Rights-related arguments in the São Paulo public school occupations of 2015: experiences of disrespect, recognition and prefigurative politics[1][2]

RICARDO JUOZEPAVICIUS GONÇALVES

ABSTRACT This paper presents a theoretical interpretation and analysis of rights-related arguments raised by students during the occupations of public schools in São Paulo state (Brazil) in 2015. First, I reconstruct the event, drawing on a selection of interviews with student activists published in a variety of sociological studies. In these interviews, students outline their experiences of disrespect before the state government's proposal for "school reorganization". Secondly, I mobilise elements of Axel Honneth's and Robin Celikates's critical theories for interpreting concrete social experiences and practices in contexts of social struggles. Finally, considering Honneth's remarks on the "sphere of rights" in *Struggle for Recognition*, I propose a theoretical interpretation of students' rights-related arguments and demands within a non-state centered conception, as consisting of a practical resource and a shared medium that allowed their protests to reverberate across the state and into social sectors distant from the students.

KEYWORDS Occupy, Students' movement, Recognition, Pre-figurative politics, Critical theory

[1] This study was possible thanks to the support of the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), grants 2018/00924-1 and 2019/12975-2. Preliminary and partial versions of this paper were presented at the IX Students Seminar of the Political Science at the University of São Paulo (USP) and the X National Seminar of Sociology & Politics at the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR), both in 2019. I would like to thank all the participants for their comments on these occasions, as well as Luciano Miguel Barsotti, Arthur Bueno, Luiz Phelipe Oliveira Dal Santo, and the two anonymous reviewers of the Interfere: Journal for Critical Thought and Radical Politics for their suggestions to improve this paper. Any remaining flaws and inaccuracies are the sole responsibility of the author.

[2] A version of this paper was previously published in Portuguese in the Law and Praxis Journal (available at <https://www.e-publicacoes.uerj.br/index.php/revistaceaju/article/view/52603/37211> [last accessed Sept. 2021]).

Introduction

The movement of public school occupations in São Paulo state in late 2015 was a massive mobilisation unprecedented in the history of Brazilian social movements[3]. Public school students united to prevent the government's "school reorganization" measures, using several protest tactics including the occupation of school buildings. This paper discusses the motivations behind these protests and the rights-related arguments addressed by students; reconstructing the experiences of the subjects involved through a selection and analysis of interviews and sociological fieldwork conducted during the protests and occupations. The scope of this analysis aims to access the viewpoint of student-protestors through the articulation of their experiences: specifically their views on injustice, violations of guaranteed rights, and their desires for the effectiveness and expansion of constitutional rights related to public education and social participation.

This particular selection is proposed since, in recent literature discussing this episode, there is so far no analysis deals in an isolated and specific way with rights-related arguments and their consequences for the development of the protests and occupations[4]. Thus, I raise a hypothetical interpretation of the movement's ability to influence and motivate support from civil society in such a short period, a decisive contemporary factor in preventing the implementation of the government's policies.

Next, I present some remarks on Axel Honneth's and Robin Celikates's critical-theoretical discussions of the proximity or distance between theorists, social agents, and their respective practices[5]. The perspective of Frankfurtian critical theory, its assumptions, and methodology (expressed in a formulation between these two authors), allows a "continuation, by means of a controlled scientific methodology, of the cognitive labor that oppressed groups have to perform in their everyday struggles when they work to denaturalise hegemonic patterns of interpretation" (Honneth, 2017b: 919), expressing their indignations, motivations, and interests. This represents a theoretical stance focused on the lived experiences of disrespect, its consequences, and possibilities, one guided by the desire to produce

[3] For an overview of the protests of recent years in Brazil, see Gohn (2014; 2019).

[4] For a broader overview on issues related to school occupations in several Brazilian states in this period, see the collection of papers organised in *Ocupar e Resistir: Movimentos de Ocupação de Escolas pelo Brasil (2015-2016)* (Medeiros et. al., 2019)

[5] In the background of this viewpoint is the discussion about the involvement of the researcher with the social context and the observed agents. In recent decades, with the novel and massive protests that exploded in all parts of the world, demanding complex and structural changes in political and economic systems (Castells, 2017; Celikates et al., 2015), what would be the best stance to understand these events: should they look at specific economic and political conjunctures? Should they focus on institutions or the social practices and mobilisations of dissatisfied subjects? Should they stand back or approach the social context? Should they clarify, listen or remain close to the social agents who are involved with the phenomenon? For further exploration of these and other questions, see Celikates (2018).

knowledge informed by social plurality and democracy in which the daily experiences and practices of its subjects are respected and considered in the political formation of societies.

In this sense, both authors consider elements of the reconstructive conception of experiences and practices developed by Jürgen Habermas in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971) as productive insofar as they allow a closer approach of critical theory to social agents. One aspect bringing the authors together is the relevance both grant to subjects, their critical attitudes, and practices motivated by their experiences of disrespect in order to question and struggle against naturalised social orders of domination. For Honneth this is conceptualised through the processes of a struggle for recognition (Honneth, 1995), and for Celikates through the development of an updated concept of civil disobedience (Celikates, 2016; 2015; 2014).

In this paper, the term "social practices of contestation" is used to refer to the varied forms of critical manifestations against experiences of disrespect which aim to secure or achieve various types of social demand. This type of practice attempts to manifest the disrespect and injustices suffered by social agents to give vent to critical behaviors – constituted by their motivations and justifications – and, simultaneously, to agents' emancipatory interests – their desire to overcome the situation considered unjust.

Finally, I present a possible theoretical interpretation of the rights-related arguments used during the school occupations, and their potential to influence and gain support from wider civil society, through Honneth's conception of the "sphere of rights" in his *Struggle for Recognition: the moral grammar of social conflicts* (1995). Honneth's theory of recognition can be fruitful to this analysis since it provides theoretical elements – such as the concept of recognition, the delimitation of its spheres of attainment, and a methodological focus on experiences of disrespect and violation – to understand the motivations and claims of social struggles and the expanding self-realisation of critical subjects. Such a theoretical perspective presents a correlation between the origin of subjects' social indignation, considered individually, with its collective unfolding and social effects.

