



Social conflicts and historical totality in high middle ages (5th-10th century)

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ABSTRACT. The study of the great transitions enjoys, in these days, a considerable degree of low status in the field of History. Maybe it's not hard to see the reasons of such absurd contradiction - at least if we consider that the essence of the subject in question lies in the study of the changes and transformations! Postmodernism, denial of the knowability or even the existence of the real, micro-history, fascination for the immobility, the continuities and the resistance to change, a more or less dense 'description', prevalent, are hegemonic tendencies in the historiographical field that help us to understand the feeling, almost widespread nowadays, that the attempted framing of the transition processes is an extemporaneous task, a surpassed demand! I propose, in this paper, in the context of Iberian's High Middle Ages, the analysis of the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages in its fundamental structuring elements.

Keywords: medieval history, social globality, class struggles.

Conflitos sociais e totalidade histórica na alta idade média (séculos V – X)

RESUMO. O estudo das grandes transições goza, nos tempos que correm, de um grau considerável de desprestígio no campo da História. Talvez, não seja difícil divisar as razões de tal absurdo contrassenso – ao menos se consideramos que a essência da disciplina em questão reside no estudo das mudanças, das transformações! Pós-modernismo, negação da cognoscibilidade ou, até mesmo, da existência do real, micro-história, fascínio pelo imobilismo, pelas continuidades e pela resistência à mudança, 'descritivismo' mais ou menos denso, imperante, são tendências hegemônicas no campo historiográfico, que ajudam a entender a sensação, quase generalizada atualmente, de que a tentativa de enquadramento dos processos de transição seja uma tarefa extemporânea, uma demanda superada! Proponho-me, neste artigo, a retomar, no contexto da Alta Idade Média Ibérica, a análise da transição da Antiguidade à Idade Média em seus elementos estruturantes fundamentais.

Palavras-chave: história medieval, globalidade social, luta de classes.

Conflictos sociales y totalidad histórica en la alta edad media (siglos V – X)

RESUMEN. El estudio de las grandes transiciones posee, hoy en día, un grado considerable de desprestigio en el campo de la Historia. Quizá no sea difícil percibir las razones de tal contradicción – ipor lo menos si consideramos que la esencia de la asignatura en cuestión reside en el estudio de los cambios y de las transformaciones! Postmodernismo, negación de la cognoscibilidad o, hasta mismo, de la existencia de lo real, micro-historia, fascinación por la inmovilidad, por las continuidades y por la resistencia al cambio, 'descripción' más o menos densa, predominante, son tendencias hegemónicas en el campo historiográfico, que ayudan a entender la sensación, casi generalizada actualmente, de que el intento de encuadramiento de los procesos de transición sea una tarea extemporánea, una demanda superada! Me propuse, en este artículo, retomar, en el contexto de la Alta Edad Media Ibérica, el análisis de la transición de la Antigüedad a la Edad Media en sus elementos estructurales fundamentales.

Palabras clave: historia medieval, globalización social, lucha de clases.

Introduction

The study of the great transitions enjoys, in these days, a considerable degree of low status in the field of History. Maybe it's not hard to see the reasons of such absurd contradiction - at least if we consider that the

essence of the subject in question lies in the study of the changes and transformations! Postmodernism, denial of the knowability or even the existence of the real, micro-history, fascination for the immobility, the continuities and the resistance to change, a more or less dense 'description', prevalent, are hegemonic

tendencies in the historiographical field that help us to understand the feeling, almost widespread nowadays, that the attempted framing of the transition processes is an extemporaneous task, a surpassed demand!

By default of fads of short breath, the general problem in which is inscribed this paper is the study of the transition processes in history and, more particularly, those enrolled in the general framework of the pre-capitalist societies. To the author it also seems that the crucial problem of the story is the time of human actions. And it is also quite complex in its basic requirements: in the face of multiple simultaneous times, it is in not only relate them in their short and long durations, but also to consider its most sensitive manifestation, that is, the portion of historical material that is endangered and the portion that is in the coursework of the processes that we analyze (BERNARDO, 2006).

