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IS Working Papers

2.ª Série, N.º 1

Porto, Janeiro de 2011



IS Working Papers

2.ª Série

Editora: Cristina Parente

Uma publicação seriada online do

Instituto de Sociologia

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto

Unidade de I&D da Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia

Disponível em: http://isociologia.pt/publicacoes_workingpapers.aspx

ISSN: 1647-9424

IS Working Paper N.º 1

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The lived experience of class.

Personal aspects of the territorialized processes of economic casualisation in two industrial communities

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Abstract

Economic casualisation progressively leads to the institution of the insecurity and progressive competition that is at the heart of contemporary societies. Between 2007 and 2008, we conducted independent ethnographic researches in Rebordosa (Portugal) and Rotherham (United Kingdom). Both are traditional industrial areas submitted to strenuous social and economic re-structuring. The personal mediations of this “crisis” constitute our main theoretical focus. At the same time, we aim at dealing with the methodological problems raised when trying to capture the apparently ineffable aspects of a practical mode of existence.

Keywords: Working class; ethnography; embodiment; practical sense.

Introduction

Economic casualisation is related with the institution of insecurity and progressive competition that characterizes the contemporary working class existence. The management of this institutional precariousness is done in relation to an institutional organisation that mediates economic forms with profound consequences for the intimate forms of life that working class people endure. There is

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uncertainty, deprivation, isolation, and then social forms related to coping which have seen an increase in obnubilation techniques (alcohol or medicament abuse, among others). There are then problems concerned with the issue of conditional recognition that makes human relational forms conditional on value.

Economic access increasingly depends on institutionally mediated forms of recognition that make humanising experiences conditional. What we have are societies based on institutional closures enacted to secure resources in relation to future so that investments can be clearly understood and strategies constituted and then the autonomous segregation enacted institutionally leads to separations that leave inequality personalised. These “emerging” social problems are rooted in the dehumanisation attendant on a society in which competition destroys the dispositions required to be a successful economic agent in societies constituted in these ways.

These “problems” are a range of personal, intimate, phenomena that are hidden and which we want to look at based on ethnographic researches conducted independently in Rotherham (United Kingdom) and Rebordosa (Portugal) between 2007 and 2008. Both are traditional industrial areas submitted to strenuous economic, cultural and social re-structuring. The personal mediations of this “crisis” constitute precisely our main theoretical focus. Due to the specificities of those revelations of the social transformations, we enact an ethnographic strategy centred in the living experience of class occurring in places with different histories and constituting different configurations of power.

Notes on method

There is a relation between being and knowing which means that in understanding a realised form of life, we need to understand it as an accommodation to being. Usually, that means that we need to understand it in order to pursue a strategy (what becomes constituted as ‘methodology’) that allows us to ‘know’ it in the representational-significatory sense of an institutionally consecrated object of knowledge, represented textually through forms that relate to the symbolic forms of those who constitute reality from a perspective that relates to their institutional position and specific (academic) strategies. However, only when we are armed with appropriate categories, can we begin to treat the nature of experiences of being that are inaccessible to people whose position condemns them to be spectators on all the realms that are beyond their own. Methodologically, therefore, we must do some theoretical work, if we are to constitute successful representations that are faithful to the grounds of the phenomena with which we are concerned. The methodological problems could be overcome by anyone whose existence constitutes access to the phenomenal, unreflective, experience of the phenomena of working class life. The socially powerless are primordially attuned to the real because they are forever oriented by it. Besides, very often, the problems are not methodological, nor intellectual; they are institutional and political.

Since “the most personal is the most impersonal” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 201) for those whose way of being is disclosed impersonally, and if the “main mechanism of domination operates through the unconscious manipulation of the body” (Bourdieu & Eagleton, 1994, p. 276) such that modes of address of the body in its physicality arise as a fundamental constitutive aspect of the patterning and regimenting of the temporal rhythms of the week, then we need ways of recognising

what might be latent to practice, part of an 'invisible' sense rarely fore-grounded in a life lived in retreat from the necessity of its own grounds. In this sense, conceptual work is at the heart of a re-appropriation of a way of being that cannot appropriate possibilities that are foreclosed upon in its mode of being-disclosed such that, as a way of being, it exhibits, as a mode of being-realised, in immediate reactions, an inner fittingness to the situation in which it occurs; such that the physical appropriation, mimetically, of forms attuned to its conditions of appropriating, emerge from conditions in which disclosures reveal a 'there' a contextual-immediacy realised as 'sense', dispositionally, that delineates being as a realm of disclosure.

What we need, therefore, are categories that are fitted to the task of understanding these realm of phenomena. What is not observable are the instantiations of sense constitutive of the meaning of being such that being introduces the subject to the range of qualitative distinctions that their comportment is attuned to and 'reacts' to because it is the sensible that is its encounter with an interpersonal world so disclosed. What this means is that a natal experience of position is required because time is constitutive of access to the meanings through which subjects experience disclosures constitutive of the existence of aspects of existence that are not necessarily spoken about but which affect individual existence and lead to responses to being in which the observable aspects are not the reason for the behaviour.

Time is constitutive of the meaning of aspects of existence such that to-be-present to the existence of the aspects, one must be there at the right-time and in a human existence this effectively means to be born in a place and to exist in a place because of what is constitutive of the forms of existence that take place in the place, an immersion in the practical density of life to what the actual distinctions constitutive of a local economy are and to what they map into: disparate spaces linked by the consistency of members who, via the constitutive efficacy of their own existence in these conditions, co-habit via employment, football teams, pubs and clubs. Saturation in the aspects of these *mise-en-scène* are the basis of an incorporation that is as much about the aspects of experience constituting a responsive habitus that is itself laden with meanings that are consequential for individuals as any choice in response: the individuals do not choose the disclosures that are constitutive of their means of choosing so they remain trapped in the meaning of their experience as that is sedimented over time and overarchingly signified in a class-divided society as a crucial tool of their discrimination: they "choose" their "attitude" to their situation so that no professional can help them. Hence, even with the youngest and least temporally immersed, saturation in their experience, leads to the complete failure of educative action.

