

**SOCIEDADES
POLARIZADAS ?**

**DESAFIOS
PARA A
SOCIOLOGIA**

XII Congresso Português de Sociologia

*Sociedades Polarizadas?
Desafios para a Sociologia*

XII CONGRESSO
PORTUGUÊS DE SOCIOLOGIA

4 - 6 ABRIL 2023

Coimbra, 4 a 6 de março de 2023

CONVENTO DE SÃO FRANCISCO – FACULDADE DE ECONOMIA DA UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA

**Secção/Área temática / Thematic Section/Area:
Teorias e metodologias**

**What is the social?
Rethinking the central concept of sociology in light of Gilles Deleuze's
molar/molecular dialectics and the Black Women's Movement in Brazil.**

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Abstract

The concept of the social is at the heart of any sociological investigation. The first sociologist to have pointed out its peculiar characteristics was Émile Durkheim who defines the social as external, general and coercive. He thereby identifies the proper object of sociology as different from that of other human sciences. In spite of his intellectual breakthrough, his conceptualization is criticized for being objectivistic. His characterization of the social as an object ignores its relational aspect. The perception of the relational character of the social is a major contribution of Gabriel Tarde, Durkheim's contemporary. According to Tarde, the social is structured as difference. It consists, thereby, of relations. This position puts him at odd with Durkheim's, a tension, which gains a conciliatory turn in Gilles Deleuze's dialectics of molar/molecular.

Keywords: social; molar; molecular; Keywords:

XII-APS-45572

Introduction

The ontology of the social, that is, as a primordial understanding of the “being” of the social is a tacit assumption at the heart of any sociological investigation. The first important sociologist to have pointed out its peculiar characteristics as a distinct object of observation was Émile Durkheim in his pioneering analysis where he defines the social as external, general and coercive (*Les Règles de la Méthode Sociologique*, 1894). By this characterization, Durkheim identifies the proper object of sociology as different from that of other human sciences such as psychology or philosophy. In spite of his intellectual breakthrough in pointing to the objective status of the social, the French sociologist’s concept is criticized for being objectivistic. His characterization of the social as an object ignores an appropriate diagnosis of its relational aspect. The perception of the relational aspect of the social is one of the most relevant intuitions of Gabriel Tarde, French sociologist and philosopher, Durkheim’s contemporary. According to Tarde, the social is structured as difference, and thereby, consists basically of relations, “*exister, c’est diférer*” (1895). This position puts him at odd with Durkheim’s who defends social facts as an object (1894). This tension in my view will later in a way gain a conciliatory turn in Gilles Deleuze’s famous dialectics of molar/molecular. Now, to understand this dynamics, I will make recourse to the historical analysis of the emergence of the Black Women’s Movement in contemporary Brazil.

The Black Women’s Movement in Brazil

The Brazilian Black Women’s Movement emerged in critical reaction to two important movements: the Black Movement and the Feminist one. The first went through different transformation processes generically represented in three emblematic movements: *Frente Negra Brasileira* (Brazilian Black Front), *Teatro Experimental Negro* (Black Experimental Theatre) and *Movimento Negro Unificado* (United Black Movement).

Frente Negra Brasileira (FNB) founded in 1931 in São Paulo. It was one of the most important movements in the 20th century, which demanded the equality of rights and full participation of the Afro-Brazilian in the Brazilian society. FNB organized diverse social, cultural and educational activities such as seminars, lectures,

alphabetization and music festivals aimed most particularly at social inclusion.

Teatro Experimental Negro (TEN) was founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1944. The founder of the movement, Abdias Nascimento (1914-2011), projected it as a space in which to promote Afro-Brazilian culture by means of education and theatre. Nascimento was particularly concerned with the absence of Afro-Brazilian descendants and their culture in theatrical representations at that time, the reason for which he dedicated himself to help Afro-Brazilians be protagonists of their own representation.

Initially named *Movimento Negro Unificado pela Igualdade e contra Discriminação Racial* (*United Black Movement for Equality and against Racial Discrimination, MNUICDR*), *Movimento Negro Unificado* (MNU) was founded in São Paulo in 1978 following a big manifestation against racial discrimination suffered by Afro-Brazilians. The manifestation was triggered by the death of a black man due to police torture and by the exclusion of a group of young boys from volleyball club in São Paulo for being Afro-descendants. Probably, the most important contribution of MNU in the combat against racism was their firm critique of the ideological basis of racial discrimination in Brazil, which is, the so-called "racial democracy" disseminated in the academy by a Brazilian anthropologist, Gilberto Freire, in his most renowned work, *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933).

