



About the Relation between Theory and Action: Drawing on the Movement Solidarity to Refugees in Greece

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Reading the interesting discussion over the possibility of open borders in *ACME* (2003, vol. 2, iss. 2), I noticed the authors' emphasis on the need for both (a) to imagine alternatives to the current systems of migration and refugee control, and (b) political action (Bauder 2003a, 2003b; Samers 2003). But what's the relation between them? Could it be regarded as a complementary or a contrary one?

In this intervention I argue that, while it seems to be easy to distinguish between theory and social movements' action, from one point of view, theory is embedded within actors' ideational elements which orient their action. In order to present this argument in a comprehensible manner, I have to point out two crucial issues in relation with social movements: (a) the important role of ideational elements in the formation of a social movement, and (b) the segmentation of a collective actor called "social movement".

But first, writing in a geographical journal, I have to make clear that with the term "movement" I don't refer to human flows that have (political, economical, social etc.) consequences (e.g. migration, refugees, even tourism); rather, I refer to purposeful and meaningful collective action (even if this action *just* produces public discourse) aiming to bring change irrespective of level: micro-level, e.g. aimed at improving the living conditions of a group of migrants, or offering

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solidarity to a group of hunger-striking refugees; or macro-level, e.g. aiming to change a national asylum system, or even to eliminate national borders (that is, to change the global organizational system).

A “Theory-Action” Scheme

Conceptualizing “Theory”

The authors contributing to the “open-borders” issue of *ACME* (2003) clearly focused on scientists’ role in trying to imagine a different world (clearly Bauder’s suggestion), a more equal one, and to examine the relation between this imagination and *reality*. We could locate “theory” exactly in the middle space of this relation (imagination/*reality*). In this case, “theory” could be conceived as the written or verbal expression of a higher (in terms of rational coherence) form of thought (or imagination²) in an attempt to interpret or represent the world as a whole (grand theory) or in part (partial theory).

Given that even grand theories are less or more incapable to conceive of the social world in its total complexity, it seems more suitable to imagine “theory” as a tendency or a dynamic process, than a state, especially a *proper* one. Defined in such a broad way, it is obvious that theory is not just a matter of academics, even if academic work is based on more strict and different rules (research) and, generally and usually, we may argue that academics enjoy more prestige. But, could it be possible to represent social movements as well in the middle space of this relation (imagination/*reality*)? In this case, locating both theory and social movements in the same space (that is, between imagination and *reality*), one could presume a relation between them and had to investigate the kind of this relation (between theory and social movements). In what follows I argue that a social movement belongs in the middle space between imagination and *reality*, as theory do, and then I try to investigate this relation between theory and a social movement, drawing on movement solidarity to refugees in Greece.

The Interpretation of the World as a Precondition for Purposeful Action

Talking about social movements, we conceive of a movement’s action as a given and basic characteristic of its nature. What we usually don’t give such attention is the relation of a movement with ideational elements. In order to show that, from one point of view, social movement’s action belongs in the middle space between imagination and *reality*, I will stress the importance of ideational elements in the formation of social movements.

Drawing on the two main current trends in the study of social movements (political opportunity structure and new social movements theory), one could say that a social movement takes shape somewhere between structure and agency. Conceiving structure as the only parameter that governs action, one could not

² Defined in a broad way; that is, imagination is not a false, but an ideational element that could be false, true, or even both.

understand why people experiencing the same environment or a common condition reveal different behaviors. At the same time, subjects don't act in an empty space, but within the framework of broader social structures within which they try to intervene. Structure doesn't influence subjects in a mechanistic way. Between structure and action there are subjects observing (or not) *structure* as such (e.g. inequality), constructing meaning and acting accordingly (comparing their observed status with the others' and developing ambitions or objectives) and in relation with their available resources (material or not) and values, simultaneously calculating environmental constraints and opportunities, and making a cost/benefit calculation. One encounters purposeful and meaningful actions when subjects construct from and invest their action with meaning. Meaning is therefore a crucial variable that guides and governs action (symbolic interaction theory), even if meaning is being reshaped by/in action in a reactive process³. Analytically, in case one faces collective action without collective meaning, one may speak about other collective phenomena (e.g. aggregations, panics) rather than social movements' action (Melucci 1996).