Given that many fundamental aspects of the phenomena that we are concerned with are constituted in an "un-thought-about" process, we need a way to render those aspects legible. Now, it seems to us that although the whole story of their social experience and of their objective being, as with any of us, is not wholly expressed in, and not therefore wholly captured by, their speech, naturally occurring instances of speech do allow one to trace and reconfigure the nature of the experiential-interpersonal conditions from which their forms of being issue. What their speech emerges from but under-describes is nevertheless manifest in the paucity of the linguistic resources they manifest as available to them because of their condition. As such, even the paucity of the linguistic resources available manifests the nature of the world that arises from their en-worlding by the fundamental

class processes constitutive of the major educational and economic markets that mediate access to resources in this society.

The stringent forms of embodied capital that accrue only from mimetic acquisition of forms that rely on acceptance and *involvement*, on engagement and thus a solicitation that is conditional as a condition of its constitution of the value necessary to itself as a form, mean that academics do not have the time, or the embodied forms necessary, to access those beyond the groups their way of being is constituted to belong to. This is why their appropriations of reality are always quasi-theoretical, always devoid of traces of the unreflectively lived forms of the phenomena about which they write. In this sense, work that attempts to represent the unreflective experience of those without access to the means to represent themselves legitimately or even to linguistically constitute their experience except in direct relation to what they feel in regard of a condition in which feeling is a constitutive relation, is always politically loaded given the way in which signifiers function in regard of a realm generated from signifiers shorn of direct experiential reference. In this sense, work that attempts to manifest the sense of existence emerging from the unreflective experience of ordinary people as it is manifest in their speech and which deploys categories to elucidate the sense manifest in their speech, is likely to have a “problematic” nature within the academy.

Making (and unmaking) the sense of class

“Indifference”, “routine” and “prison” all are expressions aimed to define a corporal and relational experience and a sensorial horizon. Existence takes place within a horizon of possibilities that for many is just constant repetition of the same cycles: “thi’s nothin’ t’ do, just w’kin’ yer life away then gu aht weekend an’ get off-yer-‘ead” for those in employment and the endless repetition of the same day for the unemployed, “thi’s nowt t’ do, nothin’s ‘appenin’”. The order of things enforces itself with a relentless logic that is experienced via perceptions of opportunities that always relate to the most immediate and definitive sign and measure of social significance: «income». The way in which both work, or the form of employment, and money overshadow one another as twin-strains in working class life, are manifest in the words of one person who bluntly stated why he needed to do a job he hates: “Yer want a place to live, yer want a nice watch, nice clothes, it’s got to bi paid fo’. Ah want t’ live someaht-like: minds yer it stinks at minute, so thy ‘as t’ w’k.” What is clear is that the mediated nature of labour market access and the repercussions of distributions of wealth that issue from it, results in a kind of inert violence that arises from the generalised pressures of an economic order reproducing itself, interpersonally, through the symbolic order instantiated in perceptions that mark the essential nature of people rendered subjects in such determinate ways. The pressures, the strains, the worry and anxiety caused by this instantiated order are clearly felt by people. One begins to see why Pierre Bourdieu (1979) says “there are grounds for seeing the absence of the spatio-temporal frameworks that are provided by regular work as one cause of uncertainty and... incoherence...” (p. 67).

What is clearly manifest here is an awareness of the way in which a change in the nature of education, toward a system where income is transferred into access effects a devaluation of qualifications resulting in an effective structural deskilling, blurring social boundaries among the

working class making the future ever more certainly more-of-the-same, cross-generationally, such that an imprisonment in pointless routines and a quality-less anxiety prevail as the reduced bother themselves with being-reduced to a realm of little realisation, grinding out an income any way they can. The way this reduction is experienced is via the ceaseless pressure arising from the difficulty of procuring income that necessitates a curtailment of any security in actualisation via the realm of interpersonal realisations human being requires.

This reiterated experience of the world, through the diffuse inculcation of dispositions whose specificity and effectiveness is tied to the objective conditions associated with a specific social setting, we acquire a long-lasting way of seeing, of feeling and thinking. The enduring immersion in circumstances of spatial and economic confinement, the reiterated and proximal submission to the redundancy of social situations and to the tacit demands that the whole physical and social space places on its occupants, explains the acquisition, throughout individual history, of postures, practices and preferences fit to work in a practical state and through practice as “posture”, “manner” manifest in aspects of comportment that appear to concern “taste” but which arise, in turn, from the necessity forced upon them by the order of things: an order in which their routines are like rituals determining a life devoid of meaning apart from the meaningless struggle with the absurdity of human existence devoid of sense and consumed by the bare mechanics of “needs”. Even the supposedly intimate realm of realisation of the supposedly affectionate is dominated by needs for self-presence that relate to the possession of income.

People intuit the relevant difference in relation to interests that arise from an experience of being that is immersed in the space of realisation that class position is. There is a mutual understanding between the (re)socialised lived body and the objectified space which naturalises the social distances and limits, infra-consciously recording them as postures in a sense of one’s place and value; a sensibility adjusted to the practices and goods plausible and suitable for “people of our kind”. The order of things is engraved in the flesh and bones of agents in the form of preferences and rejections, likings and aversions. This practical envelopment in everyday life corresponds to a relationship of circumspection structured by the specificity of the relationships maintained with our immediate surroundings. Something like a sense of class that is revealed in the form of “premonitions” and “knowing how to be”: knowing “what the crack is” involves knowing the forms of realisation available and the obligations contained therein.

