

“The Continuous Restart”: Case Study on Young Adults in Societies in Fast Transition

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All historic experience confirm that people may not attain the possible if they don't attempt from time to time to reach for the impossible (Max Weber)

Abstract: In this paper we reflect upon the role of young adults in local development processes in social contexts characterised by strong transition trends. The analysis of two sequentially different generations gives us important elements to arrive at some conclusions about social change, according to the theoretical framework we use.

Funerals and revolutions

Dr. Bernal says that the origin and development of Social Sciences started as one form of analysis of the processes of social change, in societies or micro societies. In a society in fast and continuous transition the research into social change is therefore fundamental. In our case, we have sought out a model built on local development processes that allows us to research and explain social change. The theoretical framework of this model has its root on two authors and two concepts indirectly connected with social change: the funeral rituals in Java solidly described by Clifford Geertz, and the revolutionary processes performed by Eric Hobsbawm. Geertz researched the funeral rituals in Java between 1952-54. He proposes a form of analysis that discriminates logico-meaningful integration from causal-functional integration, sustaining that cultural structure and social structure are not mere reflections of one another. “In most societies, where change is a characteristic rather than an abnormal occurrence, we shall expect to find more or less radical discontinuities between the two [social and cultural aspects]. I would argue that it is in these very discontinuities that we shall find some of the primary driving forces in change” (1973, p. 144). The funeral rituals he analysed were but incongruities between the cultural framework and the patterning of social interaction that can be explained in depth only by a dynamic theory – which considers the divergences between the need to find significance and to maintain a functioning social organism.

Hobsbawm, who has studied modern age revolutions, defends the concept that revolution is a process of change that supposes mobilisation of mass population together with social-economic and political transformation in society's affairs. Although Hobsbawm distinguishes between structure and situation, he states that revolutionary processes are a mixture of structure and situation. Structural factors, the ones that gave sense and triggered revolution can be surmounted by the specific situation in which the action and its circumstances take place. So “structure and situation operate and decide action and decision's limits, but it is situation that basically determines action's possibilities” (1990, p. 30). According to the author, revolution is a period of unpredictable and uncontrollable convulsions that can make results uncertain. In this sense, at the beginning of a revolutionary process, the forces and the power present in the stage can face unpredictable developments – but this also leads us to consider the hard task of identifying the end of a revolutionary process. In fact, this is the last element of Hobsbawm's work we want to emphasise: revolution can be considered as finished when a new administration in public affairs is built, and when people find a new common frame of life, after a period of experimentation, hesitations and changing directions. Definitively, the essence of revolution is social change in societies; it is to replace the old for the new in an insecure social frame that it's less predictable.

Social Context and Methodology

Our research was done in the mountainous rural area (200 Km²) of southern Portugal

called Cachopo. Some quantitative data that helps to understand the territory are (INE, Infoline): the negative population growth since the 60's (in the last two decades, 27 and 29%); the low population density ((5 residents per Km²); extremely high ageing index (400%) and dependency indexes; high illiteracy rates (38%); high percentage of population with only four years of formal schooling (48%). Economical activity and unemployment are a problem when we consider women. In fact, of the 10% of women who have a declared economic activity, 27% are unemployed. We could add to this scenario the strong isolation of the population (25%), the lack of basic health structures, or the lack of roads to the majority of homes. This along with the geographical isolation configures a strong social isolation that is felt mostly among children, women and old people. Other qualitative characteristics could be important. This was a population which lived on a subsistence form of agriculture both in a direct and indirect way: it was not only a great majority of people that lived off the land, as there were a number of traditional professions whose products were needed for agriculture. When demands of mechanisation and modernisation were one way out on the path of social evolution, it was rural life itself that became obsolete. Bankruptcy and decay were undeniable facts, social disintegration too with all its common symptoms – migration, ageing, and the rapid draining of the human resources that otherwise would be the credit of future generations. To conclude, this is a population that remained quietly in tradition, confusingly witnessing its increasing difficulties in reproducing traditional economic and social patterns. But when life itself is affected in this way, it gives rise to a cultural problem that could be more permanent and difficult to solve. Self-confidence, believing that change is possible, believing that the territory has a future, are all undermined. Therefore everybody chooses as first priority a very simple thing: to raise the formal educational level of their children – and then strongly advise them that the future is only possible if they escape their condemned community. This stagnated scenario could not be maintained forever. In the last few decades macro-social evolutions, characterised by increased flows of information and communication, by the full impact of globalisation, transformed this type of deprived communities – very common in Southern Europe – into something very ambiguous. Incapable of stopping fast transitional trends, local social fabric accommodates now a confused mixture of norms and values. Traditional roles and principles are still functioning while, at the same time, modern norms and values open the way to severe conflicts which, to put it in a nutshell, could be seen as the tensions between tradition and modernity. But above all this, local problems are persistent, and it seems hard to stop consequences such as desertification or the rapidly ageing of the population. Researchers, community educators, social workers and alike, especially those concerned with local development, often state that young adults are the solution to the problem. Their discourse says that to stop the draining of local human resources we should create specific processes designed for them. If new generations stay instead of leaving there would be a hope. Consequently, young adults were the target of a series of local development actions, hoping that the renewal of such deprived communities would take root.