Moreover, Honneth provides a conception of rights that can be understood as a practical resource and a shared medium both in a "state-institutional" sense and as a "social conception", constituted by the capacity of generalisation of demands and, consequently, of the wide diffusion of experiences of disrespect suffered individually[6]. This is a conception that allows analysis of new social uprisings and

[6] Although the focus of this paper draws on the rights-related arguments in the mentioned episode, this does not mean disregarding the importance of affectivity and psychological issues. These were also of paramount importance for the mobilisation of the students, but these issues require a different analysis

their relationship to their ideals of social organisation and the rights that permeate their demands and practices of contestation.

It is important to make clear that the scope of the project developed in *Struggle for Recognition* is to elaborate a critical social theory centered on processes of intersubjective recognition. Honneth does not integrate a defined concept of law into his theory, and does not position himself within contemporary debates among legal theorists and philosophers. His considerations of law and rights are devoted to demonstrating the role played by modern understandings of these concepts, alongside other spheres of recognition, in shaping the moral grammar of social conflicts. This is done through a process combining the formation of personal identity and autonomy, the internalisation of normative expectations of equal respect, the suffering generated by systematic forms of disrespect, and struggles motivated by the expansion of existing structures of recognition (1995: 162-165). It is precisely his "unconventional" perspective on law and rights[7] that informs the theoretical explanation of the arguments analyzed here, which also elude traditional readings of rights-related demands.

In this way, the violation of rights and experiences of disrespect caused by unfulfilled expectations of recognition, as well as their thematisation, can be observed as an interpretative vector for the emergence of students' critical behavior and its reverberation to other social sectors. Therefore, it has a motivational and driving function for the organisation and strengthening of social movements, functioning as a medium to communicate individual and collective experiences of disrespect and longings for social change.

1 The occupied schools in São Paulo state in 2015

Between September and December 2015, an unprecedented social movement in Brazilian history, both for its size and innovative tactics, emerged. Following the announcement of "school reorganization" proposals by São Paulo state Governor Geraldo Alckmin (PSDB-SP), public school students began several protests against the adoption of single-cycle organisation in some schools[8], reallocation of more than

than the one proposed here. Thus, they will remain in the background of this work to present an interpretation that it is the point of view of rights violations that allowed, in this particular experience and in a more objective way than in the other spheres of the Honnethian theory (love and solidarity), "to see what they see".

[7] It is possible to state that his perspective of law and rights does not fit with the state-centered ones, not reducing it to the positive laws, courts, legislative institutions, or to the activities of judges and officials. Thus, leaving it in connection with other social spheres, practices, and intersubjective relations.

[8] A cycle consists of the first nine years of schooling (elementary school) or the final three years (high school). A single-cycle organisation is a specialisation of education in which each school includes only elementary school or high school, based on the unproved argument that this measure would improve

300,000 students, and closure of 94 public schools, amongst other mooted reforms[9]. The policy was interpreted by students as an attempt to weaken the public education system in the state, and as authoritarian and exclusionary. The measures, to have been implemented at the beginning of 2016, were communicated without any consultation with, or participation of, students or the broader school community. In the weeks following Alckmin's announcement, between September and the first week of November 2015, students reacted with petitions demanding explanations from the Regionals Boards of Education and the State Secretary of Education, and held at least 163 demonstrations throughout the state (Campos et. al., 2016: 41-43). In these demonstrations, their claims focussed mainly on the participation of students and their families, school staff, and teachers in the development of appropriate proposals for the improvement of public education, and on public debate of the announced "school reorganization" proposal.

Despite this massive mobilisation, the state government remained intractable - avoiding dialogue with school communities and ignoring the policy aspects most criticised by students. Traditional media also paid little-to-no attention to students' demands. To get answers from the government, the students decided to change their protest tactics. Inspired by the "*Rebelion Pinguina*" movement of Chile in 2006[10], they adopted a more radical form of protest: the occupation of school buildings to force the withdrawal of the proposals and the opening of dialogue with government representatives. The first school was occupied on November 9, 2015. In less than two months, more than 200 schools were occupied throughout the state of São Paulo[11].

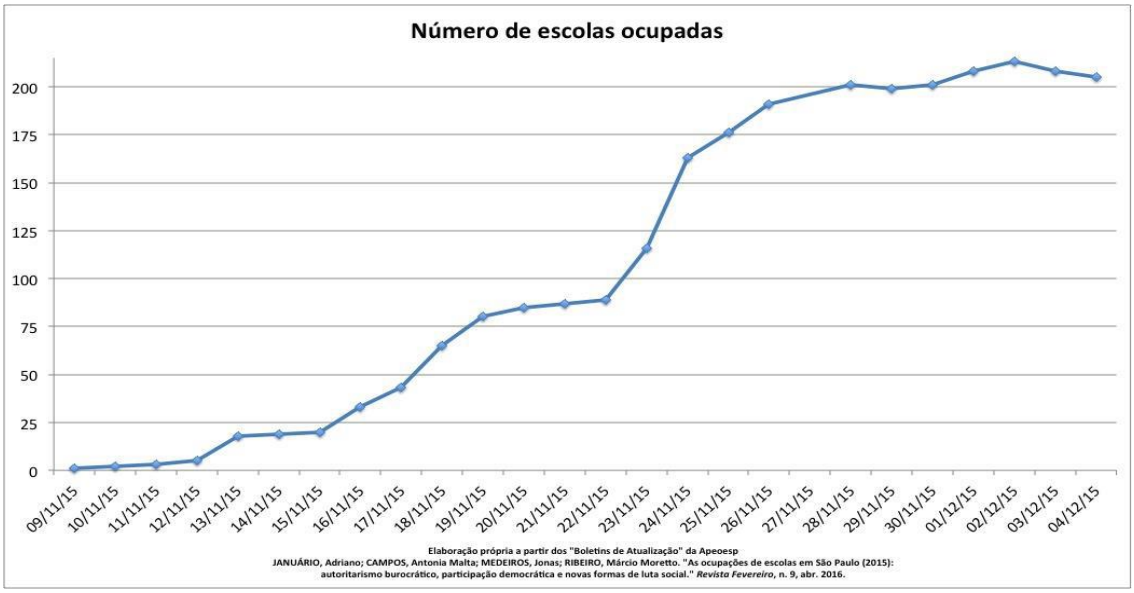
(Graphic "Number of occupied schools")

the quality of the public education in the state, by concentrating only on students of similar age in the schools.