So, generally speaking, within a given structure, one could think of the following as crucial for an individual's choice to participate in social movements' action: (a) the representation of his/her position within a structure as unfair, or the representation of a situation as problematic, that is, as deflected from a desirable one; and (b) the interpretation of this situation as changeable. Furthermore, struggle is a condition in which participants constantly have to make strategic choices in order to orient and re-orient their action. So, I could argue that a social movement belongs exactly between imagination and reality, drawing on the former and being oriented toward the latter⁴. In each of an actor's choices, the interpretation of the world or a situation constitutes a precondition of purposeful action.

Given that purposeful action presupposes an interpretation of the world (or a situation), it becomes clear that it is not easy to separate theory from purposeful action. It's obvious that this "theory-action" scheme applies at the individual actor's level. But is it the same at social movement's level? How does this scheme work at the collective level? This scheme is easier to apply – to a degree – to the case of an ideological movement, such as a communistic one that draws on Marxism or an anarchistic one drawing on Anarchism. In these cases one could argue that there a relatively solid and coherent relation between theory and action has already been developed. But, is it the same with the so-called "new social movements", that is, movements that manifest a greater degree of segmentation and a more networked organizational structure, like "movement solidarity to

³ This does not mean that there are no other variables that govern action (eg, police brutality, opportunities for success etc.). But all the variables must be seen as such, and must be calculated by the actors and end in meaning for action / reaction / inaction.

⁴ And, in turn, every change in their environment re-orient movement actors' thought.

refugees”⁵? In what follows, I will draw on “movement solidarity to refugees” in Greece in order to show the way this “theory-action” scheme is not so easy to be established at the collective level, because of the segmentation that takes place within a collective actor called “movement”.

Movement Solidarity to Refugees in Greece

We are accustomed to conceiving of social movements as unified collective actors. But this representation of a social movement as a unified body is being challenged increasingly in the recent literature, as well as from my experience as a member of the No Border network⁶, currently (in 2009) active on the Aegean Island of Lesbos. Generally, I suggest that one has to change the way one conceives of social movements in order to come to a better understanding of their relation with theory. It is impossible here to map an entire movement in order to formally show its segmentation, and, anyway, this is not the point here. So, I reduce the scope of this short comment by focusing on an internal classification of the “movement solidarity to refugees” in Greece, in order to make more understandable the difficulty this “theory-action” scheme encounters when applied at the movement level.

Refugees⁷ in Greece

In the late 1980s Greece became a migrant receiving, rather than a sending country. The main axis that governs migration policy remains border control and entrance prevention. At the same time, according to Dublin II regulations, refugees entering Greece cannot continue their route and are trapped within Greek territory. Having no state facilities or protection (in most cases, having not even access to the asylum system), refugees are gathered in the ports to Italy and the center of Athens, in the streets and extempore camps. Where this phenomenon is visible, racism is being increasingly strengthened, as are neo-fascist groups. In many cases, neo-fascist groups participate in refugee-hunting not only with government’s tolerance, but in cooperation with police. At the national level, the migration matter became a crucial factor for the strengthening of the far Right.

While the Greek state – being responsible for national security – strengthens repression (e.g., hunting refugees and deporting them, holding them in detention centers), it produces a “positive” discourse by trying to legitimize itself as the

⁵ Here, using the term “movement solidarity to refugees” I refer to a set of individuals, groups, organizations and informal networks (such as the No Border campaign on the island of Lesbos, of which I have been an active member), that are generally, trying to improve refugees’ structural position within a system.

⁶ Created in 1999, the No Border Network is conceived as a tool for grass-roots organizations to work along with migrants and asylum seekers for “freedom of movement, for the freedom for all to stay in the place which they have chosen, against repression and the many controls which multiply the borders everywhere in all countries (<http://noborder.org/about.php>). The coordination between No Border groups is done through two meetings every year and a working e-mail list.

⁷ Using the term “refugees” I refer to individuals entering the Greek territory without any permission of the Greek state. In most of the cases over the last years, refugees entering Greece come from Asian and African countries.

guarantor of human rights. At the same time, and in a contradictory way, it represents refugees as the enemy, threat, or – in the best case – as an “other” whom “we” cannot afford, or as a migrant whom “we” are not obliged to accept. According to the latter claim, Greece, as well as the EU, no longer has any need for working-hands.