The three movements, in spite of their different historical contributions and strategies along the decades, had but one common agenda, which was the struggle against racism in its different forms.

Despite the critique as to the use of the expression "wave" in describing the evolution of feminism, it can still have some utility when it comes to finding a kind of connection with the past and the change of nuances along the decades (Zirbel 2023).

As it was with the Black Movement, the Brazilian Feminist Movement also went through several phases of development following the generally accepted characterization of the movement worldwide. The first wave struggled for their right to suffrage dated back to the late XIX and early XX century. Some of the leading figures in this first period were Bertha Luz, a biologist and an important Brazilian scientist, Maria Lacerda de Moura and Leolinda Daltro. Their struggle for women's suffrage would only come to be concretized in the first participation of women in 1932 election.

The second wave began in the 60s, during the installation of military regime in Brazil (Melo & Schumacher, online-source; Caetano 2017), which was intensified in

the 70s. In this period the movement focused its demand on the equality of rights between men and women: reproductive rights, rights to employment and the combat against violence, especially violence against women and domestic violence. Feminists' political participation was also very important in this period in a particular way contributing in the struggle against the military regime. Among the most important feminist figures were Mariska Ribeiro, Maria Luiza Heilborn, Maria Helena Darci de Oliveria and Bianca Moreira Alvez (Dipati 2022). Some of these figures had just finished their studies abroad when they returned home and helped organize feminist groups. Coming from middle class families, they had access to influential texts in the academy such as Beauvoire's *Le deuxième sexe* (1949), which became an important reference in Brazil for the second wave.

Finally, the last decade of the XX century was generally referred to as the hallmark of the third wave of feminist movement. Despite the controversy around this temporal demarcation, one of the common features of the third wave was the deconstruction of any essentializing idea of identity considered to be at the very origin of the multifaceted forms of domination. It was also a period of the emergence of different kinds of feminisms, such as the ones influenced by racial perspective, black and latino feminism, which put the hegemony of white feminism into question, giving rise to new approaches and strategies within the movement, one of which is the intersectionality as coined by Kimberley Creenshaw since 1989.

In spite of the newly emergent awareness of the diverse forms of feminism in the academy, from the perspective of racial relations, the hegemony of white feminism has always predominated in some way. It was no wonder that in Brazil black female activists' participation ever since the so-called first wave and the discrimination imposed upon them as Afro-Brazilians were always rendered invisible. Consequently, the discussion about racial discrimination against black women even in the Feminist Movement, was not taken into consideration by their white peers as it has already been pointed out in some way by hooks in the American context:

“If middle-class white women were able to make their interests the main focus of the feminist movement, employing a rhetoric that made their condition synonymous with oppression, it was thanks to their racial and class privileges, especially the fact that they lived far from the sexist constraints that prevail in the world of working-class women” (hooks 2020 [1984], p.33-34).

This same critical observation appeared in my interviews with black women activists in Rio de Janeiro during my PhD research. As Ana Leoni, a black woman activist, puts it:

“And we black women were reformulating many things because when feminism emerged back there, we were not inserted. The first struggles of white European women were for the right to work, they were born inside the big house, they grew up in the slave quarters. So we didn't have to go to the street. When the women went to the street, the black women were inside their houses taking care of their house and their children. So for us, this thing of going to the streets to ask for work, it never happened. What if we come to today 2021, we continue, which is the most forced work, which is the work that nobody wants, sub-work. We still have black women being enslaved by their bosses and mistresses. We are there in 2021, we discover more of fifteen women working in conditions analogous to slavery, as in the case of Madalena, who stayed thirty-eight years. There is also the case here in Rio de Janeiro, in the entire country” [*author's translation*] (Dipati 2022, p.128).

The same held true in the Black Movement where their female conditions did not have due space of recognition because of the male domination.