What association is available to the poor relates to their ability-to-be useful and friendships amongst the working class relate to skills, to capacities to be useful: association is an economic phenomenon, without the skills to contribute an individual is a redundant being. The basis of sociality is the interpersonal capacity for people to be-useful in relation to an economic utility that relates to resource-access that mediates association.

The people is all like that now, nervous, that’s in the factories, in the cafés, they’re all nervous, because of this system where everything is expensive, life is so hard, is everything very expensive! And everyone is scared and they don’t forgive one another, they have problems at home and then go to the cafés, they have problems at home and then go to the factories, the problems from the factory they bring them to their homes... (...) We’re obliged to lose the taste [gosto] because we aren’t encouraged, we’re

nothing. To give incentive give us our value, giving people value is to respect them. (...) They said [the bosses, in the factories] “you are superfluous here”. And they talk to us in a way... They shove us anyway there... I was losing my mind [ficar meio maluco da cabeça]. I feel very down... (...) They are like dogs to each other and that’s very hard! (Adelino, 63 years old, joiner).

We acquire our sensibilities as a part of the systems of practical intentionality, of the ways of doing and being acquired through our specific situationality. These marks, which so specifically reflect the inequalities, the social positionings, embedded in people themselves, are the result of a life style and act as marks of class inscribed on the body as an existential manner and style. The sense of being is fundamental for social agents. This sense, acquired socially and interpersonally, incorporates a cultural history constituted amidst inequality. It is this propensity to be, to see and to do that guides social agents, giving the body an objectivity, a perceptibility and a significance for others, that constitutes the basis of social experience. The effects of the differential form of being of manual workers, due to their differential relationship concerning the resources, affect the most intimate processes through which the individual is formed. It is the intersubjective structure of behaviour that, in turn, concretises and actualises this specific social experience. Precisely because of that, the referential dimension of practices and representations, of experiences and significances, that is, the universe of the “significant distinctions” of social agents, is absolutely twinned with their “properties of position” because the capacity for-others to perceive social properties relates to the conditions of acquisition that give perceivable social properties their “sense” and render them “perceivable” and readable as quasi-codes, mimetically acquired unintentionally.

Precisely because an agent’s smallest and most trivial acts and words reveal the agent’s social position as it was insensitively internalised, be it in the way that people are understood and appraised in terms of personal significance, or in the tacit way in which people feel, act or speak, they constitute the personal level of the class. Martin Heidegger suggested that human beings form of life was existence, it is a phenomena that arises from sense: given that the grounds of the possibility of sense are the instantiated patterns that arise from humans practical affairs, then existence as a “class-object” is concurrent with a personal and interpersonal experience of objectification: objectification transpires from the interpersonal terrain and becomes a basis of the intelligible patterns that relate us to being.

The reproduction of social patterns of subalternity, of retraction, of sensitivity, reactivity and self-negation due to cultural shame that characterise the working class condition, thus involves the transfer, in living flesh, of class differences, both through the inculcation structured in terms of the naturalisation of arbitrary cultural factors and through the disperse and implicit assimilation of social personalities. The places of class are always especially effective places of socialisation. The symbolical-ideological effectiveness of the domination objectively experienced by the working classes emerges precisely in the discourses used to bestow intelligibility on everyday experiences. It is these discourses that immediately allude to that silent assimilation of a social experience of impotence and objectification. However, “the doxic attitude does not mean happiness; it means bodily submission, unconscious submission, which may indicate a significant level of internalised tension, a lot of physical suffering” (Bourdieu & Eagleton, 1994, p. 276). The silent imputations and

the urgent injunctions that result from the “compulsoriness of everyday life” are physiologically transmuted and appear instantaneously in the contexts of co-presence.

What this means, is that physicality, manner, presence, involves exchanges of existential sense that are exchanged through existential manner, bodies radiate different existential structures or implicit configurations of significance. The body is the active source of intentionalistic significances, the nature of there-being, placing being-there: present in terms of the significances through which one experiences being there, present/presence and person-hood, which is why there is a necessary relation between realisation of the nature of space and subject-hood: social space is realised through a range of interpersonal processes realised as responses that affect individuals at the root of their identity, in the very formative aspects of their personality. This is why one can act on peoples “subjectivity” by acting on the significances radiated by the body so that space is signified and this is why we must understand the way perspectives becomes constituted, and this is why externalism or the inherent academicism of the instituted forms of the bourgeois academy are useless in regard of the truths of the social world. Human beings radiate existential structures, implicit configurations of sense that constitute significances, “intra-worldly” phenomena peculiar to the disclosures of the social as it takes shape in relation to the dialogues of sense they are locked into vis-à-vis the sense they embody and in relation to which they are the subject and object of disclosures.

Such uncertain terms of existence are very certain and very determinate in their personal forms. The insecurity of social existence, generates acute frustrations that must be personally contained via drinking, smoking, drug-taking to obliterate the pain of being un-realised via determinations that in their indeterminacy allow no lee-way for-being except by changing one’s relation to being by a direct chemical address of the biochemical systems of the nervous system which transform a necessary determination into what feels like an elective destiny. For those who live in social conditions of subordination, the diffuse injustice, cruelty and bad luck is merely the everyday substance of being. Because these processes result in people being un-realised vis-à-vis their human expressive facilities, and lead thereby, very often, to practices of self-annihilation based in self-medication as pain-avoidance as part of a process of humanisation in conditions that are dehumanising so that dehumanisation becomes a way to realise being, they are difficult to express and impossible for distanced individuals to appropriate and thus signify.