All these motives lead us to think that our research is an important one. The main research problem was to understand, as fully as possible, the local development processes that took place in Cachopo, in the period 1985-2002. Regarding young adults – our focus in this paper –research questions follow: did local development projects for young adults contribute to stopping the migration of the population? Did such projects contribute to any social changes that overcome the temporal term of one generation? Of course, any possible answers to the second question imply that we analyse two sequential generations. Our research is a multiple case study (Yin, 1993) designed to understand the process (Merriam, 1998). In it we analysed five different

experiences in their multiple relations, unified in the local development history of this particular territory. First, the creation of an Infant Animation Centre and a community association that emerged during the process to manage it. Second and third, the creation of two productive micro-enterprises, as a result of original training programmes designed to promote self-employment. Fourth, the emergence of a local cultural association, whose central social actors were former beneficiaries of local development actions. Fifth, a religious association started by a young couple embodying missionary principles, who built a centre to support the oldest and other important structures (like a library or a voluntary service to help youngsters in their school tasks). Data collection was made over one and a half years using non-participating observation registered in a reflexive field diary; document analyses; in-depth and semi-structured interviews. Analysis was done through codification in categories and sub-categories, followed by a fragmentation that gathered the specific categories of all interviews. Later on, fragmentation was conveying poor results, as we sensed that the holistic vision of the case was being lost. Consequently, we returned to more natural forms of interpretation. Main references in methodological issues were Bogdan and Biklen (1991), Denzin and Lincoln (1998), or Taylor and Bogdan (1998).

Comings and Goings between two Generations

In 1985, a team called Radial (Rede de Apoio ao Desenvolvimento Integrado do Algarve¹) began to work with informal groups of persons in Cachopo, after the approval of a project that was supported by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, which included three lines of work: support for infant education; capacitating local informal groups; and social-economic intervention. From 1989 on, the Radial team created a civic association called In Loco that followed the work being done in the Radial phase. The main characteristics of the methodology used by Radial agreed with some important points of the local development we believe in. Community problems were taken as a departure point for action (Rezsöházy, 1988). Radial mobilised informal groups interested in solving local problems, but stressing from the beginning that they were partners, and that local participation was crucial. In that sense, Radial was there to trigger the action, but soon persons would have to take responsibility for all the projects, thus promoting local control over the process and decision-making and increasing autonomy. The collective was the main unit of work, and as collectives people underwent educational processes (Ander-Egg, 1982) towards change, a fundamental characteristic in local development (Silva, 1990). The general aim of the launched projects was to improve the quality of people's life, and the processes should strengthen the capacity, organisation and self-confidence of people. In local development a lot is spoken about its endogenous character, taken as the capacity for inner strive towards change (Vachon, 2000), even if, in deprived communities such as Cachopo, in the understandable absence of inner spontaneous dynamics external triggering is often paradoxically required (Melo, 1988). Consequently, we think that in such cases local development can restore the lost endogenous capacity for action (Fragoso, 2003).

The initial actions of Radial were targeted at young adults. Radial joined young adults to create the infant centre; it was necessary to create an in-service action-research training programme for the candidates, which lasted for three and a half years. They joined young adults further to form a group (soon legalised as an association) who took care of the project of constructing a brand new centre, and managing it. They joined young women to enter two different professional training programmes, aiming at the creation of small production units, where women could be the owners of their own business. Radial's hopes were that these actions would create jobs, and stop the constant migration of young adults, looking for employment and

life somewhere far away. We also need to stress that precisely when In Loco ceased its physical presence in Cachopo, in 1991, an association was created by external elements connected with the Catholic Church (but who came to Cachopo to integrate into the community). This conveyed a new impetus to local processes, because the Day Care Centre alone employed a significant number of young women, not to mention other types of projects. It is very important to say that local educators working at the infant centre were trained to promote, at all times, the encounter between children and their own cultural elements. This means, for instance, that child worked yearly local themes (the cork, local medicines, oral tradition, etc.) and that the treated information was given back to people in a variety of forms. Educators were able to keep in touch with children when they grew up, and created groups of children from 10-16 years who still get together in the centre (and use some resources, like computers and the internet). In the year 1995, some former beneficiaries of local development processes (especially, from a weavers' workshop) created a new cultural association. In it, some older elements gathered significant numbers of young adults. They created a group to sing traditional songs; another to perform local dances, a third one to form a small guitar school, and so on. Every year this association performs a great number of cultural activities that specially integrate young adults. Summarising, the first generation of young adults, the ones who started working with Radial and later on made their own way, were capable of profoundly changing their lives and further to promote some changes in the territory and its people (we have no room to fully describe changes that occurred). It is certain that new protagonists arose, and there was local power re-distribution. Some women made wonderful progress. They were able to change the local significance of gender roles over the years. Their *conscientization* processes went as far as understanding the importance of political action. In fact, two of these women were candidates for local administration (integrated in different political parties). A significant number of jobs were created, and some former young adults stayed. Regarding the second generation of adults, the departure point of their cultural scenario was very different. They had chances to look at their own culture, not as something without any kind of value in modern life, but as something that it's a part of their positive identity. This change was made possible first by the philosophy of the infant animation centre, and second by the cultural environment built by the cultural association.