Black women thus constitute an in-between social group, which traverses the conventional distinction between the Black Movement and the Feminist one. It is a singular condition of black women, which in the words of Werneck refuses and denounces the race and gender privileged pole:

“The difference produced by the processes of singularization of black women implies a differentiation between subjects and groups based on race and gender: men and women, white and black. Differentiation that denounces and refuses the conditions of privilege and power of violence as an attribute of the white racial pole, regardless of the biological conditions of sex or secondary differences in gender policies. Which also means that he recognizes, in white women of different times, also a pole of power and violence” [*author's translation*] (Werneck 2009, p.77)

Within the Black Movement, for long their feminine condition was not really taken

into account, as well as their condition as black women in the Feminist Movement. This blind spot in Crenshaw's term reflects the very invisibility of their multiple dominations whose impact is most notable in the position they occupy at the basis of social pyramid both in economic and cultural terms in Brazil. It was against the attempt to make invisible the multiple domination they suffered that black women embarked on a struggle for an intersectional recognition of equality of their dignity and their right to difference, or to what Sueli Carneiro, one of the most important Brazilian black feminists nowadays, refers as "double militancy":

“This is the basis for the double militancy that is imposed on black women as a way of ensuring that the achievements in a field of struggle, for example, in the racial field, are not made unfeasible by the persistence of gender inequalities and so that the achievements of the women's movements do not privilege only white women due to the racially based discriminatory practices present in our society, against black women” [*author's translation*] (Carneiro 2019, p.168)

Social movement and change: From Gabriel Tarde to Gilles Deleuze

To understand the emergence of Black Women's Movement from Deleuze's point of view, one needs to take as a starting point, his great inspiration and predecessor, Gabriel Tarde, a contemporary and staunch critic of Durkheim's model that supposes similarity among human beings as a basis of structure and nature of society (Teluivio 2015). Instead, Tarde argues for difference as the point of origin and arrival of any social analysis:

“Exister c'est différer, la différence, à vrai dire, est en un sens le côté substantiel des choses, ce qu'elles ont à la fois de plus propre et de plus commun. Il faut partir de là et se défendre d'expliquer cela, à quoi tout se ramène, y compris l'identité d'où l'on part faussement. Car l'identité n'est qu'un minimum et par suite qu'une espèce, et une espèce infiniment rare, de différence, comme le repos n'est qu'un cas du mouvement, et le cercle qu'une variété singulière de l'ellipse. Partir de l'identité primordiale, c'est supposer à l'origine une singularité prodigieusement improbable, une coïncidence impossible d'êtres multiples, à la fois distincts et semblables, ou bien l'inexplicable mystère d'un seul être simple et ultérieurement divisé on ne sait pourquoi. C'est, en un sens,

What is the social? Rethinking the central concept of sociology in light of Gilles Deleuze's molar/molecular dialectics and the Black Women's Movement in Brazil.

imiter les anciens astronomes qui, dans leurs explications chimériques du système solaire, partaient du cercle et non de l'ellipse, sous prétexte que la première figure était plus parfaite. La différence est l'alpha et l'oméga de l'univers" (Tarde 1895, p. 355).

For that, he needs to delve into the infraindividual or microlevel of concrete processes—or what he prefers to refer to as “*current*”—and analysis where he identifies three fundamental micro-sociological operations underlying the production of social phenomena: invention, imitation and opposition (Tarde 1890, 1895, 1898).

Invention, different from our common sense way of understanding it, is not something completely new in the social field. Neither is it pioneered by a single individual. Invention can simply be expected combinations of already existing elements. It is provoked by certain social circumstances and the practical need to adaptation. From this perspective, individuals are the locus of this dynamics. Inventions are then *imitated* and reproduced. And thus, they recompose the social field in a certain way creating a contingent by relatively stable social equilibrium: “Thus, the social field would be woven by countless repetitions of countless inventions imitatively propagated at different times, with different directions and scopes” (Tonkonoff 2013, p.271). Finally, *oppositions* make possible division relative to the phenomenon in so far as they make possible the perception of contrasting social elements or phenomena.

The above-mentioned triple dynamics happen *to* individuals in the first place, rather than *by* them. By this affirmation, Tarde distances himself from any subject/individual-centered approach. On the contrary, individuals are affected *in the first place*, before they take any initiative. He refers to this microprocesses as “currents”, a concept which later will be taken up by Deleuze as “flows”, whose fundamental building blocks are desires and beliefs. Desires and beliefs for Tarde are not merely psychological phenomena. They are sociological quantities. They constitute the primary leading processes that guide individual human actions and produce social structures and institutions (Teluvio 2015).