The word 'transition' involves very different senses of a basic sense, which is the movement that results in change of 'status'. And what is the meaning of the restrictive qualification I made earlier, linking the problem of transition to the particular context of pre-capitalist societies? Within these societies, I believe that the diversity of its historical forms preserves, at least, two essential elements of constant background, i.e. permanence, which need to be considered, especially as I will try to demonstrate at the end of this analysis, because of its intimate linkage and importance in the processes of domination and resistance.

The first concerns the fact that, in the post-tribal and pre-capitalist societies characterized by social division of labor and social inequality, the processes of material reproduction are based on the production and extraction of surpluses peasants, characteristic structural feature of these agrarian societies guided by various social mechanisms of exploitation of the peasantry. This is an essential element that 'unifies' them amid considerable diversity of forms, configuring a constant background, restructured in several transitions, which made the passage from the tribal forms of primary production to distinct secondary forms. At the heart of these processes took place the establishment of specific mechanisms of domination and surplus extraction of families and characteristics rural communities, for example, the Asian tributary, the feudal and slavery forms etc. It was in this context that the one lived until the rise of capitalism did with everything that was solid melted in the air!

About the second element, religious alienation, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (MARX; ENGELS, 2007; MARX, 2011), after addressing the differences between the forms of dependency characteristics of

the way of Asian, feudal and slavery production, they highlight that, any of these cases, the economic activity is directed towards the production of use values and corresponds to a low level of development of productive forces. They state that such forms of economy would be concerned to the economic mystification that follow the market output and the use of currency, since the relations of production would not take the form of relations between things and between work products. Therefore, would the alienation be a stranger phenomenon to the sale precapitalism? No, according to Marx, because such social formations would be a stage from that it may have been the first form of the ideology, mystification that would cover a religious form as they express the limitations of material life and the narrowness of the established relations of men among themselves and with the nature (MARX, 1972; TOSCANO, 2010; BERTRAND, 1979). Despite, also on this level, the diversity of forms taken by the phenomenon traditionally called religion within those societies - animist, polytheistic, monotheistic religions etc. - It always and somehow carries out an essential part in the processes of production and appropriation of the fruits of labor.

I will focus from here in a more specific context, the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, for decades referred as the passage of slavery to feudalism. The debate is marked by a long tradition 'historiography', although it has been cooled in recent decades. For space limits, I will positively tell about it only the aspects that predominate today that point out the crisis of the old system and the rise of feudalism to a profound break - a 'feudal revolution' - that occurred at the turn of the year one thousand, when the lords had suddenly reduced the set of peasantry to the relations of dependence (ANDERSON, 1987; BOIS, 1989; BERNARDO, 1995, 1997, 2002). Moreover, I do an inventory of criticism, not so much because of the inherent myopia to the hegemonic perspective that I have just enunciated, which resists realizing the long course of the proceedings in question, inscribed in various ways in the landscape of that time, but concentrating in their most harmful expressions.

The first of them is the most common alternative trend, which is to promote the fragmentation of the object of study, split into the famous (and increasingly numerous!) several levels of analysis. The 'dialogue of the deaf' which often characterizes the 'pseudodebate' of the transition in question follows, strictly speaking, the fact that participants manifest from different prisms treating

only apparently the same subject. Thus, in the analysis of the transition that specialist focuses on the cultural level, the other one in the political one, one third in the religion one and that who is sitting there in the bottom in the economy (WICKHAM, 1984)! The scholars defend themselves in the argument (misguided in my view) that each of these levels is marked by an almost total specificity and autonomy, each one is moved so radically by its own speed and for so many, so numerous and so various determinations that becomes almost impossible to determine and understand the practice and the operation of each one in a set, a hinged entirety.

