

The new global cycle of protest and the Portuguese case

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the recent cycle of collective action across countries and continents over the past few years. It seems to be evident that in the outset of 2011 began a new wave of global protests made of contagion and communication that spread in different contexts. Our argument is that, unlike other cycles marked by post-materialistic values, changes in labour and material issues have gained a new centrality. The labour and social basis of these mobilizations are particularly evident, though not exclusive, linking up with disaffection towards political institutions and a crisis of legitimacy of elites in power. We will take the example of the demonstration of 12th March in Portugal as an expression of some of the features in this emerging type of mobilization, where youth plays a leading role. It is from the empirical information concerning this public protest that we will build our analysis, identifying in the Portuguese reality parallels with the international context but also national peculiarities, dynamics of continuity and rupture in relation to the historical past.

KEYWORDS

Cycle of protest, labour, social movements, youth, Portugal

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of 2011, the world has witnessed a new wave of rebellions and movements that have affected countries and cultures, including those where any idea of political transformation was unimaginable. The so-called “Arab Spring” astonished the Western world by unleashing a wave of movements that were forged at the heart of repressive Islamic regimes. The unleashed force of these movements, in many cases gave substance to political revolutions whose outcomes are still unknown but where the desire for liberty and democracy are crucial (Gelvin 2012).

The Arab Spring had a huge coverage in Western countries, apparently catching everyone by surprise. More so given the fact that the wave of indignation was, primarily, to bring down the tyrannical and corrupt governments which had been comfortably in power for decades.

On the 17th of December a young Tunisian vendor immolated himself with fire outside a government building. A few hours after this event, hundreds of young people who suffered the same kind of humiliation, concentrated in protest around the same building. Mohamed Bouazizi's cousin made a video of these protests that became viral on the internet, and in the days that followed, several spontaneous demonstrations flourished all over the country. From a catalyst event, a revolutionary mobilization process took place. How can we explain it, if it seemed that a few months before it would be so improbable?

In a recent book on "social movements in the Internet age," the sociologist Manuel Castells tries to identify the causes that explain the emergence of the revolt in Tunisia, suggesting three fundamental elements: (1) the existence of an unemployed graduate youth, able to lead the revolt bypassing the traditional power and representation structures, (2) a very strong cyberactivism culture, which helped to create a critical public space against the dictatorship, with autonomy regarding state repression, and (3) a high rate of diffusion of Internet use, either in household connections, cybercafes or educational spaces which, combined with the existence of juvenile sectors with high qualifications and no job, made youth a central actor of the revolution (Castells 2012, 28 - 29).

In the Tunisian case, the first of the Arab Spring revolutions, it is not difficult to accept the idea that the existence of an "Internet culture" made up of blogs, social networks and cyber activism, was crucial in the ability to overthrow a dictatorship that seemed immutable. Not because this mobilization process has developed only in the virtual space of the networks, but precisely because, following the Castells's argument: "the connection between free communication on Facebook, Youtube and Twitter and occupation of urban space created a hybrid public space that became a major feature of Tunisian rebellion, foreshadowing the movements to come in other countries" (Castells 2012, 23). Mobile phones and social networks played a key role in disseminating images and messages that were important for mobilization. But the rebellion explodes when it goes from cyberspace to physical space, making those tools a means of expression and communication of the revolt against unemployment, deprivation, inequality, poverty, police brutality, authoritarianism, censorship and corruption. In the Arab world, a new era of revolutionary turmoil and upheaval took place and democratic aspiration has led thousands of people to take their fate into their own hands (Khosrokhavar 2012).

In very different ways, the combination of the degradation of the material life conditions for a significant part of the population, coupled with the legitimacy crisis of political institutions responsible for the management of collective life, serves as the backdrop for this new wave of global protest that had its origin in the Arab countries. Their beginning was symbolically associated with the self-immolation of a young Tunisian in December 2010. But, since then, the protest has spread to different countries around the globe. The Tunisian experience, unlike the experience of Iceland and its *wikiconstitution*ⁱ, were inspiring for mobilizations that followed, because they could have as an outcome a concrete institutional change in governmental power and a transformation that was channelled through the state. These were inspiring because they translated what was deemed as impossible to the concrete possibility of change.

Our hypothesis in this article is that the set of demonstrations that began in Tunisia, and before in Iceland, that led to the Egyptian revolution, but also the mobilizations in Portugal with the "Desperate Generation", in Spain with the Indignados, in Greece with the movement of Squares and in the United States with the Occupy movement, among many others, are not a separate phenomena, albeit some similar features. In fact, it seems to be something deeper. It is not just a sequence of events, but a wave of protest that should be analyzed as a whole, in which different movements, that use the

virtual space of information flows as a primary place of their struggle, banded together, contaminated each other and kept on communication.