Today the majority of young adults don't wish to leave. Some are still forced to do so, because in the meantime educational levels have risen substantially, revealing a perverse cycle that is very common in Southern Europe. That is, the higher the education level of young adults in deprived communities, the lower the chances for them to stay. And so these communities are dispossessed of the best they have. We know that employment and housing are indeed key elements for preventing young adults' migration. Housing is a problem that can be solved politically. But in fact cultural changes are unpredictable and we detected a new problem. In the past it was possible to propose employment creation projects for young adults that produced low-income professions. The weaver's workshop, working at the day care centre, or other types of jobs formerly created belonged to this category. But nowadays, no young adults are seduced by such offers. There were several attempts to place young adults working for a period of time within the created structures, but they all abandoned sooner or later. On the one hand, this means that the projects initiated 17 years ago will fatally die with generation turnover. On the other hand, it is clear that the solutions of the past have no application to the present generation of young adults.

Conclusions

We can conclude first that the processes that cause mass exodus of the population can

only partially be stopped by local development. The notions of market, the prominence of the urban over (the) rural life, the absolute mobility of capital and production structures, all of these are factors that influence life in small deprived communities. Local development can trigger important changes – but it cannot radically change society evolution.

Second, we can use Hobsbawm ideas to further analyse our case at the local level. The processes that occurred in Cachopo triggered very significant social changes. But indeed situation proves to be determinant. In other words, the first generation of young adults has accomplished so much, that we would predict that the patterning of change could be kept over time. But generation turnover transforms situation, which presents limitations to the possibilities of action. Also we think that local development processes were the engines of several social changes, but there is no way to predict the particular directions that these changes would take. So the new is in fact insecure and unpredictable, a characteristic that frequently enervates community educators or other field agents.

Third, Geertz framework is also very useful to explain our case. It is a matter of considering separately, and yet within their connections, social change patterning and cultural changes. Basically we can identify a clear discontinuity between the two, which explains the present situation. On the one hand, Cachopo had achieved a patterning of social change that, in theory, could open doors towards more organic changes, thus improving social life. For instance, it is a fact that the population has today a clear conscience that change is possible, and a new social dynamic expresses itself in the number of projects submitted to European programmes such as Leader, or other regional programmes. But young adults today are untouched by these social changes... simply because cultural and educational changes have led them to aim for something else, and again they have to seek their lives objectives outside their territory. This discontinuity explains why after these 17 years, young adults still are forced to leave.

Fourth, it is not strange that only a few changes did overcome the temporal term of one generation. Material structures can only endure if they are used; local protagonists and new balances of power can fade away. Cultural identity changes, which were triggered by the first generation, profited and embodied by the second, can make a difference. But at the same time, young adult's today still have no minimum conditions to participate in the social life of their territory, even if they want to. Despite the fact that the processes of local development in Cachopo reached an interesting level of social change, any further qualitative changes would seem to require the beginning of a brand new cycle of action, almost as if it was needed to begin from scratch. In our opinion, this effect, which we will call the *Continuous Restart*, is very likely to happen in societies in fast transition that presents strong differences between cultural systems of two sequential generations. In other words, recovering profound delays in a fast changing global society promotes the lack of continuous solutions that would build bridges from tradition to modernity.

Finally we don't want to state that *The Continuous Restart* is an universal element in modern societies. Far from it, but we have found similar situations in other researches. Last year, in San Francisco, we presented a paper (Lucio-Villegas and Frago, 2003) where the focus of the case was young adult's situation in Southern Spain. We had found a situation we called *The Perverse Circle*. It describes the following: young adults abandon school at the end of (the) compulsory education (16 years old) or before, to work in intensive agriculture and tourism. This situation is kept up for a period of up to six or eight years, after which they usually apply to local professional training programmes. This situation increases the spectrum of uncertainties that young adults experience regarding their futures, and constrains their personal development. On

the other hand, we don't know how many young adults do not escape the perverse circle. But the fact is that in our investigations both in Portugal and Spain, in communities characterised by processes of rapid social change, either we consider them in their micro or macro dimensions, it is very likely that morbid symptoms do appear. These symptoms are usually the mirror of ambiguous situations, of the social mixtures that lie in the grey areas between tradition and modernity. In this specific case, we think *The Continuous Restart* is a similar morbid symptom of social change processes.

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