

Praxis, resistance, and health as seen in social and oral histories

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to consider the role that oral history can play in recovering the processes that the working class has used to further develop work carried on within the context of a Marxist sociology based on class consciousness.

The result is the possibility of a narration that can be separated from oral histories and which allows for events, vital experiences, memories, ways of developing, and differing lifestyles. This type of oral history permits us to take the first – and foundational – step in developing a class consciousness that would be centered precisely in what some have called the sphere of private life while others simply refer to it as daily life. Such a narration that can be separated from oral histories, where events, vital experiences, memories, lifestyles, means of living, allowing us to unearth that first and functional step in developing a class consciousness, that is to be aware of one's self. This is a work still in the process of developing. In other words, we can place it in the world of daily praxis, of common sense, of utility; of that which is not explained to us, but which places us in our living conditions, and then places us within the world. Finally, it incorporates health and disease in the processes previously mentioned in the elaboration of class status.

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What we, in particular, want to do, is to go beyond a simplistic, immediate understanding and to develop a subjectivity which recognizes the need to develop a different type of subjectivity as well as to learn how to develop alternate and alternative forms of consciousness.

How do such alternative understandings develop within the contradictions of a capitalist social structure? How can we create a praxis of resistance, open, collective, and organized to go beyond current hegemonic practices? This challenge considers work in terms that are hegemonic and alienating. Alternative understandings would go beyond seeing work as a simple activity involving manipulation in function of the reproduction of capital. In the words of Georges Navel: “There is a sadness of the working class which can only be cured by political participation.”

Introduction

We begin with the consideration that work is central to development of the human experience. (1,2) This, then, leads us to a philosophical consideration: The category we call work involves a wide set of issues that go beyond those objects that are simple and can be transformed by following instructions. On the other hand, a specific activity, can be considered as essential, if it involves a unity between conception and execution.

What this proposal offers is an alternative form of resistance to the existing manifestations of capitalism. The current capitalist model has sentenced the working class to be part of an alienated human group. These characteristics go hand in hand with and serve to reduce labor to a simple activity where workers' function is to reproduce capital. This assumes a form of resistance that is quiet and silent.

This form alienation is intrinsic to the capitalist model. It exists to increase capital and leaves a large part of the working class condemned to sickness and death due to avoidable illnesses. The malaise that reigns in these types of work environments eats away at the workers' sense of self. As expressed by Georges Navel: "There is a sadness of the workers that is only cured by political participation." (3, p. 247).

The purpose of this essay is to increase our understanding of how these structures were created and how they manifest themselves in daily life - for example in emotions - and in the health/disease process. In contrast, we look for a different model, an alternative to the vulnerability that is just one form in which people manifest their resistance to domination, i.e., in one way, people 'hide' their resistance.

Oral and social histories allow us access to those participating in social struggles. These participants know - based on their memory - how their subjectivity has created a setting fit for the capitalist form of production, a form that transmits the ideas of the dominant. And so, we can learn how these people are creating a new subjectivity that helps us see how people have come to better understand their struggle. Individuals are creating a new subjectivity by means of a more open resistance and this allows for exploration and experimentation in a historical context set by the state. The new subjectivity, one of resistance, is frank and open; it explores and experiments in the set historical context previously created by the State which is characterized by a hidden resistance that questions the established work order as it is innate to human beings.

Hidden resistance and the massive occurrence of disease

After the reflections expressed above and observing the current work environments, we realize the difficulty of finding in capitalist canons a unity between conception and execution. On the contrary, it is more likely that capitalist tasks separate workers to increase productivity dramatically. Tasks are usually routine, repetitive, and extremely biased, in such a way that the activity of the workers constitutes a simple manipulation of the object in a tiny part of the work process, lasting only a few seconds, repeated hundreds or thousands of times in the working day,

without the possibility of integrating a concept of the task performed by him or her.