2. A new cycle of collective action at global scale

When Sidney Tarrow (1995) proposed the concept of cycle of protest or cycle of collective action, he identified five key elements to explain his concept: an intensification of the conflict, its geographic spread, the triggering of inorganic actions but also the emergence of new organizations, new symbols, ideologies and interpretations of the world, extending, in each cycle of protest, the available repertoire of action. In our understanding, we are experiencing such a process. In either case - from Tunisia to Egypt, from Greece to the United States, passing through Portugal or Spain - the collective action intensified, spread, new forms of action and new organizations emerged, with common references at a global level and dynamics of solidarity that occur on the scale of the nation state, but remain connected internationally in real time by the Internet space. In either example, collective action does not arise spontaneously from the exacerbation of people's difficulties and worsening living conditions, but needed an emotional mobilization that could transform anguish into anger and revolt into enthusiasm. An interesting hypothesis is that this element was precisely boosted by a *cycle effect*, that could generate a contagion effect. In Tunisia, in the government square where protesters converged in the early days of 2011, there were slogans not only in Arabic but also in English and French, revealing a certain internationalist disposition of the protest, which seemed to be aware of the importance of having the international support. In the end of January, the first occupation of the Tahrir Square in the Egyptian capital, protesters were shouting "Tunisia is the solution". In the United States, the first online call that would lead to the Occupy movement, which dates from July 2011, urged the occupation of a square in downtown New York, the heart of financial capitalism, asking "Are you ready for a Tahrir moment?". In European mobilizations, the silenced "Icelandic revolution" functioned as an example of citizen resistance to the attack on the financial sector: "Less Ireland, more Iceland" could be read on banners and posters during the mobilizations in Portugal. In mid-February 2012, concentrations whose motive was "We are all Greeks" took place in more than a dozen countries.

Although social climate and the forms of protest – in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Yemen and Libya – have, in theory, few similarities with the situation in Europe and the Western world, there are many aspects that these movements have in common with those that swept across public squares and cities in the West. Of course each country and each square has its own history and peculiarities. But there are elements that have been observed transversally in different experiences: (1) the fact that they have, above all, been organized by educated young people; (2) the central concern of the protesters with the difficulties in finding employment and social justice; and (3) using the Internet as their main tool for both organization and public condemnations, as well as using satellite communications; (4) the demand for a “real democracy”, rejecting authoritarian regimes but also the capture of the State and of political agents by the interests of financial elites; (5) the distrust of political institutions in general, associated with corruption and self-interest; (6) the transgressive occupation of public spaces; (7) the production of new aesthetic references and the importance of audiovisual culture; (8) the opening to a democratic experimentation and the search for new ways of participation and organization; (9) the use of the logic of open source and multi-directional communication to organize the movement.

The "hybrid public space" (Castells 2012) created during this cycle of protest, that articulated the action in online social networks and the physical occupation of urban public space, gave rise to new levels of action, new forms of mobilization and organization, marked by the networking culture, horizontal communication, collaborative work, avoiding leadership, by the sampling of international references. Operating through social networks and reaching “dissident” social circles that are far beyond the “core groups” that in each context act as organising pivots, these mobilizations were, in most of cases, quite fluid and volatile, that move and circulate, like links in a transmission chain of energy, enablers of socio-political dynamism. And, being so, they set the agenda.

Are these common features enough to enable us to talk about a new kind of social movement? It is probably too early to construct a systematic theory about all these experiences. At the same time, it is our aim, with this article, to try to identify some common features of this cycle of mobilization, to deepen the analysis of the context in which they take place and, taking the Portuguese example, rise some sociological questioning about youth, political and civic participation and social movements.

3. Labour metamorphoses, precariousness and new social movements: the return of materialism

While trade unions and labour fields were in the past closely tied to the working class, social movements of the sixties, despite being heterogeneous, can be readily associated with the middle class. We are aware that this connection with the middle class is not as obvious as it was the working class toward trade union movement in the past. In fact, apart from “class determinism” being a misleading premise, the heterogeneity and the internal fragmentation of both the “middle classes” and “working class” strips away the sense of any cause-effect relation in this respect. What happens is that certain class groups – or if we prefer, some specific social segments – located themselves in the most general framework of the social structure, are to be found in such particular conditions, that they can trigger shared subjectivities and collective attitudes characterised by common concerns, therefore favouring collective action. Besides, cultural environments and socialising contexts are decisive to forge identities or at least shared forms of identification in conditions which give rise to social movements: identity, opposition to a recognised adversary and a common idea (principle of *totality*) in relation to an alternative constitute three of the principles pointed to by Alain Touraine (1981 and 2006) as decisive criteria in defining a social movement (Tilly, 1978 and 1996).