We arrive home so tired that we don’t have time for anything else, we don’t have energy for nothing more, we arrive home and then, sometimes, we discuss with our family, we’re stressed with that environment [*factory*] and it’s the family that pays the consequences.

Now, that I see that’s no solution at all, I arrive home and I’m totally out of the problems, the factory ends for me. I arrive home, starts my life, my home is my life, the work is behind me then, I forget it, I don’t want to think about work at home because if I do it I have to vent at others, I’m super stressed, so I get home the workday ends. I arrive home, take a bath, I’m another person. (...) I didn’t take anything, because I know people who, well, feel tired and they go running to the doctors asking for medication to rest, to sleep. No. I try to arrive home and take a bath, put myself... well, put myself normal, my own person, take care of me, arrive to bed and simply sleep without thinking anything else (Isabel, 19 years old, works in a furniture factory since 16).

Understanding social conditions implies keeping in mind the personal and intersubjective terms through which these social conditions are realised. The forms of subjectivity through which we realise and display the “biologisation of culture” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 90) and class are related to the forms of sociability through which, intuitively, we understand the value that is publicly bestowed on these distinct and distinctive marks inscribed in the flesh. The personal inflections of these particular economic conditions constitute points of expression that effectively reveal the processes of impersonalisation and anonymous violence that, in the course of processes of recomposition of the social space, befall those who occupy economically and symbolically marginal and marginalised positions. To be “downcast” and “unmotivated” is the physiological repercussion of situations interpersonally generated and consequential (“a bad environment”, “lack of respect”, “distress”). How one is treated is a fundamental medium through which one is “made” to “live” the environment of one’s body as a fundamental aspect of one’s being-environed. Again, “human” faculties are detrimental to the negatively positioned. And sensitivity to disclosures, to significances, becomes a fundamental aspect of comportment and awareness, even to the extent that one has to look away from others in order to avoid facing negating significances, a condition of avoiding one’s public significance that is sensitively rendered in the following spontaneously realised grasp of the preconceptual manifest in the realm of comportment-towards.

Being part of a common group who are subject to the gaze and to a life of being negatively visible, so that they are practically sensitive to *use* of the glance, their way of looking emerges from what they perceive in regard of how they are perceived, their intraworldly, what they encounter by way of human significances arising from how they are situated in the web of public intelligibility and their being-with emerges from this encounter with being because of being-there by virtue of associations arising from their being-with people who are situated through the same web of significances. How they live in their environment arises from how they are located in their environment by virtue of the significances that render present that environment as lived. It is because the world is engaged with in relation to their human proclivities for presence and recognition, that they are invested in the form of their experience so that those forms are means by which they are affected: these forms have constitutive effects and the world haunts them even in their non-conscious moments, sleepless nights and nightmares induced by “worries” ensue and they endure feelings of permanent exhaustion, “anxiety”, an experience of spatial and corporal oppression (“suffocation”) and of objectification are all part of those corporal languages of anxiety and of the culturally mediated somatic experiences. The “heartburn” and “indigestion”, the “hot head” and “burning up” silently reveal the incarnation of class as it is interpersonally constituted in situations progressively understood and experienced as representing a “lack of respect” or “offence”. These corporal metaphors make it possible to articulate and clarify experiences that would otherwise remain unarticulated, repressed or censured by the formal institutions. What stands out in working class speech, notwithstanding appearing in an intermittent and fragmented way, is a kind of visceral evocation that, in a figurative and literal sense, lends *thickness* to the attempts to confer coherence on the social transformations.

If we have a disease we're doomed! We're doomed! We don't have nothing, nothing, not a penny! We don't have a penny! If a get a disease, I, I don't want to... I think but... I don't want to think, but I think a lot about these things and that's why I lost weight, I lost 10 or more kilograms, I'm getting thin since I came here [to his new household, bought with a bank loan, that's getting increasingly higher]... It isn't because I'm starving [tirar à boca], thank God, but it's from the whims [cismas] from my head! And my head is always working. Because of that, look... [he holds a tuft of hair in his hand] White hair. From the worry [freimas]... (...) I'm always hesitant [com o pé atrás], full of fear! The way this goes by.... I don't know the day after. People don't know the next day as things go. Today this is as it is [i.e. not very good], but tomorrow it could be worse, and then? We lost everything? We lost... all we have already paid? We lost our home? That's exactly like that, you lost everything. And I... I... my head, is like I said, is always working on these things, always working on these things! It's hard, life it's really hard! (...) I work a lot of hours to carry-on my life, otherwise... it's very hard. I work to carry-on with life. But then we start to see [dá fé], everything takes over the body [cai tudo em cima do corpo]. I feel tired. I, I... at this moment, I feel tired. I feel very tired. I don't know it it's from the head, because of thinking so much about my life... Sometimes, I get up from my bed tired, in the morning, even more tired than when I fell asleep... And then I'm always dreaming in the night, bad dreams about life... (Manuel, 42 years old, joiner, works since 12).