[9] For a brief sum of the event written in the heat of the moment, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/16/opinion/brazils-students-occupy-their-schools-to-save-them.html> (last accessed Sept. 2021).

[10] One of the key factors that contributed to inspiring the Brazilian students was the contact with the documentary "*La Rebelion Pinguina*" in public exhibitions organised by social movements (available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYzkDql56yw> [last accessed Sept. 2021]). Another factor was the translation of a booklet called "How to occupy a school?" used by students in Argentina and Chile, produced by the movement "*O Mal Educado*" (a word-play in Portuguese that can mean both poorly educated and audacious), long before the occupations took place.

[11] It is important to note that the government tried to disrupt the occupations using the state military police enforcement on several occasions, as can be seen in scenes from documentaries and news reports, for instance see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j42hfZiOfSU> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LK9Ri2prfNw> (last accessed Sept. 2021).



The contestational practice of occupying public schools showed a great capacity to influence dispersed social actors. The occupied schools received support from those close to the students (their families, neighbors, local traders, and teachers) and also from distant social sectors that mobilised to support the occupations. These included several independent media channels and some sectors of mainstream media, university students, activists, lawyers, intellectuals, and some sectors of the Judiciary[12], alongside countless artists, musicians, public personalities and organisations of football supporters (Campos et. al., 2016: 257-267).

On December 4th, 2015, amongst the enormous repercussions of the occupation movement, the government announced the suspension of its "school reorganization" reforms, and the then-State Secretary of Education resigned from his position. Surveys also indicated a steep drop in Governor Geraldo Alckmin's popularity during the period. The occupation movement had such acceptance in the public sphere, and caused such enormous cost for the government, that it was left with no alternative but to retreat (Campos et. al., 2016: 257-267).

1.1 Students' voice: affectivity, solidarity, rights and critique

The experiences of disrespect provoked by the government proposals were most varied during the occupations themselves, as shown by interviews conducted with students and analysis of their publications on social networks (Campos et. al., 2016; Campos et.al., 2015). For didactic purposes, I adopt the typology of arguments presented by Medeiros and Januário (2017) to characterise students' responses: a)

[12] Such as the Special Action Group on Education (GEDUC) of the Public Prosecutor's Office (Ministério Público de São Paulo) and the Public Defender's Office (Defensoria Pública de São Paulo)

emotional or affective objections to the reform package; b) rational arguments against substantive aspects of the proposals; and c) political and moral criticisms of the authoritarian way in which the state has treated the students.

The first argument type is demonstrated in the relationship between students' decision to protest and occupy their schools and their affectivity towards the school and school community. Many students reported long-lasting ties and bonds with their schools, to the extent that they joined the protests because they perceived that these ties were threatened:

> Bro, this is our house... our home [...] and you can't get out of it like this... you can't forget your home... your home and all that family... they are not of blood but heart... there we are not only friends... we are a family and I know that if we all act together... they will not get us out of there... they cannot do it, it is our future that is at stake and I think I speak for everyone when I say that we will not leave our home or our family behind [...]. (Excerpt from a Facebook post. Available at Campos et. al., 2016: 33)

Other students, however, did not experience this as a fundamental motivation for thir involvement:

> I hated school myself, sorry for the sincerity, but I hated school only because it is a very oppressive space [...], but I hate school but I think that we are the ones who make the school [...], yet, you know I say I don't like it but this is my school, you know, like, I want to be here, I want to change this boring habit of teachers coming in and throwing anything on the board because school can be just the way it is, but it is our place and we have to fight for it [...]. (Excerpt from an interview with a student. Available at Campos et. al., 2016: 34)

The core of this category of arguments is positive valuations of sociability within schools threatened by the reform project: friendships, local bonds, and affective relationships among the students and between students, professors and school staff. Not all, however, students shared these affective motivations.

We also find arguments against the content of the policy, arguing that the motivation for the protests was to obstruct the proposal because it would not be the best measure for improving public education in the state:

> Under the conditions that state schools are in, it is impossible to reorganize something that is already not organized. I think first he [the governor] should invest in school structure, and various other factors, in teachers' salaries for example, in overcrowded classrooms that already exist, which he will make it worse with this reorganization. So, I think there are a lot of other things he could invest in before thinking about reorganizing or restructuring something within our schools. (Excerpt from an interview with a student. Available at Campos et. al., 2015: 9)

Other arguments invoke a notion of participatory democracy in the sense that, in a democratic state, citizens have the right to participate in the making of laws and public policy to which they will be subject. As these students elaborate:

"I'm against it because... instead of them asking for society to know the opinion of the people, whether... they agree or not, they kind of imposed it."

"We thought of doing something, participating against the reorganization too... because it wasn't something decided by the students, the parents ... it was something imposed, so we didn't agree on that at the time."

"Yeah, it wasn't asked, you know... if you are going to change something that interferes in people's lives, you ask first, because that's what a people's representative does." (Excerpt from interviews with students. Available at Medeiros and Januário, 2017:16)

These arguments, in the context of Brazilian legislation, demand effect to rights of participation and democratic management of education policy. These rights, supposedly ensured by Brazilian law[13], are demonstrated to be lacking.