In what became the dominant interpretation paradigm of the new social movements, it was stated that post-materialist values and identity issues would be, since the 1960's and 1970's, the centre of new forms of social mobilization. Analysis about youth collective action emphasized the centrality of post-material issues. However, one of the strongest elements of the current cycle of protest is the return of materialistic concerns, particularly related to labour and employment, that turned out to be the top subjects and the cause of people's indignation and a powerful leaven of collective action.

Facing more urgent and primary needs, struggling against the “austeritarian” abolishing of a large set of labour rights, the aesthetic discourse loose mobilization capacity compared to those needs, but the new cultural identities of the precarious youth seems to be redefined on the grounds of both cultural and economic

dimensions. Labour relations of our time are crossed by precariousness and by a new and growing “precariat” (Standing, 2011) which also gave rise to new social movements and new forms of activism and protest. Thus labour relations and social movements have been pushed toward new ways and new discourses. In fact, the new socio-labour movements are movements of society, of a younger generation (largely of qualified young people connected to the university system) legitimately protesting against the lack of career opportunities, against the lack of jobs, against the irrationalities of nowadays economic austerity policies. The rapprochement between cultural criticism and social criticism is therefore a logical consequence of contemporary voices and forms of protest.

The report on employment trends for youth published in 2011 by the International Labour Organization refers to young people as a "lost generation". With the spread of precarious forms of employment, with youth unemployment rates around 25% in North Africa and 18% in Europe (41.6% in Spain), the spread of poverty wage (where young people appear disproportionately: 23.5%) and young people becoming the majority of long-term unemployed, the ILO notes that the roots of the protests that took place in 2011 in North Africa but also in Spain, England or Greece, must be found in these reality (ILO, 2011: 3-6). Indeed, as pointed out by the same document, young people have been paying the highest price in terms of employment throughout the crisis that has developed since 2008 and this explains why they they "feel discouraged about the future" and even "angry" and "violent" (ibid.: 6). One year later, the same agency pointed the extent of youth unemployment to 75 million, noting that "many young people are trapped" in a type of work that "does not correspond to their aspirations and often does not offer transition opportunities to a more permanent, productive and well paid positions" (ILO, 2012a: 8). Also according to ILO, "between 2008 and 2012, youth unemployment rates in the Eurozone increased by 5.4 percentage points, reaching 22.2 per cent" (ILO, 2012b: 22).

The transformations of the world of work throughout the 20th Century, particularly in Europe, evidence a process of profound social change that calls into question the centrality of labour, and has brought about a new political lexicon: globalization, decentralization, flexibilization (Antunes, 1997; Costa, 2008). The decline of Fordism paved the way for new frameworks and began what would become the most profound reorganisation of labour market since the post-war era: decentralised production, greater specialisation, technological innovation, flexibilization, semi-autonomous

teams (Toyotism), new qualifications, multiplication of contractual forms, sub-contracting, models of lean production, new techniques of production management (just-in-time), total quality management, reengineering, externalization and outsourcing, teamwork, etc. (Hyman, 1994 and 2004; Amin, 1994; Womack, Jones and Roos, 1990; Costa, 2008). It was evident throughout the first decade of the 21st Century that the new forms of labour relations meant an increase in precariousness, whether in Portugal or in Europe: receipts for the self-employed (or better, false receipts), short term contracts, temporary work, part-time work, illegal work in the informal economy, etc., are just a few types among a wider range of new forms of labour relations (Antunes, 2006; Aubenas, 2010).

As Ricardo Antunes has noted, “there has been a decrease in the traditional working class. But, simultaneously, a significant subproletarianization of work has been carried out, resulting from diverse forms of part-time, precarious, informal, subcontracted work, etc. There has taken place, therefore, a significant heterogenization, complexification and fragmentation of work” (Antunes, 1999:209). For some authors, this process of fragmentation and complexification involves a growing legion of people that move between insecure and badly paid jobs (in some countries the immigrant population is an example) who have no idea what job security is, who do not use the title professional to say what they do and who make up the vast world of the “informal economy” in which the word “rights” is put to one side (Standing, 2009: 109-114). “Flexi-workers” or “generation Y” (born after 1980) are but two of the labels to designate a new precarious class which uses a new language – emails, sms, Facebook, etc. – that sometimes makes of them a “cibertariat” (Huws, 2003). If citizenship were defined in terms of occupational rights, then this precarious class would lack citizenship. The precarious worker “does not have a material basis, or the occupational space, to develop leisure and participate politically”. In this sense, the precarious class “does not have freedom because it lacks security” (Standing, 2009: 314).