Then, I call attention to another trend that as it is so vigorous, it is virtually unanimous among the strands of approach to the subject. This is the absolute disregard for the effects of contradictions, of social conflicts and of class struggle in determining the course of medieval history in general and the transition processes that involves it, in particular. In this specific context, for example, the classical approaches impacts directly and specifically, in the initiatives and decisions of the landowning elite - to which is even assigned a historical role guided by the desire of profit maximization - the decision by suppressing the 'system former economic', the 'slave' and the implantation of servile relations of production (BASTOS, 2013).

But, the overcoming of this limited framework of perspectives is a *sine qua non* condition to any attempt to analyze the transition from the point of view of the articulation of social entirety. Then, at first I highlight that, if even under capitalism, as Karl Marx pointed out, the 'fragmentation' of social life, i.e. what appears in its historic nature as a difference of 'spheres', especially the 'economic' and 'political', is only an appearance - due, in this case, the unprecedented differentiation of the economic sphere that the system promotes - in pre-capitalist societies the surplus was extracted from the direct producers by the convergence of various mechanisms of coercion, articulated mainly in that kind of field attraction forces that is constituted by the relations of production, but as parts of their essential and primary time. Therefore, I propose that the relations of production take place organically, maybe in these societies in particular in legal, political, cultural and religious individuals forms of relationship - modes of domination and coercion, forms of ownership and social organization, level of productive forces - that are not mere reflections or secondary support, but constituent elements of the relations of production since the beginning of its

execution. The 'sphere' of production is dominant not in the sense of keeping distinct from the legal-political, cultural or religious forms, or to precede them logically and historically, but just in the sense that these are forms of production, they are *attributes* of a particular productive system (WOOD, 2003).

As Marx wrote in *Grundrisse* and well highlighted by Edward P. Thompson,

[...] In all forms of society, it is a certain production and its relations which assign rank and influence to any other production and its relations. It is a general illumination in which are immersed all colors that modifies their particular shades. It is a special ether to define the specific gravity of all that it highlights. In place of the notion of the primacy of the 'economic' (more 'real'.) - where the norms and culture are seen as secondary reflections - what this passage emphasizes is the simultaneity of the manifestation of private productive relationships across all systems and areas of social life (THOMPSON, 2001, p. 254, our emphasis).

Considered the period between the fifth and tenth centuries, roughly, the European West, and in its essential lines of force, it was marked by the expansion of large landed property manor, based on different procedures and mechanisms, but mainly oriented to the incorporation of the small peasant farm, a specific procedure for expropriation which fostered the creation and articulation of social classes in the social formation in question: a dependent peasantry and a landowning ruling class manor. Such relationships take a strong personal connotations, as in subordinating to each other aristocrats of higher and lower expression in the famous bonds of allegiance, as in constituting them into broad families that were inter-connected and claimed together, the ascendancy *vis a vis* to the peasantry (BERNARDO, 1995).

Far from been configured as a perennial, stable process and free of more or less vigorous manifestations against social contradictions that characterized it, the process was guided by several expressions of antagonism that still demand for studies. Despite its considerable limits what the period documentation reveals, leads us, if supported by an adequate theoretical framework, to a process not due to intervention of the sovereign will of a single class, but to the contradictions and the game of actions and reactions that embody the conflicts and the movement of history. A note, however:

Conflicts are not a different reality from the daily operations of the social system. They are a different perspective because these operations should be faced when we want to follow them in their development. Thus, I distinguish the fights, the violent clashes in

the classical sense, of all the conflicts in which I include all forms of manifestation of social contradictions. The systems aim its reproduction and, from one stage to the next, the contradictions mark the rhythm of the time. Conflicts are sensitive manifestation of the contradictions; materialize the time and they are therefore the foundation of the story (BERNARDO, 1997, p. 15).

In the context in question, not even the violent riots, more vigorous expression of social struggles were missing. However, there were more manifestations of conflict and more everyday forms of resistance, reaching as entire regions as more specific villages and often even some houses and peasant families who, with considerable frequency, resorted to the courts. I will conclude this paper with the preparation of a brief typological inventory of these manifestations (WICKHAM, 2007).