The lack of consultation with the scholar community evidenced the authoritarian contours of the state government's policy making, excluding those directly affected from the decision-making process. In other words, the proposal constituted a violation of rights suffered by a certain social group – São Paulo public school students – excluding them from decision-making without justification, increasing the perception of distance between public authorities and the students, and constituting a disrespectful and unjustified treatment which revealed the unequal position of public school students in São Paulo.

Other arguments specifically mention the constitutional right to public education, positing that barring "school reorganization" is only a provisional and urgent demand, and that the struggle for improved public education and the effectiveness of constitutional rights would go far beyond this:

The occupation has a purpose, the purpose is to fight for education. Therefore, we take advantage of being the entire day at school to take care of it in the best way possible [...], also claiming for changes [...] we are taking care of what is rightfully ours [...]. (Excerpt from a Facebook post. Available at Campos et. al., 2016: 142)

The focus of our strive [sic[is against the reorganization, but we the students understand that this agenda is only the beginning of several other claims. (Excerpt from a Facebook post. Available at Campos et. al., 2016: 148)

Although the focus of this paper is on rights-related arguments, one should not disregard affective, emotional, and psychological issues. These were also

[13] Including by the Brazilian Federal Constitution, by the Statute of Child and Adolescents (Law nº 8.069/1990), and by the Law of Guidelines and Basis of the National Education (Law nº 9.394/1996)

paramount to students' mobilisation, but require a different analysis than that proposed here. Arguments of this nature tend to have a limited capacity for generalisation, since they depend on feelings and emotions which may not be apprehended by other social layers. These, then, will remain in the background in order to highlight that rights-related arguments (and experiences of disrespect related to them) allow access to social agents' experiences in a more objective way than arguments around affectivity or shared cultural values.

The experiences of disrespect related to rights, represented here by rights to education and participation in its management, can be considered as one reason for the surprising force acquired by the student movement, and for the social support it received. This type of argument had a greater capacity for resonance, sharing, and adherence, due to its common semantic and objective understanding of rights across social spheres.

Behind these motivations, a progressive notion of a struggle for rights can be seen developing in the movement during the protests. The idea of "Schools of Struggle", the name of a song popular in the protests and occupations[14], is not simply rhetorical. In the occupations, students expressed a desire to learn more about their rights and how to guarantee them. There were, for example, political debates, workshops, cultural presentations, and public classes - all chosen and organised by the occupying students.

This learning process activated by the students' experiences of disrespect also contributed to the intensification and deepening of participants' "critical behavior". One way of comprehending social agents' motivations towards formulating critical hypotheses invokes issues of self-interest in overcoming a condition. This can be illustrated by the following excerpt:

> Yeah, we start to be critical when it affects us, eh? When we see that [...] it is really complicated this government when you... it is only when you get affected [...]. But when you see that it affects you, thus, in a way... that they are harming you... you get more outraged, thus, you know, more critical, you start to see everything different, eh? You always want to criticize in any way. (Excerpt from an interview with a student. Available at Medeiros and Januário, 2017:2)

The notion of struggling for rights and the culture of rights in formation is associated with the "intergenerational conscience" of the constitutional right to education in Brazil. Some students reported struggling for education rights for the entire Brazilian population, including future generations, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

[14] MC Foice e Martelo (MC Hammer and Sickle), "Escolas de Luta" ("Schools of Struggle"). Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvdrLD1RbTI> (last accessed Sept. 2021).

[F]or me it was because [...] the rights that belong to us, even if it is no longer part of our life in the future, they are also of those who are coming after us, our children, as we also go through and experience things that our ancestors struggled for. And... nothing more than we also continue that, because the education was already also getting very bad, many things were already changing a lot, it is not only this that was going to happen, we have to put a stop to this at once. (Excerpt from an interview with a student. Available at Medeiros and Januário, 2017: 2)

Complimenting these arguments, the occupations functioned following the logic of "prefigurative politics"; a striking characteristic of many occupation movements that use public space (Celikates, 2012: 68; Butler, 2015: 218-219). This type of organisation anticipates, experimentally, the transformation that participants seek through actions that demonstrate, within the occupied space, changes they wish to effect in broader social reality (van de Sande, 2015; Raekstad, 2017)[15]. Occupations of public spaces, as protests which last longer and require greater and more complex commitments than static protests or marches, carry within themselves desires for deeper transformations. In this way, we can say that beyond the demands expressed and the arguments sustained, the very practices carried out in the occupations constitute forms of transformative political action.Students' practices of contestation, the strategies chosen by them, and the way the movement organised indicated that deeper social changes were included in their objectives.

The school occupation movement followed a horizontal form of organisation, aiming to allow students' participation in decisions (however minor) through assemblies. This could indicate an attempt to break with paternalistic and authoritarian practices that were, according to the students, a striking feature of the

[15] On the performances of the logic of pre-figurative politics and the contemporary struggles of the new social movements, it is worth mentioning this enlightening passage from Judith Butler in *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly*: "A social movement is itself a social form, and when a social movement calls for a new way of life, a form of livable life, then it must, at that moment, enact the very principles it seeks to realise. This means that when it works, there is a performative enactment of radical democracy in such movements that alone can articulate what it might mean to lead a good life in the sense of a livable life. I have tried to suggest that precarity is the condition against which several new social movements struggle; such movements do not seek to overcome interdependency or even vulnerability as they struggle against precarity; rather, they seek to produce the conditions under which vulnerability and interdependency become livable. This is a politics in which performative action takes bodily and plural form, drawing critical attention to the conditions of bodily survival, persistence, and flourishing within the framework of radical democracy. If I am to lead a good life, it will be a life lived with the others, a life that is no life without those others; I will not lose this I that I am; whoever I am will be transformed by my connections with others, since my dependency on another, and my dependability, are necessary in order to live and to live well. Our shared exposure to precarity is but one ground of our potential equality and our reciprocal obligations to produce together conditions of livable life. In avowing the need we have for one another we avow as well basic principles that inform the social, democratic conditions of what we might still call 'the good life'. These are critical conditions of democratic life in the sense that they are part of an ongoing crisis, but also because they belong to a form of thinking and acting that responds to the urgencies of our time." (Butler, 2015: 218-219)

government's announcement and attempt to implement "school reorganization". The movement, its actions and modes of operation, accorded to its participants' criticisms and social imagination, and their considerations of the forms a fairer society might take. Through their institutional imagination, students constructed a "mini-society" [16], as one participant clearly stated[17] (Campos et. al., 2016: 294). The occupations were managed through committees, dealing with matters such as cleaning, cooking, communication, and security. The subversion of social gender relations was reflected in the way tasks were not divided along typical gender lines, highlighting a strong female protagonism[18], as well as the tolerance and recognition of LGBTQ+ issues (Campos et. al., 2016: 135-136).