This way of obtaining the greatest possible surplus value involves not only depriving the worker of his product, but also the stripping of his being, that is, the possibility of capturing and developing his/her human qualities. Jobs then become alienating jobs. A simple manipulation of the object to be transformed is dictated from the outside, without considering the know-how of the worker, as we read in Robert Linhart, *About chains and men* (4, p. 188-190)

The objective of capitalist management is reduced to seeking the greatest amount of surplus value through the exploitation of the work of others, the work of a large number of human beings who are faced in their day-to-day life with the dispossession and contempt of their capacities and abilities, and that prevents them from developing their human condition.¹

The alienation present at work leads much of the working class to fall ill and die; the prevailing discomfort in this type of work takes over the being imperceptibly. In this regard, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez points out, following Marx, in his famous *Philosophical Economic Manuscripts* (5), that such is the discomfort experienced by workers in the contaminated factory environment and such the waste of their talents, abilities, capacities, that the worker flees from that place like the plague and tries to take refuge in the field of mere physical reproduction (6); that it is not conducive to developing the workers human potential, so they do not find the place to express their being human. Where, then, will they be able to face their humanity if the job does not allow it. Let us retrieve here what Sánchez Vázquez highlights (6, p. 91, 93):

¹ "If the intellectual powers of production expand their scale on one side, it happens because on many other sides they vanish. What the partial workers lose is concentrated, compared to them in capital (...) It is consumed in the great industry, which separates science, as an autonomous productive power, from work and compels it to serve capital." (10: 439-440). For his part, Taylor maintains the following: "It is only through the forced 'standardization' of the procedures, the forced adoption of the best instruments and the best working conditions, and the collaboration also required as can be get this job faster. And the obligation to enforce the rules and to achieve this collaboration rests solely with the management" (11, 77).

The idea of alienation of work clearly presupposes that work with respect to the worker is part of his essence (of his human essence, or of the essence of the worker as a human being). If work is (or is part of) the essence of man, alienated work is external to that essence. Here, objective, and subjective aspects are combined. Work that denies the worker as a man, mortifies his body, and ruins his spirit --this is objective. But Marx also underlines the worker's attitude towards his work: he does not feel good, but rather unhappy and he only feels outside of work, when he feels outside of himself at work. It is not an emotional attitude, but a purely subjective one that derives from factors that accompany this activity, i.e., fatigue, tiredness, disgust for a certain type of work, etc. Work not only mortifies one's body but ruins us as a human being by limiting our physical and spiritual development. Therefore, Marx adds that the worker only feels whole outside of work, and in work he feels an outsider.

The worker, certainly, not only works. He has an existence outside of the workplace in which he eats, drinks, procreates, and dresses, preens and dwells under a roof. These are also -Marx warns us- human functions, but separated from all the rest of human activity, turned into ultimate and exclusive ends, are animal functions.

Now, as only in these animal functions does the worker feel like a free being, this tremendous investment results: when he works, that is, when he exercises an essentially human function, he sees his human side denied and his animal side affirmed. Therefore, the human is animalized. On the other hand, when he does not work, that is, when he exercises his animal functions, he feels free. That is to say: his human side is affirmed; thus, the animal is humanized. Or as the young Marx said lapidary, expressing this investment: The animal is exchanged in the human and the human in the animal.

This said, exploitation and domination are not accepted without resistance. On the contrary, resistance is present wherever we see exploitation, domination, and alienation of humans. This is how Edur Velasco (7, p.140-141) explains matters:

(...) We must put aside the perspective that contemplates changes in the work process as an inevitable consequence of the valorization process, which is imposed on the

will of direct producers. The collective worker is a living body, endowed with will and a complex knowledge of the production process capable of executing his options on the factory floor on all fronts, be it political, economic, and/or ideological. The workers maintain a margin of autonomy to accept certain commitments, as well as, otherwise, to carry out an underground but implacable struggle (...).

The fundamental question is to identify the different ways in which resistance is carried out by dominated and exploited workers robbed from their humanity, in addition to being dispossessed by the private appropriation of the objects produced collectively.

One of those forms of resistance is expressed in a silent/silenced way; This is the way of coping with domination, the way of accepting exploitation/theft, not only of the products of their work, but of their human condition. In this silence, a very particular situation occurs, namely a constant discomfort appears, that is expressed as chronic stress. This continuous, prolonged situation, in which the contained emotions are implicit, sooner or later will give way to the so-called chronic-degenerative diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, ischemic heart disease and cancer, among other. These are conditions that currently affect workers massively. According to this statement and with numerous evidences, we can maintain that prolonged stress is the bridge that connects the social and the biological; In this process, the connection between a social situation, the exploitation of workers and a biological, physiological response to this condition shows itself.

