements in favour of the introduction of the politicization of differences in the public realm. For, whereas the politicization of differences is regarded in theory as an isolated policy in an already-given political system, the political practice shows that the politicization of differences has broader implications, requiring a transformation in the way of making and understanding politics altogether. It is on the basis of a new paradigm of making politics that the politicization of differences can be explored at its best.

To reflect on the new paradigm of making politics proposed by social movements at the WSF brings up a series of questions that can be of immense value for the further development of political theory and political practice today: What were the conditions for the rise of such a new political paradigm? How this form of political functioning could be translated to the praxis of politics in general? How far the new paradigm redefine politics anew? How theory could contribute to improve the impact of the transformative politics of social movements? These are only some examples of new research topics that could start to be explored in the dialogue with the practice of social movements.

5. Exploring the potential of human rights as an instrument of contra-hegemonic action

After showing the reasons for social movements' suspicion of cosmopolitan argumentation, and having presented the change of paradigm in making politics at the WSF, I want to conclude by suggesting how the language of human rights could potentially corroborate to the achievement of real social justice and to the construction of common grounds without the need of overriding a collective-based political approach to social inequalities.

I recall two important reflections made so far in this paper that are relevant to rethink human rights today. First, human rights have an acknowledged potential as instrument of

contra-hegemonic action for grassroots organisations by offering a powerful legitimation for social movements' causes and actions, besides facilitating solidarity and networking with other social actors worldwide. Second, and in contrast, the greatest criticisms of activists to cosmopolitanism are, on the one hand, the manipulation of human rights when these are taken to be abstract, and, on the other hand, the resistance in recognizing the fundamental role of positive and collective rights in ensuring the conditions for the exercise of individual and negative rights.

In the light of the considerations about the new political paradigm of the WSF, I am inclined to suggest that it is not possible nor desirable to enforce human rights universally without failing into manipulative abstraction. Like the condition that characterizes the WSF as an open space, there is no single interpretation of human rights that can be valid in all contexts without generating despotism, insensibility and even more oppression. Rather, we should recognize human rights from the uniqueness of each context's field of struggle against oppression, discrimination and exclusion. In this manner, we not only avoid, through the concreteness of each particular struggle, the manipulatory abstraction that endangers the language of human rights. We are also able to enrich human rights with new resignifications that can contribute to make it stronger and more powerful, in the sense of strengthening cosmopolitan solidarity, as the multifaceted conceptions of power and oppression that arise from the uniqueness of each social actors' particular experience at the WSF also strengthen the rise of common political practices[29].

Therefore, the recognition of collective-based politics, as well as of positive rights, can contribute to make the language of human rights more sensible to subtle forms of oppression, and stronger in the sense of becoming a powerful instrument of contra-hegemonic politics in the achievement of justice. This extension of the language of human rights to particular contexts will also help to better understand the mechanisms of complementarity between individual and negative rights, on the one hand, and collective and positive rights, on the other hand.

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[29] The contextualization of human rights here proposed does not aim at leading to relativism, but to a practice of translation from particular contexts in which human rights are resignified, so that the concept of human rights be enriched and international solidarity through human rights be strengthened. For more on the project of translation among different contextualized experiences, see B S Santos, 'Por uma Concepção Multicultural de Direitos Humanos', in *Reconhecer para Libertar: Os Caminhos do Cosmopolitismo Multicultural*, Civilização Brasileira, Rio de Janeiro, 2003, pp. 381-424.

Through an engaged and contextualized language of human rights, we will certainly become closer of the utopia of another possible world.

6. Final Conclusion

In this paper, I aimed at showing the problems involved in a lack of dialogue that is not shaped a priori by hierarchies and prejudices between political theory and the practice of social movements. This leads, in a broader sense, to the necessity of reflecting critically upon the production of theoretical knowledge, its motivations and purposes.

Before concluding, it is still worth observing that the primarily aim of this paper was not to solve the complex tension between individual rights and collective-based political action, but to show that to enter in dialogue with the experience of social movements – observing the required openness and respect that characterize a fruitful engagement with the other – enables the rise of new paradigms and ways of rethinking anew such complex and urgent questions in the world in which we live in. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos use to argue, 'the critical task ahead cannot be limited to generating alternatives. Indeed, it requires an alternative thinking of alternatives'[30]. It is only through the eyes of others that we will learn to think differently.

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[30] B S Santos, 'Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges', *Eurozine*, 29/06/2007, p. 10.