Although the occupations shared common demands and experiences of disrespect which kept students united, it is also possible to say, in the words of Judith Butler, that the occupations entailed: "a desire to produce a new form of sociability on the spot" (2015: 200). The occupations demanded a new way of life, enacting in each moment the principles they wished to see realised in wider social reality. In this sense, the radical improvement of basic education for all, participation in public policy design, and the wish for democratic and collective decision-making processes can be seen as principles of a "new society" to which students aspired.

1.2 Results of the students' occupation movement

The occupation movement was able to suspend the government reforms and force their discussion in the broader public sphere. As already noted, the Secretary of Education responsible for the proposal resigned, and contemporary polls showed a sharp drop in the popularity of Governor Geraldo Alckimin[19]. The movement had such repercussions for the government that it was compelled to retreat.

The reason for this partial victory, according to Campos, Medeiros and Ribeiro (2016) and Medeiros, Januário and Melo (2019) was the movement's

[16] In an article analysing the protests of the so-called 15M in Spain – which presents some practical and organisational aspects similar with the school occupations in São Paulo – Pablo Ouziel asks that, in synthesis, these collective presences would be questioning themselves and the public in general: "how can we govern ourselves?" (Available at <https://www.politika.io/fr/notice/a-nonstatecentric-conception-of-social-transformation-in-spain-15m> [last accessed Sept. 2021]).

[17] "The experience of living every day, 24 hours a day, with schoolmates and friends was astonishing, I learned and matured a lot within the mini-society we built, everyone has a very special place in my heart and this coexistence made me even stronger and ready for anything! THERE'S NO TURNING BACK!" (Facebook Post. Available at Campos et. al., 2016: 148)

[18] As demonstrated in the documentary "*LUTE como uma menina*". Available at <https://youtu.be/8OCUMGHm2oA> (last accessed Sept. 2021).

[19] "Alckmin's popularity hits its worst mark": <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2015/12/1714813-popularidade-de-alckmin-atinge-pior-marca-aponta-datafolha.shtml> (last accessed Sept. 2021).

successful presentation of three characteristics: 1) flexibility and creativity in adapting repertoires of collective action as the conjuncture changes, deliberating "tactical turns" that spread quickly among supporters; 2) capacity for building a dense civil society support network (on the streets and online); 3) the ability to take advantage of "porosity" in the Judiciary in order to acknowledge direct action and civil disobedience as legitimate forms of protest.

In the following years, occupations of schools became a viable form of collective action in Brazil. After São Paulo, several large-scale mobilisations happened in other states[20], presenting differing agendas but converging on defense of public education as a right, and demands for citizens' participation in its management.

2 "To see what they see": critical theory and social practices

The analysis of participants' experience of the school occupations movement has examined interviews with students (and themes arising in them) to understand their motivations relative to disrespect shown for their rights. The selection of themes privileges students' narratives; guided by elements of Frankfurtian critical theory that are briefly explored in this section, and which assert the centrality of social practice to theoretical analysis of social changes. Nevertheless, questions of the impact of a researcher's own identity on understanding the social contexts of agents' actions are always present. Dynamics between positions of observers and participants concerning contested phenomena have resulted in different theoretical views and produced social theories starting from different points (see Celikates, 2018; Boltanski, Honneth, Celikates, 2014).

In the critical theory tradition, the theme is directly connected to the essential idea of subjects' emancipatory interest, one of the characteristics that originally differentiated "critical theory" from so-called "traditional theory"[21] (Nobre, 2014: 34-

[20] For example, in the states of Paraná, Goiás, Rio de Janeiro, Ceará, Rio Grande do Sul, Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo.

[21] Horkheimer presents his research method in the essay *Traditional and Critical Theory*, published in 1937. Critical theory, understood as a way of producing knowledge aware of its social context of origin and application, is developed based on an attempt to overcome the diagnosed shortcomings of the so-called traditional theory. This proposal was initially intended to develop and update the classical Marxist intentions in a new historical context, to remedy the problems that history presented for the diagnoses of the time, aiming to bring its concepts to the present historical moment, reformulating and rethinking the theory given the new historical and social conditions. Horkheimer criticises the positivist attitudes of traditional bourgeois science in which, through the pretensions of scientific "totality" and "neutrality" towards knowledge, other forms of knowledge were not admitted to be integrated into the produced scientific knowledge and not even to the internal reflection on the traditional theory itself. Horkheimer notes that the positivist method of the time was influenced and determined by capitalism in a way to harm the production of scientific knowledge, aiming only to legitimise the form of capitalist societies, without having an interest in remedying its imperfections or operate an effective criticism of reality, in

35). One contribution related to this theme can be found in Jürgen Habermas's *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971), in which the original proposal is developed that critical theory, in counterpoint to traditional theory, should start from observation of a distinct form of human action – the "critical behavior" of social agents, determined by their interest in overcoming naturalised social orders of domination, and their diagnosis of transformational possibilities inscribed in social reality.

Habermas (1971) proposes that critical theory adopt psychoanalysis's reconstructive method, in which intellectual work is divided between analyst and patient in a therapeutic setting. The former reconstructs what has been forgotten through imprecise descriptions or defective "texts" expressed by the latter; with remembrance defining the precision of constructions elaborated by the analyst. Critical theory could take advantage of elements of this method, raising it from the individual to the social level.