Of course these changes in work affect the dynamics of engagement and collective action. So, for this purpose, we need to consider the “old” trade union organisations as well as the “new” ones, and to pay attention to the social networks which are emerging worldwide in the struggle for the right to employment and a dignified future. In fact, besides these transformations, work remains at the centre of social conflicts and present day political struggles. The role of work as a decisive space of

social cohesion and as a condition of exercise of citizenship, invites us to think about the ways these new forms of social movements can contribute to revitalising the mechanisms of dialogue of a new social contract that consolidates democracy (Castel 1998; Santos 1998).

In the case of Portugal, the percentage of precarious employment (if we add short-term contracts, the self-employed, temporary workers and part-time work) is now close to 30% of total employment. According to official sources, in 2010 there were 37,6% of workers between the ages of 15- 34 working on fixed-term contracts, whereas if we consider the age group between 15 - 24 years old this percentage is close to 50% (INE, 2010; Carmo, 2010). In the last decade, jobs offering permanent contracts have decreased at the same pace as fixed-term contracts have increased. In December 2011, the percentage of unemployed in Portugal was 13,6%, whilst the average in the Eurozone was 10,4% and in the UE/27 it was 9,9% (Eurostat, 2012). However, unemployment figures force us to emphasize, whether in terms of length or age groups, and it is young people (which are the better qualified) who are particularly affected.

Successive austerity measures deepened this process and were levers of massive social protest. In 2011, the Portuguese public servants had their salaries cut by up to 10% and saw their Christmas subsidy reduced by 50%. Furthermore, for 2012, public sector bonus for Christmas and summer – which have been the result of workers victories for over 30 years– were cut in a half, despite the fact that, in July 2012, the Constitution Court considered those cuts unconstitutional (Costa, 2012). Meanwhile, the State budget law for 2013 revealed an *increase in the tax burden* – “a huge tax increase” in words of the finance minister, So the severe austerity measures that affect public sector workers (including both active and retired workers, with ramifications on the lives of approximately 3 million people) are a clear demonstration of the deficit of social justice in the wage relation and its extension to the private sector is a strong possibility (Reis, 2009: 11; Reis & Rodrigues, 2011). They were in the origin of most protest that happened during 2012.

The argument we would like to stress is that the intensification and expansion of precariousness, the fragmentation of productive processes, and the disregarding of rights and dignity associated with labour relations, intensified by austerity, are creating a new form of struggle which is based around work and the struggles for the recovery of its dignity will affirm a new state of politicisation. This appears to be

happening through new socio-occupational movements that are presently raging across societies on a global level. The excluded, unemployed and segments of skilled youth, and those that turn away from trade union organisations seems to resist and want to struggle again. So, these recent social trends seems to reflect a new interconnection between two sides: the sociocultural side, related to the students and well educated segments; and the labour side, with the new “precariat” filed by those coming from the work field at the costs of the growing flexibility, unemployment and precariousness. Both sectors seem to become more united as they have been demonstrating together along 2011 and 2012 in several countries.

4. The Portuguese case: the example of the 12th of March demonstration.

On January 23, 2011, at the Coliseum of Porto, the Portuguese musical group Deolinda presented at the end of a concert, a new theme (“Parva que Sou” / "How silly I am") that immediately provoked an excited and enthusiastic reaction from the audience. In the days that followed, the video of this song, uploaded on youtube by someone that was in the show, reached tens of thousands of views. It became viral. The song, endlessly shared on social networks, motivated an intense public debate about employment and the widespread precarious condition of portuguese youth. The song inspired the call of a "non-religious, non-partisan and peaceful" demonstration, through a Facebook event created by four young people who seemed to personify the situation described by the song. The protest took place on the 12th of March, 2011, in more than a dozen cities, gathering about 300,000 people in Lisbon and 80,000 in Porto, according to organizers, meaning it was one of the biggest demonstrations since the Portuguese revolution in 1974.

The success of the song is not a coincidence: the aesthetic communication has often has the ability to synthesize and eloquently express reality and the networks of meaning and representations that circulate in a given society. “Parva que Sou”, whose tone ranges from complaint, regret to indignation, seems to have captured crucial elements of the youth condition for an important segment of our society.