According to Wickham, the first category of conflicts that pitted peasants and lords was related to the legal status of the first. The high-medieval documents from courthouses are relatively numerous, in which landowners wish to affirm the personal dependence of the peasants tied to the property, especially in the cases they intend to have a personal status of freedom.

These cases ended in general, with the victory of the Lord, even when the servants have occasionally won, as in *Canaveilles*, in the eastern Pyrenees, in 874, or in *Cusago*, near Milan, in 901. Evidently, the lords had no interest in preserving the documents in case of defeat in court, but if we consider the routine record of their victories in the documentary collections, it may be possible to consider that this was the usual result (WICKHAM, 2007, p. 40).

It should be clarified that the legal freedom could favor the peasant with the attenuation of the weight of the rents that he was undergoing. As we check on frank *polyptychs*, for example, at least until the first half of the ninth century that the taxation related to a free origin tenant was comparatively lower than that affect the domestic servants.

The second category of conflict involving various forms of manor exaction, especially the rent of land, leading us to a dispute which stood at the heart of relations between peasants and lords. However, Chris Wickham notes that the documentation concerning it is significantly less abundant in this than in later periods. For the author, this relative scarcity is due probably to the majority status of unfree tenants, in the Middle Ages, who had sealed their access to public courts, *forum par excellence* from which the documentation is originated. It is also likely that, in this type of situation, the lords

acted more directly using direct violence and armed intervention, considering that the customs governing the fixing of rents were jealously defended by the peasantry.

The set of best known examples in which freedom is linked to obligations related to income is from Limonta, on Lake Como, in the period between 882 and 957, when the peasants, stating their freedom, refused to cultivate the olive trees of their lord, the monastery of St. Ambrose of Milan This -. falsely, as demonstrated Ross Balzaretti - claimed that all were *servi* and his claim that were obliged to that cultivation was based on the usual established a *longo tempore*, and not in the arbitrary power of the lords over the non-free (WICKHAM, 2007, p. 42).

A third field of disputes was articulated in direct relation to the occupation and exploitation of space, being more explicit in cases where landlords contended the silvopastoral rights with the local communities. This took place under the most hard-fought contests, both because of the collective nature of communal rights, which held together, more effectively, communities, and by the internal force of those who preserved such rights and further by the tendency of those rights were regulated by an intricate set of manners that overlapped in many cases. A classic example of conflict silvopastoral is documented on a registration form of St. *Gall* concerning a dispute between the monastery and a peasant community of its neighborhood about the demarcation of the forest and the animals grazing, dated to the first half of the ninth century. The conclusion of the legal process gave rise to the division of the woods, which features a partial victory for the local community, in question.

The most plentiful and enlightening records of conflicts over rights of use of uncultivated land, especially during the X and XI centuries, with the assertion of royal and aristocratic power in the Meseta, region lying in the north of the Douro river comes from the northern regions of the Iberian Peninsula. The livestock, which is the primary economic activity of local peasant communities that have remained autonomous for almost two centuries, involved a series of pastoral rights that set the tone for the peasant reaction against the aristocratic deployment in the region.

Reyna Pastor showed that, if on many occasions the communities lost all their rights of exploitation of grazing areas sometimes they were able to force the churches (main site landlord) to divide spaces in dispute, as they did with the monks of *Pardominio* (Province of León), in 944, or with the powerful monastery of *San Millán de la Cogolla* in the region of Navarra, in 1050 [...] We have examples where

communities have mobilized to fend off other manorial powers, as in the case of *Castrojeriz* (Province of Burgos) that obtained in 974, a privilege (*fuero*) of the Earl of *Castilla* who defended his pastoral duties, even if they had to take action themselves to defend the actions of cattle theft perpetrated by local aristocrats throughout the tenth century (WICKHAM, 2007, p. 45).