According to the interpretation of Robin Celikates in *Critique as Social Practice* (2018: 142-144), , the critical transformative processes of both psychoanalysis and critical theory rely on the subjective preconditions of its subjects. In a psychoanalytic session a person's life story is reconstructed, restoration of lost or hidden structures. The patient, therefore, must be involved in the process as an opportunity for self-reflection in which he or she is an agent and not a mere object. In this sense "analysis is not a steered natural process but rather [...] a movement of self-reflection" (Habermas, 1971: 251).

If subjects have no interest in self-reflection - if they do not suffer from psychological and social barriers to inner development or the exercising their capacities - the notion of critique would be meaningless. This assumption is supported by Habermas's premise of an anthropologically-grounded cognitive emancipatory interest, which allows reflection itself. In this sense, reflection would have no practical consequence without this ultimate goal, and neither psychoanalysis nor critical theory could begin.

The objective of critical theory (and its suitability for the current analysis) is, on this reading, necessarily practical; it aims to some extent to "reorganize" the self-

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the sense that "understand how 'things work' is already accept that these 'things' are so and that cannot be radically otherwise" (Nobre, 2013: 17). The goal of the proposal of Frankfurtian critical theory is to unite diverse knowledge to produce social theories with a high degree of complexity, oriented to overcome the deficiencies and inequalities generated by the capitalist system. Horkheimer disseminates a proposal of interdisciplinary work in which economists, social scientists, historians, psychologists, jurists, political theorists, philosophers, and art critics would work in the same field, guided by the guiding principles of critical theory, mainly the "emancipation-oriented interest", trying to escape from the limits of speculative philosophy and, at the same time, from the limits of empirical sciences. Doing this to avoid abstract constructions without demonstrations and empirical descriptions considered as autonomous, but lacking a theoretical basis to support them, also collaborating towards a common goal: to produce a time diagnosis capable of providing a precise and complex understanding of the historical moment and its emancipatory potentials and blockages.

comprehension of its addressees. Thus, psychoanalytic reconstruction is elevated from individuals to the level of society, reconstructing social narratives to elaborate social scientific knowledge of critical content. Despite Habermas initially considering the analogy between psychoanalysis and critical theory promising , he gave up the proposal after the 1970s; following instead a critical model based on linguistic conditions of communicative interaction between subjects (Habermas, 1984). Nevertheless, the approach was not completely abandoned by critical theorists.

According to Axel Honneth, Habermas's proposal was abandoned because the psychoanalytical approach was used to explain "the role of struggles"in the social process of subjects' development (Honneth, 2017b: 910). Honneth, at the same time, considers that Habermas's claim that critical theories may proceed by way of reconstruction should be preserved, since this perspective allows identification of theoretical paths in social research that could be designed to update previously accepted norms, allowing diagnosis of deviations which mark processes of social development (Honneth, 2017b: 912).

Robin Celikates also highlights the possibilities of this path, proposing a relationship of joint construction between social agents and critical theorists, as the former can provide self-interpretations of their positions, dissatisfactions, and social understandings to the latter (Celikates, 2018: 12-15). The researcher's task, therefore, is to reconstruct an interpretation of these issues alongside social agents, and to avoid the rupture between "observer" and "participant" proposed by other strands of social thought (see Celikates, 2018; Boltanski, Honneth, Celikates, 2014).

Celikates goes further to free Habermas' conception from the "psychologizing ties" that restrict the development of reflections, reestablishing agents' social practices with the social critique that motivates them and constitutes their outcome. Through the necessity of a double work, gathering the voices of social agents and theorists, it becomes possible to reconnect the immanent emancipatory interest in social practices with critical theory (Celikates, 2018: 191-192). Correspondingly, Honneth has recently argued that, in order to access subjects' emancipatory interests, it is necessary to conceive of critical theory as a "continuation" of oppressed groups' attempts to "denaturalize" or overcome hegemonic patterns of social domination through their critical behaviors (Honneth, 2017b: 919).

In this sense, psychoanalytic reconstruction as a method of social theory consists of attempts to explain how critical production could move to another level by differentiating social constraints to which members of society are subject from the development of their critical capacities. It will be necessary, then, to

conceptualise social agents as reflexive agents, and to highlight the experiences determining suppression or emergence of their "critical behavior".

Taking into account the methodological points raised by Celikates, alongside Honneth's approach to critical theory[22] (specifically his theory of recognition – which considers experiences that violate social expectations as constituting the engine of social struggles), an analysis of contestational practices appears warranted. This analysis should take the voice of agents themselves as its central element; aiming, as far as possible, to reconstruct their experiences through their own understanding of their practice[23].

The next section proposes a theoretical interpretation aligned with this methodological insight: the reconstruction of subjects' experiences of disrespect through rights-related arguments made in response. These arguments functioned as a practical resource and shared medium capable of reverberating student's demands throughout the state of São Paulo. This was, however, only possible because the rights-related arguments were developed in close connection with students' practices; that is, they were not completely dependent on the institutional structures of "official" law. My proposed interpretation is that these rights-related arguments provided elements of a non-state-centered view of the law, a "social conception of law".