"I belong to the generation without pay." So begins the song, remarking that "the situation is bad and will continue/ I'm already lucky to have an internship". Indeed, the proliferation of low salaries, unpaid internships (particularly in certain areas

qualify as journalism, architecture, etc.) and precarious jobs supported by the state, mid-term situations between training and work, allow us to speak about a "low cost generation" (Chauvel, 2008). In Portugal, it combines low wages - in 2011, over half of young employees earned a salary between 450 and 600 euros and more than two thirds of young people earned less than 750 euros (CIES / CGTP-IN, 2011: 9) - with scarce social protection, which contributes to a poverty risk rate of 20% amongst young people.

This song, listened with emotion by thousands of young people, speaks not only of job insecurity, but also about a "parents' house generation". In fact, according to Eurostat (2010), Portugal is one of the countries where the percentage of young people still living with their parents is higher - about 60% of young adults face this situation, while in Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden and Finland) this percentage is about 20%. Among the reasons that explain this "prolonged adolescence" are the difficult access to housing, unemployment and precarity. As noted by Alves et al. (2011), the dependence on parents remains even in situations where there is already residential autonomy. This "welfare-family", that helped to compensate the fragilities of the Portuguese welfare can however begin to have difficulties in keeping its role, due to the deepening of the crisis (Santos 2011, 76-77).

Subaltern insertion in the labour market gives rise, among precarious youth, to a feeling of being "always postponing" their projects, to use the expression contained in the song at the origin of "Desperate Generation" demonstration. In Portugal, the employability of youth is characterized by being long, painful and complex. It compromises youth autonomy and encourages dispositions marked by the need for constant adaptation, a "new psychological contract" based on short-term commitments (Lewis et al., 2002), which strongly limits the emergence of collective concerns and of projects that can go beyond a short-term horizon.

It is not surprising that, inspired by this song and the wave of identification it created, the manifesto that called for a protest on March 12 took labour and precarity as the central issue: "We, the unemployed, 500-euro workers and other underpaid disguised slaves, outsourced, short-term workers, false self-employed, intermittent workers, trainees, fellows, working students, students, mothers, fathers and children of Portugal", could be read in call to go onto the street. According to the same text, the

responsibility about precarity is to be pointed to "politicians, employers and ourselves".

The 12th of March corresponded to a mass demonstration where converged the youth affected by precarious jobs, older generations impoverished or in solidarity, and discontents against Socialist Party (social democracy) government led by José Sócrates. The Anticapitalist left (as the Left Bloc, a party of Portuguese left), social movements (feminist, LGBT, associations as Inflexible Precarious, among others), sectors of the political right (as Social Democratic Youth, organization affiliated to PSD, the portuguese Liberal Party, which at that time was in opposition), flooded the streets. Even some elements of the far-right tried to insert themselves in the demonstration by heading the parade. The leader at the time of the largest trade union confederation (General Confederation of Portuguese Workers - CGTP), Carvalho da Silva, also attended the demonstration, even if the unions looked to such an "inorganic" protest with some surprise and a lot of mistrust.

This amplitude on the street does not mean that the call of the protest was unclear or that its organizers - the four youngsters who created the event on Facebook - have not insisted on its main features: a democratic demonstration, "non-religious, non-partisan and peaceful", focused on the need for greater transparency and responses against unemployment and precarious jobs. In fact, the organizers rejected appropriations, fought against anti-union discourse or the liberal narrative of a "war between generations".

The days before the demonstration, the organizers asked each participant to take with him or her a sheet of paper or a poster that identified a problem and present a solution. These documents were then delivered to politicians. About 2000 people handed these papers to the organizers, who deposited them in Parliament so that MPs could consult them. Preliminary data from a study of these sheets delivered in Parliament reveal some interesting elements. Firstly, the social and labour issues are by far those who deserved more references among the protests. About half of them refer to work (49%) and, within this category, the false independent work (the so called "green receipts"), unpaid internships and unemployment. These documents also reveal that the issues about the political system (14%) and transparency and corruption (9%) are among the most mentioned. Within these, criticism of nepotism and the "wedge", "privileges of politicians" and "reducing the number of MPs" are the most frequent. The discontentment with the political parties and representative democracy were clearly

visible: "The people united don't need parties" was one of the slogans shouted in the streets of Lisbon.

This dimension of dissatisfaction with political institutions is an important aspect, along with the socio-labour dimension. In Portugal, a recent study on the quality of democracy revealed that 78% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that "politicians are only concerned with their own interests" and "political decisions in our country especially favour big business", with evident distrust of political parties and social movements of protest being considered more able to give voice to popular concerns (Pinto et al., 2012). At the same time, the expectations from the state and from democracy as a system of goods and wealth redistribution are very high, which reinforces the frustrations against the inability of public policies to respond to the main problems identified in that research, namely, unemployment (37 %), poverty and exclusion (16%), the national debt (13%) and economic growth (11%). In the European context - and there we have the eloquent examples of Greece and Italy - not only there is the sense of the complicity of elected powers in relation to the logic of financial markets, but we assist to a kind of "postmodern coup-d'états" through which the management of the crisis is performed using a post-democratic strategy "that operates by the appointment or imposition of unelected technocratic governments" (Sevilla et al., 2012).