The processes that foster social precariousness of the working classes, especially of the segments which have in the meantime been subjected to a greater level of depreciation of corporal capital and confronted with the devaluation, inadequacy or impossible reconversion of the schemes of action, perception and appreciation of the manufacturing universe, inhibit, impede or make the activation of the subjective forms that are recognised as confirming virile and crafts workshop dignity harder. The objective devaluation of the "value" of manual workers is interiorised and experienced in terms of the ongoing social inferiorisation, the loss of possibilities of self-assertion and the gradual deterioration of interpersonal relations. Personal identity and self-esteem are irredeemably affected by situations that deny the "value" of individuals as working class is experienced in relation to education, occupational, housing and sexual markets in which they are located at the bottom, leading to a sense of loss that is located in the primordial site of the expressive force, the individual who "feels drained" and faces an absence of choices concerning any possible individual project. A sensibility arises from the forms of being-affected by a determination via a shared sense of the world that is constitutive of working class experience.

Because this competition for resources takes place upon the essential terrain of individuals embodied characteristics that are supposed to be attributes of their individual being, intelligence, appearance, sophistication, this war of all against all, becomes transmuted by the logic of its instantiated into a moral competition in which the losers appear to be stupid and ugly so that within the class structure as it is realised there is a kind of moral topology being-realised that creates resentment among the victims which creates forms of tacit violence expressed in slang expressions which make "badmouthing" and "cursing"; as well as "disgust", "irritation" and "envy" pervasive aspects of the personal terrain of these societies. Such a form of competition leads to the dismemberment of local social networks and the weakening of the moral economy of "respect" and "friendship". This dehumanisation of interpersonal forms makes personal existence vulnerable,

precisely because manual workers, because of their double ineptitude, tend to adjust to the image that is sent back in every situation in which they face the depreciation or denial of the value and relevance of their practices and their discourse. “Shame” and “embarrassment” are the most frequent manifestations of situations in which the sense of place and, concomitantly, the permitted limits in the words and in the actions of each social agent are overstepped. The feeling of outrage acts as a “self-fulfilling prophecy” through which “the fear becomes a reality”.

These collective feelings of inferiority are converted into processes of social self-exclusion and retraction consigned to the logic of things and which are evidence of the work of an effect of destiny. By the inertia of the incorporated structures, through corporal stances and discourses of deference, social agents help to reconstitute the power asymmetries present in the social conditions that are at the heart of their dispositions on a daily basis. What neoliberal economic conditions result in are groups who are economic residual and personally dysfunctional because they lack the resources to compete because they only exist as a resource in terms of their resourcelessness via public discourses about exclusion that provide labour markets for those instituting their powerlessness through educational processes that leave them forever dispossessed.

What working class people encounter is a world constituted from forms of social valuation that are evident in the responses of people around them: the instantiation or manifestation of criteria of human value through which humans are aware of themselves as subject to value. Much of the transactional interpersonal forms constitutive of these forms of awareness are immanent to space: they arise as the meaning of the space is constituted through engagements that relate to the value established within the space as the condition of the space’s realisation as an interpersonal form through patterns of response, welcoming or insulting, recognising or negating, that are the basis of the constitutional of social forms of existence. It is through uncoded, or none-verbal cues, through exchanges of sense, interpersonally that relate to valences of capital, that the patterns of recognition constitutive of space are realised. We are all aware, unconsciously or otherwise, of these enviroing aspects that are consequential to our destiny in a society in which social movement increasingly depends upon sponsored mobility, so that people experience an objective future inscribed in the relations realised around them: through which they acquire their deepest, practical, sense of what they can expect as they move around the society in which they exist without necessarily “living”.

The world is not a home for some: they are unable to dwell because they lack the habitual traces of belonging to spaces constituted through engagements that rely upon the dispositions of particular backgrounds. For some there is the valorisation of the marks that all human beings exhibit in response to the way the world is mediated for them by the resources they possess at that most vulnerable of times when flesh is forming itself, childhood, when children imbue the marks of their primary relation to the social realm, acquiring an implicit sense of their value and the future immanent to it as an interpersonally produced phenomena whose meaning issues from the processes of instantiation constitutive of the meaning people perceive, or “sense”.

Appearance and the evidence of reality. Conditions of exposition and practical horizons of relevance amidst the “economic crisis”

“It’s the reality, it’s what we have, it’s what we are”, one 51 years old engine driver tells us. Although amplified along the lines of the internal morphology of the working class as a whole, this seems to be a structural trait of the contemporary working class condition. Both the lack and inability to access the recognised forms of being and appearing, and the cumulative concentration of negatively perceived personal characteristics (especially linguistic traits, physical appearance, diet) are mutually related to the objective situation of deprivation in terms of material and symbolic resources and the occupation in the socio-professional structure of a position that makes the request for “respect” impossible or inhibits it. The rarefaction and fragility of objectively possessed resources correspond to personal experiences of inferiority and discredit and command an impoverished and limited relational and personal experience. In these conditions, not only do the possibilities of acquiring social recognition diminish, but the investment in interpersonal forms of distinction that can only be seen as acts of ostentation and of “going beyond the bounds” becomes superfluous².

Our flesh displays as a medium of exposure, to the field of the non-cognitive intentionality of others: to a field of others’ responses, which may be utterly non-verbal, like ignoring or failing to mark one’s presence (that is recognize it positively, as opposed to negatively through simple “ignoring”), disposes us to affective consequences. For example, in the social world, even unconscious behaviour, like not speaking to individuals who do not show up as significant, has significance, even not marking someone’s presence through slight gestures of the body like moving one’s shoulders to indicate presence or moving one’s bags slightly in passing, has affective consequence for others. In a class society, people endure a whole series of such treatments from specific others, teachers, council bureaucrats, estate agents, solicitors, priests, managers – all of them, living “personifications of capital” (economic and cultural).

There are guys [refers to them, bosses and clients] that don’t even care about looking at you, they don’t look at you, man! I’m right there doing my work and they don’t even notice you. They act as if they don’t see you, do you understand? Sometimes, I notice that and I smile, I smile while I wait for them to ask me why I’m smiling, because in the day they ask me why I swear I’ll say, “you’re a fucking moron! You don’t even have any respect for me, a dog that’s, here, working!, you don’t respect anybody! (Paulo, 31 years old, construction worker).