3 Struggles for recognition and the "sphere of rights": a practical resource and shared medium

As discussed above, the authoritarian manner in which the state government formulated and tried to impose "school reorganisation" activated the critical behavior of students, resulting in a wave of protests. In the movement to prevent

[22] An approach that can be conceived as follows: "Depending on their social position, actors have 'voice' and social power of justification – the power to demand justifications and to produce them – in degrees that vary radically. The critical theory, therefore, has to ask itself under what social conditions – or, more specifically, and following Axel Honneth – within which relations of recognition can actors form and exercise their reflexive capacities". (Celikates, 2012: 38)

[23] Marcos Nobre considers that this approach "Intends to make sense of events from the perspective of those who act, is a perspective of interpretation that gives the floor to those who make the movement, which seeks to understand mobilisation according to categories elaborated by who participates in it. In this regard, it combines different disciplinary perspectives, such as those of History, Anthropology, Law, and Sociology." (Nobre, 2019: 7). On the recent transformations of social struggles and the relations between theory and practice within the different strands of critical theories, Nobre mentions: "This new relation to transformative action also needs to be developed by again distinguishing between two levels of engagement: one directed at single actions, and the other at a greater commitment to an emancipated society. […] The reason the new configuration of the relation between theory and practice regarding the diagnosis of time has been given precedence is due mainly to a situation in which practice as well as theory depend inherently on activism in the public sphere and, to a broader extent, in democratic disputes." (Nobre, 2015: 168)

reorganisation, and students' demands for improved public education, we observed arguments related to disrespect shown by the state to constitutional rights. From this analysis, we can consider the hypothesis that the use of the "language" of rights[24] to express experiences of injustice and disrespect is one reason for the rapid reverberation of the movement's demands throughout São Paulo. By this hypothesis, a shared language sustained a common ground of understanding in the struggle for rights to education and social participation despite diverse local contexts – the peculiarities of each city where protests took place, the many and diverse social actors involved, and variations of narrative in media coverage and social networks. Moreover, these arguments were also likely to be understood and supported by social sectors outside of school communities, which did not directly share students-protestors' experiences.

To interpret this episode from the point of view of rights violations, Axel Honneth's theory of recognition provides theoretical elements to understand social struggles' motivations and claims within a negative (or negativistic) approach; starting from social agents' experiences of disrespect (Celikates, 2021: 271-272). This theoretical perspective interprets the motivations behind the practices and claims of critical subjects through a framework that connects the individual origins of outrage with its collective unfolding and social consequences. Honneth also presents a division of the spheres of recognition that broadly corresponds with the earlier characterisation of students' different argument types.

There is a long philosophical tradition of mobilising concepts of recognition, albeit with different meanings attached to the term. Paul Ricouer's *The Course of Recognition* (2005) organises these usages and indicates that their meanings are related to the multiple lexical senses of the noun "recognition" and the verb "to recognize" in different languages. In Honneth's theory of recognition, the Hegelian conception of recognition is adopted, alongside a political conception linked to

[24] In the last decades, one can consider that the so-called progressive social movements have concentrated much of their efforts on claims on rights and laws. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley (2002) have organised a fundamental contribution to the topic, bringing a set of reflections on the meaning of rights for social struggle in the North American context, highlighting its challenges and limitations (for example, on the role of law in the naturalisation of categories [Brown, 2002]). On the limits and ambivalent potentials of the "juridification" process and its relation to critical theory, see also the remarks by Daniel Loick (2014). Despite these critical reflections, I believe that the language of rights allows individuals or groups to draw the attention of the public sphere to views that have been largely neglected. Even more so in peripheral countries such as Brazil, where constitutional rights are violated daily, causing routine and intense experiences of injustice and disrespect in the population, especially within marginalised groups. In this sense, it may also be productive to confront Axel Honneth's comprehension on the sphere of rights presented in this section concerning these limitations, a task that may be undertaken on another occasion.

communitarian theories of justice. [25] In *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995), Honneth presents a division of three social spheres of recognition; the sphere of rights, and the spheres of love and solidarity.

The meaning of "rights", at this point of his social theory, concerns individual and collective struggles for the recognition of rights, and the social relations that refer to them and constitute a fundamental part of intersubjective recognition (Honneth, 1995: 107-121). Thus, the denial of certain rights and legal exclusion constitute experiences of disrespect with the potential to harm subject's' abilities to sustain internal comprehensions of being free and equal before other members of society (Zurn, 2015: 38-39). As shown above, one of things government reforms attacked was students' rights-related expectations. This negative experience was responded to through critical behavior that made use of rights-related elements. As will become clearer, students' responses and struggles mobilised these arguments in a different way than traditional, state-centered conceptions that, at that moment, did not seem able to absorb their demands.

From the foregoing analysis, we may speak of three fundamental types of rights-related struggle for recognition in modernity: struggles for new rights, or new requirements for the exercise of autonomy; struggles to expand existing rights to marginalised groups; and struggles to guarantee rights already possessed. In all cases, what is in dispute is relations understood to reproduce disrespect and injustice against individuals and groups without the same status or legal treatment. By exclusion from the possession of rights, subjects are prevented from participating in social life on an equitable basis, and cease to understand themselves as interaction partners of equal value; losing the self-respect which develops with recognition as a subject of law. As Honneth's explains:

> Whereas the first form of disrespect is inherent in those experiences of physical abuse that destroy a person's basic self-confidence, we have to look for the second form in those experiences of denigration that can affect a person's moral self-respect. This refers to those forms of personal disrespect to which an individual is subjected by being structurally excluded from the possession of certain rights within a society. We have initially construed the term 'rights', only roughly, as referring to those individual claims that a person can legitimately expect to have socially met because he or she participates, with equal rights, in the institutional order as a full-fledged member of a community. Should that person now be systematically denied certain rights of this kind, this would imply that he or she is not being accorded the same degree of moral responsibility as other members of society. (Honneth, 1995: 133)

[25] Recently, Honneth has also published *Anerkennung: Eine europäische Ideengeschichte* (2018), presenting an investigation of the multiple meanings of the concept of recognition in contemporaneity by means of a reconstruction of the various origins of the term amidst the European political thought.

When moral expectations of recognition are not realised, or subjects are deliberately not recognised, the situation of injustice in which the subjects find themselves is brought to light. According to Emannuel Renault – in his theoretical discussion of the dynamics of psychic suffering caused by such situations – it is through these experiences of injustice that previously tacit or unconscious expectations are made evident to the subjects involved. Simultaneously, they become aware of the directions that their practices and critical behaviors should take (Renault, 2019: 26-27).