Another interesting element of this mobilization resides in its intergenerational characteristic. Contrary to a liberal approach, disclosed in the Portuguese media before the protest, according to which the root of discontent and problems of the "precarious youth" should be found in the "dictatorship of the acquired rights" of the older generation, the demonstration belonged to all generations. The analysis of the documents delivered in Parliament, but especially field observations carried out on the day, showed that the composition of the parade included a large age and social diversity. Indeed, the precarious and unemployed youth were in the streets fighting for jobs and autonomy. But also were students threatened by job insecurity and difficulties associated with the lack of social support. Parents concerned with the lack of opportunity for their children. Grandparents' of the "Desperate Generation" were present in solidarity and protesting due to their small pensions or and the overall impoverishment. Despite the youthful dynamism of the protests, the demonstrators were, in fact, notably diverse, from older citizens frustrated with the emancipatory promises of the revolution of April 1974, to middle-aged people made unemployed

with the closures and relocations of companies, to those disposed of by the public sector, and so on. The austerity politics were, in fact, the common backdrop for the emergence of social protests, which created the possibility for the youth to take the forefront, in a very particular context as is the case in 2011, as the interpreters of general discontent.

One of the novelties in the tradition of social movements and public protest in Portugal is that the “Desperate Generation” and mobilizations of 2011, as well as those that happened in September 15, 2012ⁱⁱ, have created a new pole of collective mobilization in this country. As evidenced by Santos (2011:106), these mobilizations showed that "the forms of organization of interests in contemporary societies (parties, unions, social movements, NGOs) not only capture a small range of potentially active citizenship".

5. Outline of a comparative summary: the Portuguese case in the context of a global cycle of protest

Some structuralist sociological perspectives tend to depreciate approaches focusing on the "event" or exploring concrete episodes, as if they were closer to art than science. As Luc Boltanski argues in a recent article about the theories of revolt, "the rehabilitation of the event and of the episode is, in my opinion, an important task for social sciences" (Boltanski, 2012: 108). Indeed, the moment that triggers a revolt is always the domain of the unpredictable, is always a singularity. The catalyst events of mobilizations can be as diverse as the performance of a song (in the Portuguese case or in the Icelandic), a desperate act (the Tunisian self-immolation) or indignation against the violence of police repression (as happened in June 2010 in Egypt, or one year and a half earlier, in Greece, with the murder of the young Alexis Grigoropoulos). Therefore, the phenomena of protest and their cycles should be understood taking into account both the historical contexts and long-term trends that help explain them (in this case, changes in work, the imposition of austerity and the shrinking of democracy) and also the density of those concrete episodes that, as Walter Benjamin would say, "explode with the continuity of history", introducing the disruption in the "homogeneous, empty time" of watches (Benjamin, 2012: 139).

In this cycle of collective action, the collective apprehension with the reduction in public investments and the withdrawal of or reductions in public service financing, particularly in health and education, are some of the aspects that have given rise to greater degrees of dissatisfaction in Portugal as well as in other countries in Europe. Whether on the subjective level, or whether in relation to working conditions and access to employment, educated young people, as we have seen in this essay, are among those most affected by the changes taking place in the economies. As for Portugal, the increase in precariousness and unemployment has been more pronounced for the young, with approximately half of these to be found in precarious situations and for whom unemployment is around double the national average. The economic crisis, the violent austerity measures, with the growing unemployment and the expansion of poverty (including in the middle class segments) contributed decisively to the new discontents. People are becoming increasingly impatient and mistrustful of national and European politicians, and over the last two years, they have started to protest. On the one hand, we are witnessing in Portugal large mobilisations of trade unions, organised, above all, by groups in the public sector and in the area of education. In November 2011, a general strike took place, organized by the two main trade union confederations, CGTP and UGT (ordinarily rivals). One year later, a new general strike took place, on November 14th, but in this case it gained a European dimension: it happened not only in Portugal but also in Greece, Spain, Cyprus and Malta. It was the first European strike of the XXIst century and it can be considered a relevant step toward a “global trade unionism”, an aspiration that has acquired more frequently the shape of a “delayed metaphor” (Costa, 2008).