The general battle-cry “solidarity with refugees” that informs the gaze of the refugee as victim or friend hides a number of different orientations. Let me make one (among many possible) analytical classifications between different action orientations within the movement solidarity to refugees. Data I use here have been collected within the framework of a broader research project about the movement solidarity to migrants and refugees in Greece, and come from qualitative field work (participatory observation and interviews with participants).

Basic Action Orientations within Movement Solidarity to Refugees in Greece (a Segmented Field)

One could think along a spectrum, considering at one extreme pole the *philanthropic* action and at the opposite pole an *anti-systemic* oriented contentious action. In terms of philanthropy one could enumerate actions such as giving clothes, organizing breadlines or collective kitchens, etc. (church organizations, NGO’s, solidarity groups)⁸. In terms of anti-systemic oriented action one could refer to a group’s contentious actions challenging the power system as a whole. Between these two extreme poles one could consider two other middle positions. First, one could refer to advocacy actions; actions that try to press authorities to assume their responsibility to offer protection and humane facilities to refugees. Second, one could refer to anti-racist actions; actions that try to intervene in the construction of meaning by endeavouring to represent refugees as victims or friends (e.g. publishing refugees’ stories and (re)producing a friendly public discourse), as opposed to the ruling discourse.⁹

Somewhere within the advocacy position we could draw a dichotomy between non-political (philanthropic and, in some cases, advocacy action) and political action. That means that actors operating within the philanthropic field of action (and in some cases within the advocacy one) don’t target directly intervention in the political system (that is, the system within which normal decisions are produced). In most of the cases one could consider advocacy as a political action that takes place within the institutional limits. The other two political positions (anti-racist and anti-systemic oriented) manifest action in both institutional and non-institutional levels.

⁸ I obviously do not mean here that there is no way to distinguish a church organization from an informal solidarity group. A movement’s limits depend on the criteria one analytically sets each time. But this is not the point here.

⁹ Of course these are analytically constructed positions of action orientation whose empirical limits are not clear.

With the exception of the last pole of action, one may see *similar* actions emerging from both informal groups and institutional organizations. In many cases, *similar* actions are being invested with different meanings. For example, organizing breadlines is an action trying to feed the homeless, but organizing a collective kitchen tries to communicate the idea of self-organization, and is meaningfully connected to anti-systemic action (here, action that by-pass the system's organization). Secondly, along this spectrum we meet both groups acting simultaneously at all these levels (e.g., combining all these action orientations) and groups acting in just one or on a few of these levels. Third, moving from the philanthropic to the anti-systemic oriented action pole we meet criticism. Our imaginary philanthropic actors criticize the anti-systemic actors as general, vague and far away from (everyday practical) refugee needs, without any practical outcome ("the problem is here"). From the other side, anti-systemic oriented actors criticize philanthropic ones as trying to resolve the symptom without doing anything against the cause, without challenging power, just trying to cure (collective or personal) guilt ("the problem's cause is out there"). Another criticism exists between the two central positions and the last one. This criticism has its own escalation as well. According to anti-systemic oriented groups, the central poles focusing on human rights neglect the fact that these rights are being subjected to the power of capital's laws and are thereby constrained. On the other hand, according to the central positions, the anti-systemic oriented groups fight for refugees' rights without any *important* outcome; they are seen as wasting resources by focusing on powerful and elusive elites without even having the *constrained* outcomes of the groups of the middle positions. Finally, moving from the philanthropic pole to the anti-systemic one, one meets an increasing challenge to national safety and the role of national borders.

From one point of view one could see all these action orientations as complementary. Generally, there is a need for all four analytical positions. Refugees have no facilities for solving everyday practical problems, so they need practical actions right here right now. At the same time, refugees are being detained and treated as a threat, have no access to the asylum system and have pressing advocacy needs in relation to the authorities. Moreover, the ruling discourse represents refugees as a threat, so refugees must be represented as the victims of the system and even as friends. In addition, refugees *are* victims of the system; that is, acting against the system means action against the precondition of the refugee's state. According to this view, "the movement" (even with unclear limits) covers all the possibilities of acting in solidarity with refugees. From an opposing perspective, one could see these orientations as contradictory. Focusing on philanthropic action, investing resources in philanthropy neglects the system's responsibilities, the cause of the refugee's state. It may mean one doesn't recognize the system's responsibility, or one does not try to improve the system's response to such problems (e.g., the state's responsibility). By focusing on the opposite pole, however, on anti-systemic orientations, by fighting an untouchable power whereby one focuses on the obvious and lowest touchable consumable end (e.g., the police-

guards of a detention center), movement actor will always lose the source of this power. By focusing on the top of the pyramid only, actor produces a general anti-authoritarian discourse, but one that is practically insufficient.

