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Political flow in a critical ethnography

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The discussion proposed in this paper will focus on the emerging social dynamics in local communities, namely its inner disorder, after the development of an ethnographical educational project - Urban Boundaries: the dynamic of the cultural encounters in the communitarian education.

In 2010, a local popular movement from Costa de Caparica/Portugal called Urban Boundaries decided collectively to develop an educational project. This movement faced the political oppression experienced by two local communities – the fishing community and the bairro community.

The educational dynamics of this movement, founded in Paulo Freire’s notions, promoted the encounter between silenced neighbours, allowing for a dialogical space fed by knowledge exchange, survival practices, and the recognition of diversity and unity - transversal among communities’ members. Its sudden conclusion, against the will of community members, has led to a strengthening of their will to develop collective work. Hence began the Urban Boundaries project (UB), with the same actors and at the same place, but now as an academic research project.

When the Urban Boundaries project (UB) started, both communities had a main common struggle: access to water. The fishing community was forbidden to fish in the urban front, exactly where the local government has built them a fish market less than four years ago. The bairro community, an "illegal" urban settlement dated over forty years, had no piped water. Its residents, over 450 people, needed to walk about one kilometer to fetch water in a public fountain. Local politics is continually developed without
regarding these two communities; they are only considered in the creation of allegedly successful welfare programs, which they never attended.

The collective process lived in the construction of the UB transforms itself in a tool with common grounds, bringing issues of local survival to the research questions. For the fishing community, the will to assert its voice was an important issue. So, in the UB, this issue was worked through the life stories – material and immaterial local heritage, through the local cultural diversity. Moreover, the issue of human rights (i.e., the right to water, the right to be recognized as residents, and the right to education), was central to the bairro community. Therefore, activities of multiple cartography and critical alphabetization were developed in the UB.

The development of the project maintained its central focus: to create inner tools to collectively remove the invisibility cloak that hung over both communities and, through a mediation process, to promote an emancipatory communitarian education. The aim was the construction of a collective critical voice to guarantee local political actions, using the critical ethnography methodology. The research process, as an ethnography of itself, was based on multiple field notes, photographs, audio and video recordings, and other artifacts, in a practice of participant observation with the continuing involvement of the three communities (the academic community being the third) in data collection, interpretation and dissemination, as well as the political actions inherent to the research processes. In this research approach based on Critical Social Theory, rather than an understanding of reality, the proposal is to transform it. So, the information obtained from the ethnography was reinvested in the construction of a critical perspective of the lives of the members of these communities, through a constant dialogical process.

This is a politically committed research approach, which requires the involvement of all stakeholders in the deconstruction of the social and political reality that oppresses those most economically disadvantaged communities and maintains the hegemonic groups. In this sense, this ethnographic approach required the collaborative involvement of academic researchers and members of local communities in praxis, in order to give visibility to those who are excluded from the decision-making forums; a transformative praxis in our thinking oppressed by the massificated idea of the misery as given condition. However, these processes of emancipation,
collectivity, and visibility, achieved by both communities, brought to them their exotic character and a welfarist process.

In this paper our central focus is to discuss the concept of empowerment, emancipation, and collectivity, and their relations in the light of existing political flows in the critical ethnographic practice developed in the UB. The discussion is mediated by the identification of some tensions, in the intra and inter relational spaces of the three communities directly involved, as well as with the new relations that were being developed during the project. To the proposed mediation we begin with a critical deconstruction of these concepts through Critical Social Theory, to understand the inner disorder in and among these three communities.