The fourth category enunciated by Chris Wickham configures, according to his opinion, the most explicit manifestations of peasant protagonism, whose occurrence would be expressed, for example, in the ban imposed by King Rotary, dated 643, in the Italian Peninsula, to any peasant rebellion (*seditio*) as it could testify that the peasants could be grouped into collectives (*Concilio*) rebelled against the actions of a certain lord (*dominus*). This type of event would have a very limited horizon, referring only to peasants who resisted, by force, to the exercise of manorial prerogatives of a stately aristocrat given over their dependents. It seems to have been the case of a rebellion that took place in the countryside of Naples in 592, in which many peasants dependent on many lords rose against the papal administrator of Naples and they attacked him. Some centuries later, the peasants of the Frankish region between the rivers *Loire* and *Sena* formed a sworn association (*coniuratio*) to repel *Vikings* invasions, which is why they would face the wrath of local aristocrats, who decimated the peasantry in the year 859. This form of peasant protagonism, even facing a supposedly common enemy, constituted a risk to the elites, and their reaction makes it clear to his real opponents at that time.

Fifthly, Chris Wickham brings together the authentic and scarce, peasant revolts of the Middle Ages, as it took place in the kingdom of Asturias, around the year 770, and the *Stellinga* that occurred in the region of Saxony in 841-2. However, we should consider an element that escapes from the perception of that author. Since the beginning of the period covered by this study, several western regions of the Roman Empire were the scene of violent social confrontations, especially parts of present-day France and Spain in the decades of 430 and 450. Gathering hit-and-run slaves and subordinate peasants, plus a free impoverished peasantry and progressively subjected to the aristocratic dependence, the attacks against large land assets promoted,

[...] plus plenty of immediate physical destruction, the emancipation of much of the direct producers, allowing the ex-slaves and the free taking over of parcels land that they passed to cultivate on their own account and in their benefit (BERNARDO, 1997, p. 22).

It is noteworthy that such movements, designated *bacaudae*, met several outbursts that even won by Roman repressive apparatus never came to be, apparently, fully suppressed, being in a latent state between the second and fifth centuries, amidst the various outbreaks. Thus, the riots that occurred in the following centuries were absolutely not a new fact, even though we know very little about them.

The elites of the period never dedicated themselves to trying to understand the motivations of peasants when they put into question, in such a triggered way and according to their judgment, unacceptable, the dominant political and ideological structures. Furthermore, we have a lack of detailed record of chroniclers who addressed the peasant revolts occurred in the fourteenth century (WICKHAM, 2007, p. 40).

Regarding to Asturias in 770, we only have a few lines recorded in elaborate chronicles around the year 900, which states that the dependent peasants rose against their masters, until King Aurelius reduce them, after killing many, to their previous servitude. It is likely that, in the small, mountainous Asturias then, the process of aristocratic domination was still in its early days, assuming the character of the violent opposition from jealous rural communities who were known by their traditional autonomy. This is even the interpretive strand most commonly adopted in relation to the revolt of *Stellinga*. The Saxony was not a region subjected to aristocratic control when it was the target of the bloody conquest by Charlemagne in the late eighth century, which can be inferred from broad participation of the peasantry at the annual meeting that gathered together the various local communities.

In the first half of the ninth century, however, as the native aristocrats as the Franks who were installed, especially in ecclesiastical institutions, increased the land concentration and the extent of dependency relations. When the civil war, started in 840 because of the Carolingian succession disputes, stagger the aristocratic hegemony, the free peasants and the freedmen (*frilingi* and *Lazzi*, respectively) responded and triggered the revolt of *Stellinga* ('Companions', 'brothers'). Its main target was the Saxon aristocracy, and it is claimed that the rebels sought to restore the 'ancient customs of the Saxons'. They remained Saxony under their control during the winter and spring of 841-842, suffering a violent crackdown by the local aristocracy afterwards. This revolt shows us in particular that,

[...] the peasantry period was able to recognize and to oppose to the global expansion of aristocratic

power [...] in addition to electing the good times to the outbreak of the movement (WICKHAM, 2007, p. 45).