The spectrum of positions within the movement is characterized by discontinuity; the four imaginary positions criticize each other and are somehow contradictory and oppositional. At the same time, the movement is characterized by continuity; groups and individuals combine analytically all the different action orientations, and actions joined by groups carry different meanings.

All these fields of action are further segmented and composed of sub-fields. For instance, the anti-racist position has different trends, like, for example, groups and organizations oriented toward a *common opinion* representing refugees as friends (e.g., organizing anti-racist festivals), and groups more oriented against neo-fascist groups manifesting more contentious action (the so-called “antifa” groups). The field becomes even more complex, especially the political one, as different political ideologies and trends articulate each other within the movement.

Each of these analytical positions consists of groups and individuals the interrelations of which are not so clear and are not given, as one could observe in a hierarchical structured movement or organization or party. The term that could characterize the movement’s organizational structure is “network”. There is no authority or just one leadership that can speak on behalf of the movement. There is information recycling. Each actor (individual or collective) decides his/her/its participation in the action in which he/she/it finds meaning.

Theory and Purposeful Action: An Interactive Relation

It is obvious that, in such a segmented field, it is not easy to find a solid and coherent relation between theory and social movement. But, while theory constitutes an ideational input, it is inseparable from ideational elements that influence individuals offering meaning in their actions.

Although the relation between theory and an individual actor is obvious, I noticed that there are a few cases in which individual actors seem to deny theory’s value. As G.¹⁰ stated, “Who cares about theory..? We need action”. In cases like this, what the individual usually challenges is not theory as such, but the pattern of a theorist who spends the most of his/her time in the office “ignoring the real world” (G’s statement).

In such a segmented field, such as the movement solidarity to refugees, it is very difficult (and not necessarily desirable) to establish a solid and coherent relation between theory and action, especially one in which theory guides a social

¹⁰ G. is an activist acting in a group that could be classified in the anti-systemic oriented position, and define himself as anarchist. In any case, this denial of the pattern of theoretician is not a typical characteristic of actors who define themselves as anarchists. Moreover, I have met activists who deny this pattern and they could be classified and at the other positions than the anti-systemic oriented one.

movement. But there are cases where the “theory-action” scheme I referred to applies not only at the individual actor’s level, but in the collective one as well. For instance, let me focus on the anti-racist movement and the way biological science answered the racial dilemma: “race” is a social construction, that is, a matter of representations, and not an essential one (for a more elaborated and extended rendering, see Wetherell, 1996). While there is no direct relation between anti-racist movement and the science of biology, this biological answer not only armed the anti-racist movement’s argument, but, moreover, consolidated it to such a degree that nowadays it is supposed as self-evident on behalf of activists. This argument has been further strengthened because of social psychology’s answer to the dilemma of racism. Racism doesn’t belong in human’s nature, it’s not a natural norm; it is a matter of representations (very generally), that is, a social phenomenon. But what does such an argument mean for an actor? It means that racism, as a social (and cultural) phenomenon, is open to intervention, it is not impossible to eliminate. In other words, the condition of racism is changeable. Thus, a scientific and theoretical argument justifies the movement’s action.

In this way, racism becomes a field for intervention (action), and the anti-racist movement becomes a field within which activists try to find ways to eliminate or restrict racism. This last observation points out that the scientific field and theory not only offer to action, but receive from it as well. Many activists, trying to answer the “grand questions” among others, are being involved in scientific research and theory, influencing, in turn, theory.

Conclusion

Social movements’ action is neither a mechanistic nor an instinctive one (even when spontaneity comprises one of its basic morphological characteristics). Instead, it is a purposeful and meaningful action that presupposes an interpretation of the world, that is, a theoretical scheme. Even if there is no strict and direct theoretical guidance, as happened to some degree in the case of ideological movements, theory is embedded within actors’ ideational elements that orient their action.

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