The point is that a life of these kinds of treatments and experiences leads to the internalization, as a form of practical knowledge sedimented in bearing, of dispositions that are accommodations to these solicitations, but which then operate as markers of the early-existence of these treatments

² As Bourdieu puts it: “With a Heideggerian play on words, one might say that we are *disposed* because we are *exposed*. It is because the body is (to unequal degrees) exposed and endangered in the world, faced with the risk of emotion, lesion, suffering, sometimes death, and therefore obliged to take the world seriously (and nothing is more serious than emotion, which touches the depths of our organic being) that it is able to acquire dispositions that are themselves an openness to the world, that is, to the very structures of the social world of which they are the incorporated form” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 141).

which then “invite” further (mis-)treatments, which is what is so damaging and so haunting for working class people if they do enter the world of the dominant. All of the resources of what we perceive as “personality” are mediated social forms inscribed in the somatised body which takes up certain dispositions as part of a response to the world which is part of a knowing of the world. The field of the possible, the range of *manoeuvre*, rests largely upon how we are perceived.

The attempts to assert and maintain an honourable status within a framework of material constraint, competitive tension between peers and the absence of control over the conditions of work and existence (“things might be ok but they can change suddenly and the rug is snatched from under you) involve tactics of conflictual uncommitment. These constitute “practices of personal integrity” (cf. Moodie 1991) and disaffection in relation to experiences of negation or deprivation. Modalities that are tacit, and apparently insignificant, which make it possible to indirectly express dissatisfaction and protest, in spite of the absence of visible signs of challenge. The indelible definition of spaces of reparation and practices of restitution and self-assertion constitutes an attempt to subvert the experiences of exploration and domination experienced on a daily basis in the factory, in the home, in the cafes.

“Thinking is what, sometimes, makes you tired, thinking about life” (Manuel, 42 years old, joiner). The strength and firmness of reality in the face of intentions to endow it with significance must be diluted by the detachment and alienation, more or less provoked. Through exercises in oblivion (“we try to forget so we don’t think too much”, “it’s better to not even talk about it”, “don’t remind me!”) an attempt is made to inhibit or reduce the dissonance born from the “awareness” or intuition of insignificance. “Ruminating is a disease, bugged!, if we ruminate too much, we go crazy!” (Sérgio, 29 years old, packer). In these conditions, it is not only improbable but also unadvisable to insist on transporting the world to the plane of reflection and rationalisation, which can only insist on the damage caused by the perception of the closing and mutilation that existentially characterise their way of life. In this sense, the aim is to “forget” or “alleviate” through practices of decompression or mortification of sensibility, mainly by resorting to chemical solutions in order to diminish or invert the experience of heteronomy and negation (“get hammered”, “drink to forget”).

These social agents exist within a restricted circle of interpersonal forms of acquisition of recognition, they are highly restrained in the possibilities of projection and realisation and affectionately experience a generalised state of finitude and impotence. Frequently dominated by anguish and a feeling of estrangement, they are susceptible to suffering a distortion of temporal structures in the sense of their circumscription in the immediate environment. It is the virtual impossibility of suspending the urgency and hostility of the conditions of existence that stimulates a realistic vision of reality, a description not symbolically euphemised of the suffering generated by the “crisis”. The problem, we want to suggest, is the conditions of the smooth operation of the institutional economy that the trans-national elites vote for and then enforce via policy and expertise, are the effective dispossession of the world’s poor for whom the modes of realisation of this economic condition dispossess them of their very initiative to be human persons at all. As one person expressed the dispositions acquired from this mal-adaptive relation to economic life:

To me it costs a lot being at a standstill, because I never like very much to be around here, at home, at standstill, I like to be outside, but now, my friend, it has to be like this... I have to be at standstill.... Man it costs a lot to be at home! And being at a standstill, I don't like it, I'd prefer to be working, I don't feel very well at a standstill... Sometimes I become... it seems that I'm getting sick, I don't like that... (...) I feel... How I feel? I feel almost at an end, until now you are useful and then, from one moment to another you're useless, why? If I... If I didn't like to work, well, I'd be work-shy: I will continue to be one, but I'm not that way...It's how I say to many ones, now, with this age I'm becoming a loser? This means, I'm not useful anymore [já não sirvo para nada]! I'm pissed off with this, but the bosses... it's them who know... (Zeferino, 51 years old, unemployed for two years).

The established institutions of the economy are becoming, for some of the working class segments, personally dysfunctional. The lack of realisation of individuals so located leads to a kind of inexpressivity that becomes dysfunctional in an economy requiring the working class to be as service class. Interpersonal processes arising from social speciation, reconstitute the terms of difference that arise from our different experiences of being the flesh we are, such that “our environment” is never, and can never be, the same, because we face being, inhabit the world in terms of what we find “there”, differently in regard of the objective significance of our flesh as it is publicly signified and rendered consequential, environing. Given these people's experience of being-realised in relation to others, in terms of forms of treatment that situate them and, fix them by the terms of that being-perceived, curtail their capacity to access their own humanity as a *personal* terrain constituted viably in qualitative disclosures of human, personal significance, we should not be surprised that those so located, speak a deranged language arising from their own devaluation, a degradation that they encounter in others' responses such that, facing negative evaluations, they cannot accede to valued forms, cannot access economically viable, nor personally worthwhile relations and positions, as one person put it, “We are deactivated people, somebody's fuckin' switched us off, mate, meks me fuckin' sick”. The deactivation arises from there being no public realm of realisable, affirming, recognising, projects for such people's intentionality to become articulated in terms of, and, as we will see, this is as true of working class students in departments of social science as it is for unemployed middle-aged men in pit-villages. What is “de-activating” is the cultural realm as it is mediated by educational and institutional processes that mean that working class people, regardless of qualification, can do nothing except accept their economic destinies, expecting at best to become “trades-people” or “office workers”.