The silent way of resisting may imply the perpetuation of the conflict within the person, within that person who is going to find himself divided between accepting or rejecting domination, and therefore, in constant conflict. On the one hand, the intention to confront, to fight openly against the imposed domination/ exploitation that generates the discomfort is withheld, then the situation that gave rise to the discomfort is perpetuated by not opposing it. This releases the mechanisms or processes of the organic response, which can also trigger a vicious circle, a constant alteration of the metabolic and functional processes.

Stress is the mediating element between social processes, such as the work process and the health-disease process. Social processes are expressed in the body in many ways. If we manage to identify the circumstances that give rise to prolonged stress, it would be possible to know the framework through which the social, mental, emotional, and biological factors interact in the body of people.

When people experience situations in the daily passing of everyday life, their organic structures respond to these experiences. A problematic situation that is lived chronically, as for example, an increasingly precarious and insecure working condition in which individuals do not find a way out or a solution, this causes permanent responses in the body. Therefore, prolonged stress situations cause the subject to become ill (8).

To understand what happens in people's consciousness and contribute to the knowledge of the health-disease process, in which the economic, the social and the emotional converge, it is necessary to deepen the study of the ways in which the contradiction is expressed between accepting dominant ideas and resisting them. In this work, we want to emphasize the importance of considering the different ways of assuming domination or resistance in the repercussion of the health-disease process mediated by subjectivity. We understand that subjectivity is elaborated in the interrelation with others in society, in the various social processes in which the subject interacts.

Open resistance... active, collective, organized

In our proposal, the alternative we seek is to rescue the testimonies of human beings who resist in a different way, that is, openly, collectively, in an organized way. It is essential to find out how subjectivity in those who openly resist develops in each historical context of exploitation that controls, dominates and represses ideas of creativity, initiative, and struggle in an effort to improve working conditions for a better world. We need to find out how, despite this, despite having everything against them, these individuals resist openly.

It is possible to affirm that this, the open resistance, is mediated by reflection, by a questioning that gives rise to concrete actions and to organizing groups that follow a path similar to the one that implies the recovery of the human condition in work. This it is the route that can lead

to avoiding ill-health, since, as we already mentioned: "There is a worker sadness that only political participation can cure" (3: 247).

In other words, it is about rescuing the life stories of workers who face alienating work and decide to stop stoically supporting exploitation. On the contrary, it is about fighting against it, organizing social, political movements that create real alternatives.

It is a question here of trying to know if the political praxis² allows them to recover their being as humans, because reflection in this area, contributes ideas, imagination, and creativity. The individual can come up with a path of recovery of health.

Oral history, linked to social history, is essential in order to carry out what we propose, to approach the subjectivity of people, the way in which they come up with alternative ideas to those imposed by the ruling class through the State institutions. That subjectivity arises in the interrelation with the others, in the social spaces of coexistence and exchange of ideas. That subjectivity we consider social, because there is no subjectivity that is not; that is to say, without the concurrence of others, the subjects cannot acquire a subjectivity or an identity.

It is surely not easy and perhaps it is impossible to call subjectivity to account, since it is about knowing the feeling of human beings through their own experiences, their memories, ways of walking, ways of being in life, expressed in their very particular way of bringing them to the present moment through their conversations. Obtaining the meanings that human beings elaborate from the facts of their own life, from their daily life, and from the extraordinary events that have succeeded in driving them to follow alternative paths when imposed by power, requires allowing them to speak without impeding the free flow of their knowledge, thus understanding their experiences.

We want to interpret the gaze of people who are openly resisting and thus developing a collective consciousness condensed in the heat of resistance. Mina Navarro, mentions that in relation to the testimony of a person who fights in defense

² With respect to political praxis and its difference from mere political practicality, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez (12, p. 35) has pointed out relevant events.

of their territory, "memory appears as one of the most powerful sources in the shaping" of the collective conscience (9: 130).

I invite you to join this noble struggle, knowledge which arose in the hope of resurrecting the knowledge of our ancestors. The Spaniards stole our gold: in exchange for little mirrors, we gave away our riches; now, after so many years, the only wealth we have left is water and land, nature. That for us means everything, encompasses a series of feelings that for us are invaluable.

It is necessary to know how class consciousness is developing in the process of resistance, in the struggles of civil society. It should not be forgotten that these struggles, this movement are real and are there.