Tarde's sociological approach on the pre-individual processes lays the ground for Deleuze's concept of the molecular. However, different from Tarde, who focuses exclusively on pre-individual microprocesses, Deleuze defends a coexistence of molecular processes and molar representation:

“Les deux systèmes de référence sont en raison inverse, en ce que l’un échappe à l’autre, et que l’autre arrête l’un, l’empêche de fuir davantage; mais ils sont strictement complémentaires et coexistants, parce que l’un n’existe qu’une fonction de l’autre; et ils sont pourtant différents, en raison directe, mais sans se correspondre terme à terme, parce que le second n’arrête effectivement le premier que sur un “plan” qui n’est plus le plan du premier, et que le premier continue son élan sur son propre plan” (Deleuze 1980, p.268).

By molar, he understands perceptible and representable social units, such as gender, class, religion and race (1980, p.264). While the molecular flows move by multiplicities, molar forms search for unity and tend to solidify into rigid structures. In so far as molar segmentarity points to arborification and rigidity, molecular one indicates continuous rhizomification by means of its affects and percepts (Deleuze 1980). Deleuze sustains that both dynamics are always present simultaneously as a dialectic duality between the molecular flux of affects and percepts, which occurs *to* individuals, and the molar representation of a social phenomenon.

With respect to the Black Women’s Movement, the molecular flows consists of different connections on the one hand established among women and through them in their daily experience, feelings, perceptions, affections; and lines of flight (the unrepresentable, difference, intensity) on the other, already “contained” in the molar segmentarity of Black and Feminist Movements, which the latter as rigid lines tried to contain in themselves, but which always escaped both grip of representation. Now, the Black Women’s Movement being transformed into a new molar representation in its turn is also not an internally homogenous group, but rather consists of diverse and complex social groups with their own characteristics, forms, strategies, dynamics, structures and approaches. They are collectives, NGO, social movements or nucleus of women in poor neighborhood. Their strategies can be intersectional (Crenshaw 1989, 1991), promoting a kind of flexible solidarity (Carvalho 2018), or networking. Their complexity is, however, assembled into a single, generalizing, and “normalizing” conceptual umbrella, in other words, “represented” as Black Women’s Movement.

In summary, this very sketchy presentation of the emergence of the Black Women's Movement in light of Deleuze's concepts points to some relevant considerations. In the first place, both Black and Feminist Movements are not homogenous groups. They are composed of innumerable other minor sub-categories that interact among each other and are capable of questioning any prevalent dynamics of domination condensed as molar representations, that is, homogenizing them into a single category without taking into account their differences and power relations established among them. Among these subgroups, the subaltern ones can even subvert this relation of domination, as molecular flows of affections and perceptions occurring to black women at the origin of Black Women's Movement. Consequently, it does not mean as some other poststructuralists would have us believe that categories are just linguistic constructs without materiality, free floating signifiers in Lacan's term disseminated without end but producing an infinite play of significations, in Derrida's words. For Deleuze, the molar is no less real than the molecular. They do not nullify each other, but simply coexist. The difference lies but in their suppleness. The molar tendencies do stabilize and thus homogenize constant molecular flows, pure intensity, while the latter suspends molar capture and transformation into solid forms giving rise to a constant dialectical tension.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we may say in this context that the social cannot be reduced to mere static and rigid forms à la Durkheim, that is, solidified into molar representations in Deleuze's term, nor to merely elusive molecular currents of beliefs and desires à la Tarde. It is rather an inevitably constant dialectics between the two, characterized by Deleuze as a relation of complementarity. But probably more than simply a complementary relation, it is rather a dialectical tension between molar machine of capture which continuously tries to produce new rigid forms and categories, and the elusive molecular intensive flows of affects and percepts, which constantly subvert the formation of rigid, calcified categories in the diverse lines of flights. For, it is only in this continuous dialectical tension that the productive nature of any sociological investigation will flourish.

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What is the social? Rethinking the central concept of sociology in light of Gilles Deleuze's molar/molecular dialectics and the Black Women's Movement in Brazil.

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