Final considerations

As we pointed out earlier in this paper, the systematic study of the manifestations of peasant resistance and social conflicts in the Middle Ages Western is still to be done. We have classic works, such as Rodney Hilton (1988) and Reyna Pastor (1980), who are pioneers in addressing the issue, but their diverse local expressions and timing are still poorly known, such situation, for sure, favored by a vigorous historiographical inflection which became the Medieval history, in recent decades, the field of domain par excellence of the reactionary and postmodern perspectives, I beg your pardon because of the redundancy. Thus, for example, the fascination exercised over the lives of the medievalists that I have called elsewhere (BASTOS; PACHA, 2011) by the 'ontological precedence' given to the concepts of 'medieval' to understanding that society and it is a real obstacle to overcome the ideology of social tripartition, sublimated vision, elaborated by the elites of the period to affirm the harmonious coexistence between 'priests', 'warriors' and 'workers', denying the contradictions and disclose the alleged dominant social balance. So, how can we pay attention within the framework of such a naive and simplistic view, however hegemonic, for the manifestations of the phenomena which constitute the most peremptory denial of the validity of a medieval supposedly idyllic society which seduces its scholars?

It is therefore urgent that we resize the global characterization of pre-capitalist medieval millennium, as well as other slices of its life, overcoming, based on the best tradition of marxist critical theory, the idealistic visions that put in check, more than deciphering the past but to understand the history that established our present ongoing. In this sense, the diversity of relationships, social practices and experiences of the peasantry in their daily struggle for existence, material and social reproduction and resistance to aristocratic domination must be framed in the center of that social formation essentially agrarian (SCOTT, 1985). What their barely audible echoes lost in the mists of time reveal is not the prosaic tone of strange events experienced by an 'other' in which, faraway, we cannot recognize, but the temporal amplitude and the richness of human experience lived in conditions of oppression and the struggle against it, beyond the effects of movement and transformation

that produces this fight. What the dissipation of *Mists of Avalon* from that time the unveil us is a medieval society marked by fierce violence, of class inequalities and by intense exploitation, and the daily and diverse combat against its manifestations, disturbing expressions that when they echo from the sources, tarnish the Middle Ages dreamlike that we learn to celebrate especially in Brazil, where this age was first and foremost guided by the perspective of the history of French Mindsets (BASTOS; RUST, 2009).

Finally, within the analysis of social movements should be considered, as noted earlier, with João Bernardo, which prevails even in theoretical sources as different as liberal historiography and the Marxist tradition, a reductive conception of the breadth and diversity of those historical events, being limited to a certain type of phenomenon generally defined in terms of number of participants, the explicit character, or preferably violence of the movements, the systematic placement of claims and, above all, the purpose of these requirements,

[...] which should correspond to which historians consider to be the economic sphere. Everything that does not meet these conditions is excluded from the social struggles, so there would be only a temporality marked in regular periodicity when the systems function (BERNARDO, 1997, p. 15).

Aiming to expand our ability to grasp the various expressions of conflicts in history in the period of this analysis, it can be considered the confrontation between Christianity, a statement religion, and the beliefs and practices condemned for orthodoxy as pagans practices articulated directly to the heart of the process of the implementation of new forms of power and of resistance which were opposed (BASTOS, 2013). Despite the limits imposed by the nature of the available sources, the successive condemnations of pagan beliefs and practices spoken by christian orthodoxy seem to reveal that peasant communities have preserved a base of continuous elaboration and re-elaboration of an irreducible worldview to the formulas issued by the ecclesiastical elites, expressing their autonomic ways of grasping of the nature and the ideals productive forces, embodied in rites of fertility, protection of fields of crops, and their livestock etc. Take them as expressions of system dysfunction, such as 'disembodied' cultural manifestations or even to take the perspective of the authorities of that time, condemning them as remnants of a past doomed to disappearance, imply, in any case, in giving up what seems to constitute two essential basic guidelines to

the analysis of historical processes, especially those that configure the transitions: pay attention to the manifestations of social contradictions that reveal the dynamics of systems and target - without postpone it to a remote future – the synthesis, i.e., the understanding of the operation - in their gaps and joints – of the social and historical structured globalities.

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