... during a phase of capitalist accumulation in which violence and strategies of domination have intensified more and more, where the criminalization of protest, repression, militarization, and counterinsurgency against social movements stands out (9:135).

For this reason, the practice of oral history is essential if we intend to know matters as intimate as the political militancy of human beings, to know how this has permeated their lives and how their view of the situations they face from the new vision, and if such political participation allows them to regain their being as humans.

We need to know how subjects manage to realize that they must follow the path trodden and imposed by the ruling class, to seek security in life, to keep a job, and that, despite the dictates of others, something is hidden behind the apparent success of having a secure work, a low-paid employment, which hinders human development.

Perhaps it will be difficult, if not impossible, to overcome the discomfort present in workers' daily lives, the product of a commercial labor activity that leads them to lose their being as humans, that is why we ask ourselves what it is that makes it possible for others to discover the difference and find alternative ways of recovery for the human condition.

In conversations with people who have begun to develop a political praxis we find some glimpses of that understanding, we glimpse that their praxis has allowed them to achieve something close to happiness.

When humans feel happy, their brain releases many endorphins, known as happiness hormones. We wonder if that is precisely what manages to keep people who are recovering their condition as human, healthier or with a greater possibility of walking towards health. And if this is precisely what the capitalist class is trying to prevent for most of the population, then, what are we as researchers to do? Share these small or great discoveries that we are achieving from our look into the path of social oral history?

Transition from alienated work to political participation and health

Chayo³ is a 37-year-old young worker from a sewing cooperative, originally from the state of Veracruz, who emigrated to Mexico City 8 years ago. She started in the cooperative in packaging and a few weeks later she was promoted to production manager. As she defines herself, she likes to learn things from the beginning of all processes. When getting the job, she did not mention that she had completed a career in process development technology, since she likes to know everything related to work processes from below.

Chayo told us about her willingness for knowledge and how, at first, when talking to her about politics, she refused to participate. However, once she crossed the limit, she got a strong interest concluding that political processes are everywhere. She also told us that she liked to participate politically because she learned. She also shared her knowledge with others and that caused her a sensation of well-being.

Conclusions

In the approaches using oral history with a worker who participates politically in the collective organization around a sewing cooperative, we were able to witness something of what we anticipated in this essay. On the one hand, she has made us part of the disappointment that realizing how despite working tirelessly and being willing to work hours and even without days off, without putting up any resistance, the company did not take into account their efforts. They did not increase her salary and, furthermore, she was not able to look at herself as a human being and respect her emotional needs. Consequently, they

³ Chayo is the pseudonym of our interviewee.

deny her a permit that she considered fair, because when the company required it, she was always willing to sacrifice her time with the best of attitudes. Chayo highlights the lack of humanity on the part of their employers in private companies.

Later, she can learn about a different project, one that barely manages to sustain itself; given that despite the great effort they make, it is difficult for them. It cannot be ignored that the capitalist mode of production imposes its rules and finally the cooperative cannot escape the prevailing market logic.

In this project, Chayo finds the answer to what she has been looking for and learning more; for this reason, she also decides to venture into political participation, because in addition to observing in those who lead the project the congruence between what is proposed and what the facts are, her own political participation gives her the possibility to continue with her development. She tells us: "there is much to learn" and she finds happiness in it and in sharing.

In her words, she shows us what authors such as Marx, Engels, Karel Kosik, among others, have shared with us through their writings and political life. Chayo gives us the understanding of how important it is for a human being to develop. It tells us, for example, that being the line manager in the capitalist company, she only had one process in charge of and instead the quality control manager had different processes under her. But for her, a better deal was not within her reach at that moment.

On the contrary, in the cooperative project, she had the opportunity to develop politically. From two years to date she lives a different reality. Her words translate joy; We can reflect that, in this constant development, endorphins are released and possibly on that path, we will move towards health.

You are here and you learn everything you can, everything, because you take the knowledge and you can replicate it. You can help someone else. No? So, yes, it is a lot of emotion, joy and, yes, I really like it ⁴.

⁴ In the pursuit of political praxis rather than political practicality, one of the first tasks may be that of the historical recovery of the so-called workers' knowledge. That is, overcoming the conception-execution dichotomy of intellectual and manual work. In search of

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the abolition of alienated work and its transformation into art.