The objective insecurity subjectively experienced explains the opacity and prudence in the perception of the future. The feeling of being immobilised in a reality which itself is “stopped” or subject to the perversities of a higher power and the tendency to convert “money” into a universal principle for regulating social life are expressions of that logic of impersonality. On the other hand, the impossibility of avoiding and controlling the personal vicissitudes beyond the sphere of the incidental and the perspective of an “overcast future”, closed around a single point of escape – paid work – reflect and delimit the “pessimistic” nature of the experience of the world and the apprehensive and timorous forms of interpersonal behaviour that are characteristic of these segments of the working classes. To understand the same and to feel the same emerges from being situated, established, in the same world, and sharing the same “interests”, both in the colloquial and

in the political sense. The “fear of the future” means the best one can do is to try to skirt around it lightly, “without taking any risks”, and to focus above all on “today”. The problem is that the economy requires individuals to be able to strategise and invest in the future but current condition preclude the adoption of such a relation to existence: working class kids see no future and are disinvested from existent public forms, all they do is exist in the moment occupied with the purely personal and inter-relational forms of their domesticated public existence vis-à-vis families and college friends that become the end-of-existence and not a means towards other-means.

The “envy”, which arises “from one man having a better car than the other, from one man building a house while the other one doesn’t”, is “the poison” appointed to explain the contamination of a community convulsed by a deep process of social recomposition. These tendencies of social restructuring brought about unwonted situations and symptoms of social inequality and bestowed on “money” a centrality that makes the maintenance of the principles of gratitude and disinterest characteristic of symbolic exchanges infeasible. The acquisition of social visibility, hence, of socially recognised value, depends, namely, on the possession and flaunting of guarantees – socially recognised - that secure “social esteem”. The possibility of accessing these forms of recognition seem to be exclusively conditioned by access to “money”, understood as an omnipotent social force.

The need to guarantee “social honour” fundamentally involves modes of stylising life intermediated by the market and realised through the consumption and acquisition of goods that shape the individual deemed capable of bestowing relevance and confirming dignity – and humanity. The contingency of persevering in the realisation of these modes against an economic background susceptible to the emergence of processes of insecurity, which exacerbate the objective vulnerability of the whole of the working class, and to the development of unforeseen inequalities in the distribution of resources, opens up spaces of marginalisation and deprivation. All these are prone to lead to, simultaneously, the emergence of a heavily individualised vocabulary to explain merit (that sees in the “total failures”, “vices” or personal adversities the reasons for many “misfortunes”) and the generalisation of feelings of injustice. The denouncing – or the refuting of eventual suspicions – of “envies”, resentments and avidity (“greed”), the prudence in relation to personal and other’s “desires” and “ambitions” and the (ridicule of the) suspicion regarding the presumed envy, the “gluttony”, of “happiness” and material possessions, are aspects of a situation in which the cultural autochthony (respect, virility, artistic pride) of the working class seems threatened.

“Envy” is the malevolent emanation of people who “are not happy with themselves and try to ruin other people’s lives to be happy”, who “take pleasure in the misfortunes of others”. Although the feeling that life is continually exposed to harmful forces is palpable and the fear of falling under such a negative influence is real, in reality, it is extremely difficult to attribute directly responsibility for the malicious deed to someone and practically impossible to accurately determine the motives and means employed, given that these are generally kept secret. The “distrust”, the “demotivation”, the “saturation” are mutually related to the threats and problems that oppress the working class and the emptying of “trust” and “sincerity” which made the “confidences”, the “friendship” and the “complicity” between colleagues possible. This situation helps worsen that experience of “spiritual insecurity” related to material dimensions of everyday insecurity, such as social precariousness, the fragility of capitals, violence and oppression, disease. “Envy”, “bad luck”, “evil-eye” are ways of interpreting and attempts at manoeuvring the invisible forces that act on the lives of these social

agents and that, interiorised by them, are transfigured into those feelings of “life going backwards” or of being continually exposed to threats. A context marked by the progressive obsolescence of the forms of autochthonous enhancement, by the frequent impossibility of accessing alternative forms of public acknowledgement and by economic instability, makes the feeling of inferiority that looms even over the smallest possessions plausible.

The work of interpreting “misfortunes” such as unemployment or the “bad debts” becomes harder; therefore, people begin to suspect the spread of “wickedness” that incubates “out of sight”. They suspect that intrigue (“[people] really like to talk behind other peoples’ backs”) and the “evil eye” are directed, mainly, at those who “are doing well in life”. Efforts associated with the logic of social distinction, like that guaranteed by “conspicuous consumption” afforded and demanded by the social ascent of certain strata of the working classes, fundamentally by resorting to credit, are held as evidence of “vanity”. Therefore, they lend themselves to interests that deny the principles of austerity and equality, fuelling the suspicion that they are benefits acquired secretly.

This “mode of comprehension” that points to the presence of invisible dynamics and anonymous forces in the development of the “sense of spiritual injustice” constitutes a “structure of plausibility” that holds up the coherence possible in a situation of “spiritual insecurity” and “epistemic anxiety” (cf. Ashforth 2005). The vulnerability, marginalisation or even bankruptcy of the ways of life and the principles for interpreting and acting on social reality correspond to a loss of common sense. Acute social transformations bring about precisely the modification of the altered sense of reality, of self-knowledge and of cultural justifications of the social order.