On the other hand, the initiatives of those involved in the “precarious” movements are proliferating, organised by indignant young people in the absence of opportunities to get a dignified job, and after having invested in academic careers at the universities. From having an individualist, consumerist and indifferent attitude, from the search for individual solutions that led them to reject politics, from the evolution of the old activism (of the 1970s) to recent indifference, young Portuguese people, similar to the Spanish, English, French, Greek, Americans and even those who organised the Arab Spring, are showing signs of wanting to have a voice and to return to assert a collective will.

Of course the social causes that underlie the Arab revolutions are obviously not the same as those underlying the discontent in Western Europe. In the first case, political

democracy did not exist. In the second case, political democracy let itself become corrupted and was incapable of assuring with economic democracy. The defence of social cohesion, which formerly was secured by the social state, is on the verge of a breakdown. We must not forget that Europe is a puzzle of extremely unequal pieces which cannot be put together. In the late-developing European democracies of the southern countries (Portugal, Spain and Greece) the historical experiences of state authoritarianism left deep scars, and the brutality of the police forces and the centralisation of political power continued to prosper after the fall of the respective dictatorships.

In this context, how to apprehend these different phenomenon, identifying at the same time the commonality of its features and the specificity of each context?

In the Portuguese case, a feature that became evident, and it seems to be common to all this cycle of protest, is the return of material issues as central elements of political mobilization and struggle identity formation. Transformations in work, characterized mainly by the installation of unprecedented unemployment and a rampant process of precarization of labour relations, are now deepened by the dynamics introduced by austerity policies whose effects are cutting wages and social benefits, shrinking social functions of the state and the worsening of the debt problem, resulting from the transformation of a financial crisis in a crisis of sovereign debts of the states. March 12 was the moment of expression of a general discontent, which addresses not only the functioning of economy, but it is revealing, too, a crisis of legitimacy of political institutions. Indeed, if this cycle of protest began with movements for democracy in the Arab world, whose political regimes were clearly authoritarian, its expression in the countries of Southern Europe, or the way they emerged on the other side of the ocean in the U.S., reveals a distrust and discontent of citizens regarding political institutions and the claim for a "real democracy", to use the expression of the Spanish Indignados.

Another element common in this cycle of collective action is the fact that young people, particularly young people with high skills and a subordinate insertion in the labour market, are among the most active protagonists of social movements. Like in other countries, but the specificity related to our development model, Portuguese youth has been among the segments of the population who suffers more with the economic recession and is particularly unprotected to face this situation with a minimum of security, regarding social and labour rights. The feeling of loss of quality

of life, whether in relation to levels previously experienced, either by reference to expectations, or what could legitimately be expected given the increase and investment in skills, is one of the reasons that explain the current cycle of mobilizations.

In this context, this graduated and precarious youth has revealed a mistrust of traditional forms of organization, such as trade unions and political parties. In the Arab countries, the repressive context inhibited the emergence of a civil society and the virtual space of flows on the Internet was the place where could be rooted a public space with minimal autonomy. The most skilled young people, protagonists of this digital culture, were key players in the processes of democratization in those countries and dispensed, in most cases, previously existing institutions. In the Portuguese case, the onset of inorganic phenomena of mobilization with great ability to attract mass presence of discontents have reconfigured the field of protest, forcing parties and labour organizations to position themselves about this experience, forging a relationship marked by ambiguities, tensions and disputes.

The non-hierarchical logic of networking, which tends to reject delegation, doesn't mean anonymity, quite on the contrary. Both in "Desperate Generation" as in other examples of this cycle of mobilizations, the biographical testimony had an unprecedented relevance. In the U.S., the Occupy movement was preceded, during August, a *Tumblr* (an online platform) entitled "We Are the 99%", which welcomed the individual testimonies of citizens who shared their stories and, in doing it, activated a very strong dynamic of identification. Also on March 12th, both the convenors of the protest and the protesters acted in a logic of individual autonomy rather than collective representation. The event on Facebook was created by four youngsters who embodied, each in its own way, the new subjects of precariousness. In the day of the demonstration, people were asked to individually fill a sheet of paper or a design a poster, which then would be delivered to policy makers.

In any of these cases, though in different ways, Internet and wireless communication devices played a key role, not only as a means of communication but as elements that prefigure the forms of organization, deliberation and political participation, leading to new collaborative practices, reinventing democratic practices, opening new political horizons. The multitudinous reappropriation of social networking and wireless communication can be characterized as a mechanism of "self-mass communication" (Castells, 2012). The message is autonomously decided by the issuer, but it

communicates with many, potentially with millions. Depending on the dissemination via Internet and wireless networks, used as platforms for digital communication, it was possible to create viral phenomena. Virtual communication networks made it possible to organize mass protests outside the traditional pre-existing structures and build up autonomous public spaces in authoritarian contexts, empowering individuals, which was a prerequisite for the international contamination between movements.