A change in the conditions that sustain “reality” itself risks compromising the relationship of familiarity with the social world, making it more or less suddenly a strange or unfortunate space. Michel Pialoux, in this context, speaks of “existential disquietude” (1996, p. 114). The recognition bestowed by reality on the agent who recognises that reality and the realisation of what he is in the same reality that helped to create him, is threatened. This underlying divergence between two stories shows how the effects of the technological and economic change in the factory and of the global processes of social insecurity of the working class condition can constitute a deeper and more personal experience for manual workers.

The schemes of perception and appreciation incarnated as a sense of evidence break off from reality. A reality that seems to resist henceforth to the workers’ forms of appropriation and hostile to the practices of shared sociability. “You don’t even know where to put your feet”, “you find [the world] strange”. Even in the most common acts and words, it is the tacit discernment of reality that yields. It is the dominant meanings and practices that mould the substance of daily experiences, that is, “our expectations, meanings and lived practices which are part of and form our sense of social relations and reality” (Ong 1987: p. 3). Although assuming different modalities and consequences according to the sectors that internally make up the working class, especially the change in the materiality of cultural practices and of the socialised space (heavily supported by a bureaucratic redefinition of the “profiles” and the “participation” of workers), it means a change in the lived space. The relations of domination and subordination thus emerge transfigured as an (in)capacity to adapt or chronic and ingenerate resistance to “change”, especially by those workers who are more “tied” to and “rooted” in the “ways of working of the past”.

The transformation of the mutual implication between the incorporated history and the objectified history, which through repetition and routine defines the tacit and unquestioned relationship with reality, upsets the fluency and naturality of the corporal presence, replacing it with a materiality and solidity that interrupts the conative relationship and the affective resonance in relation to the surrounding world. The feelings of drowning, of “pressure” and “suffocation”, of stupor in the face of the rigidity of reality, of restriction or “burden”, are related to the objectification of the lived body. In this way, the body ceases to confer affective, sensory and cognitive access to the world and appears deprived of the affective and sensorial harmony with reality (“not even food tastes good to me”, “I don’t pay attention to that anymore”, “I don’t care anymore”).

The loss of control over oneself (“he got muddled”, “he got irritated”, “he froze”) and the feeling of estrangement from everyday life (“it’s all topsy-turvy”, “I am always mistrustful”) are correlative of the loss of the affective, pre-reflexive and intersubjective commitment with the present situation. However, it is important to highlight that this “depressive incorporation”, that arises in restrictive, aversive and apparently uncontrollable environments, constitutes not only a “realistic response” in the face of the changes, but also an “adaptive” response in relation to restricted possibilities of creative action, of fulfilling objectives or satisfying desires. The dampening of affection and action, through the consumption of substances that numb or suspend consciousness or through involvement in practices of suspension and escape from everyday life, as well as “learnt abandonment”, replace a social experience of deprivation, discipline and weakness.

The decadent perception, the forms of self-punishment and self-aversion (the guilt, shame, disinterest, blameworthiness), the physical and emotional discomfort and distress (“fed up”, “irritated”, “stressed”, “demotivated”), the generalisation of malevolence, the impulsive physical and verbal aggressiveness in relation to the supposed inducers of the misfortunes and the selfish intentions they nourish, are part of the perception that many workers have of the evolution of the quality of interpersonal relations within factories, homes, cafés and the generality of spaces of working class sociability. The commonplace and tacit forms through which the “crisis” takes shape and its interactionally actualised constitute, still, crucial elements for the understanding of what the working class condition currently represents.

The fear and deception brought on by the difficulty in meeting the requirements made by “ambitions” (“house”, “car”, goods and forms of self-representation), in the meantime naturalised as conditions of condign access to social existence, produce an effect of closing the probable aspirations and futures, at the same time favouring the maintenance of bulimic familiar patterns of mobilization for work. The feelings of physical and psychological distress constitute somatised expressions associated with social contexts marked by growing disparities in the power relationships and with processes that foster social precarity. The feelings of social inferiority and shame and personal self-repression are the result of the multiplication of the opportunities for workers to face institutional spaces of symbolic denial or depreciation of their cultural forms. The adoption of practices that induce numbness and obnubilation of perception and consciousness (so-called “high risk” behaviours, self-medication, consumption of narcotics) are ways of dealing with the “fear of the future” and the “grief of thinking about life”. The perverse feeling of the dissemination of malice and envy throughout the community accompanies the growing insecurity in the maintenance of the forms of recognition accessible to the working classes, such as work or domestic sustainability. These

are all crucial dimensions in the social experiences structured by and that structure the processes of practical, historical and everyday (re)production of the working class.

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Resumo

A precarização económica está relacionada com a instituição da insegurança e a crescente competição que caracterizam a existência contemporânea da classe operária. Entre 2007 e 2008, conduzimos separadamente pesquisas etnográficas em Rebordosa (Portugal) e Rotherham (Reino Unido). Ambos os locais são áreas industriais tradicionais submetidas a uma profunda reestruturação económica e social. São precisamente as mediações pessoais desta “crise” que pretendemos explorar. Ao mesmo tempo, procuramos reflectir sobre os problemas metodológicos levantados quando procuramos captar os aspectos aparentemente inefáveis de um modo de existência essencialmente prático.

Palavras-chave: Classe operária; etnografia; incorporação; senso prático.

Submetido para avaliação em Setembro de 2010.

Aprovado para publicação em Novembro de 2010.

Versão final entregue em Dezembro de 2010.