The occupation of public spaces such as streets, squares, symbolic buildings, or others, coupled with virtual spaces - social networks, participatory forums, phone applications and other devices - created a "hybrid public space" (Castells, 2012). Either on the Internet networks, either in the released spaces of occupied squares or "acampadas", this hybrid public sphere was an essential source of autonomy, to enhance communication processes that escaped the control of those who hold institutional power.

Political diversity and programmatic fluidity are features of many of the mobilizations we've been referring to. In the case of the Portuguese March 12, the diversity of causes and agents was evident at the protest, proven either by the observation of who joined the parade, either by the analysis of the topics and approaches made by protesters on the problems that led them to the street and the solutions proposed. In fact, a certain desire for democratic experimentation, coupled with a more or less diffuse dissatisfaction with the current form of amputated democracy, dwelled this protest, in a sometimes problematic sometimes creative tension between now and the future, institutional, insurgents and disruptive practices.

6. Final Note

Since late 2010 and early 2011, we have witnessed a new cycle of global mobilizations. With significant differences according to the contexts in which they occur, its agendas and modes of action, many of the protests that have erupted in several countries share a set of features and are interconnected. They reveal, in different ways, a crisis of legitimacy of political actors, widespread dissatisfaction with the responses in the face of economic crisis and concern about the processes of labour precarization that are today a strong global trend, very relevant among the youth of Southern Europe and the Arab countries. Accordingly, we tried to demonstrate that material issues, and in particular the socio-labour topics, are at the

heart of these new forms of collective action.

In Portugal, this cycle had its foundational moment with the demonstration of March 12th, 2011. Organized from an initial appeal in the Internet space of flows, called outside of traditional structures, this protest filled the streets of several cities in the country, with the participation of about half a million people. The identification of a common condition associated with precarity among young people - the so-called "Desperate Generation" - produced a feeling of unity and recognition that exceeded the cyberspace and materialized in the occupation of public space. This demonstration was intergenerational in its composition and very diverse in the type of claims that were expressed, the issues of labour and employment having dominance, but the discontent against government, politicians in general and corruption also having a relevant weight.

The Portuguese case has specificities related with the country's semi-peripheral condition, the rhythms of its own political process, its history and its institutional structure. There are however a number of features that bring together the demonstration of March 12 and other phenomena of this cycle of global protest, namely informality, demand for horizontality, contamination and transnational flows, the role of graduated precarious and unemployed youth, the intensive use of social networks, creating a "hybrid public space" that combines online and offline, as well as a programmatic fluidity and a desire for democratic experimentation.

The Portuguese example is interesting to think about the conditions of collective action in societies where, from an economic point of view, there is recession and a process of rampant precarization, from a political perspective assist the weakening of democracy by the agendas of international institutions and financial markets, and from the standpoint of social logics by strong individuation. Internet and its culture of autonomy were, in this context, an instrument for reinventing the modalities of collective action in a society of individuals. March 12, as other examples of the global cycle of protest to which we refer, had the ability to set the political agenda and determine the themes and terms of public debate. Its programmatic fluidity may, however, be regarded as both its strength and its weakness, in that the immediate consequences of these mobilizations are dependent on how institutional agents react and how in the political field is redefined the balance of forces. Bringing new dynamics to the field of citizenship, these mobilizations are certainly a central subject for sociology of social movements in the present time.

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ⁱ Since January 2009, Iceland witnessed to a new process of popular mobilization against the recovery of the debts of private banks and the decisions of the political institutions. The protest of citizens led to the appointment (by the Icelandic Parliament) of a group of 25 independent citizens in order to design the draft of a new constitution. This group of people launched a participatory process, through social networks and the Internet, which collected more than 16,000 suggestions. After 4 months, this group presented a draft constitution, which was known as "wikiconstitution", once it was done using the interactive and collaborative platforms allowed through cyberspace.

ⁱⁱ A group of 29 citizens launched a call in the social networks for a manifestations on that day under the motto "Fuck the Troika! We want our lives back". In the manifesto of the initiative, there is a very critical diagnostic with regards to the recent political choices: "after more than one year of austerity under the external intervention [bailout], our perspective, the perspective of the great majority of people that live in Portugal, are getting worse" because "the austerity that is imposed and that destroys our dignity and life, does not work and destroys democracy". The appeal to the citizens insubordination - "if they want to us to bow and force us to accept unemployment, precarity and inequality as a way of life, we will respond with the force of

democracy, of liberty, of mobilization and of struggle" - had an echo and would be materialized in more than 30 cities that gathered approximately one million people in various Portuguese cities.