Experiences of disrespect - evident in deprivations of rights, marginalisation, or social exclusion - not only represent violent limitations to personal autonomy, but also elicit feelings of lacking the status of an equal interaction partner. The deprivation of rights granted in society means an injury to the expectation of being considered by others, and feeling oneself, to be a subject "capable of forming moral judgments" (Honneth, 1995: 134). This experience leads directly to "a loss of self-respect, of the ability to relate to oneself as a legally equal interaction partner with all fellow humans" (Honneth, 1995: 134). Due to the centrality of "social respect" to understanding the sphere of law in *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth claims that rights can be understood as depersonalised symbols of social respect (Zurn, 2015: 35); despite their particularities regarding identities, occupations, and social positions. They are symbols of the social respect necessary for the development of autonomy, and confer legitimate claims to groups and individuals which experience violations in their social interactions.

One can say that the sphere of rights has an advantage in this theoretical structuring, as Honneth believes that not all three spheres of recognition contain the moral tensions necessary to set social struggles in motion. A struggle can only be characterised as "social" if its goals can be generalised beyond its participants' intentions to the point that they become the foundation of a collective movement (Honneth, 1995: 162). Thereby, forms of disrespect and injustice experienced by the students as violations of the right to education, deprivation of participation rights, and consequent exclusion from the legal-political community, worked by mobilising various social agents and strengthening their claims and practices of contestation. Thus, the movement was able to demonstrate its experiences "as something that affects not only the individual self but also a circle of many other subjects" (1995: 163-164). According to Honneth's theory of recognition, this example can be considered a mobilisation that made use of a "common language" to share the experiences of the subjects involved, communicating in an intelligible way the need for resistance.

From the "translation" of their experiences into the collective and shareable language of rights, the movement even gained support from state judicial institutions, such as the Public Prosecutor's Office (Ministério Público) and the

Public Defender's Office (Defensoria Pública). It has further influenced an unexpected interpretative variation of the traditionally conservative São Paulo State Court of Justice regarding the right to property and possession against the right to protest by occupying public buildings[26].

Through dynamics of protest and action using rights-related arguments, it is possible to discern a reciprocal relationship of recognition being established and amplified. The students were recognised as political subjects sustaining legitimate demands - first by themselves, and later by other social sectors - including those which traditionally reject acts of civil disobedience and occupations of public spaces for protest purposes. In students' arguments, we can also observe a form of "social empathy" aimed at protecting the rights of subjects not directly involved in the occupations; such as younger children, mature evening class students and students of the Education for Youngsters and Adults program (EJA), teachers, and other school employees whose jobs were at risk. As Honneth argues:

> we can only come to understand ourselves as the bearers of rights when we know, in turn, what various normative obligations we must keep *vis-a-vis* others: only once we have taken the perspective of the 'generalized other', which teaches us to recognize the other members of the community as the bearers of rights, can we also understand ourselves to be legal persons, in the sense that we can be sure that certain of our claims will be met. (Honneth, 1995: 108)

This generalised, intergenerational perspective allowed by the use of arguments and demands for rights invariably produces a type of "social binding", since struggles to ensure legal recognition and individual or collective self-realisation are amplified by the aim that others (whether elsewhere or in the future) can achieve this same condition. According to Honneth, the sphere of rights is related to forms of intersubjective relationships characterised by the formal and anonymous respect, shared by all members of society, of each other as persons who possess rights - rather than the affective relationships of small groups (Honneth, 1995: 118-119).

In a recently published text, Honneth notes that the sphere of rights has the characteristic of being "omnipresent" in modern societies, available as a "practical resource and a shared medium" to, among other functions, reject unreasonable demands, justify social reforms, or empower institutions to implement social changes (Honneth, 2017a: 128).[27] Thus, diverse social spheres will – to varying degrees – always be connected in some way with law, and should not be considered as "extralegal" spaces, completely disconnected from rights and their language.

[26] On this theme, see Tavolari et. al. (2018); Tavolari and Barbosa (2019).
[27] A reconstruction of the debate about these issues can be found in Silva (2020).

According to this view, law and rights can be understood as practical resources in the sense that all subjects can, to some extent, dispose of them as available "instruments" to fulfill their demands on various social issues; carrying out their practices through a common language shared by their community. Likewise, they can be seen as shared media: "instruments" with the potential to allow mutual understanding between subjects through the social respect made possible by the sphere of rights, rather than an end in itself.[28]

According to Honneth, the structure of the meaning of law and rights-related claims in social movements and protests cannot be restricted to the modern "legal form", or even considered to possess space only within official arenas. On the contrary, the sphere of rights is widely shared in different social spaces. This conception seems productive and under-utilised for observing new forms of protests and claims that seek to avoid state institutions and arbitrations, while organising themselves on a kind of internal and independent normativity that can transform or settle definitively in the public sphere.

What is fundamental to this interpretation, representing a theoretical potential not yet fully explored, is that its conceptions of law and rights neither depend on, nor centre, the state. Instead, a "social conception" allows the language of rights to be a medium for claiming rights beyond judicial institutions and structures. As shown, student-protesters used such arguments to communicate their experiences of disrespect, considering this way of presenting their claims to be better apprehendable in the public sphere.

Final remarks

The theory adopted in this work to investigate a specific social uprising considers the practices and experiences of its critical participants as central to its understanding. Its purpose is to structure a joint work between social theory and critical subjects, through an approach that follows their voices, making it possible to elaborate knowledge collectively and in connection with everyday, concrete social practices. This orientation seeks to "see what they see" – to understand the motivations that led students to protest and occupy their schools – allows one to

[28] On the role of "mediums" in the processes of the struggle for recognition, Judith Butler mentions that "the individual, no matter how intensively self-referential, is always referring to itself through a mediating form, through some media, and its very language for recognising itself comes from elsewhere. The social conditions and mediates this recognition of myself that I undertake. As we know for Hegel, the 'I' who comes to recognise itself, its own life, recognises itself always also as *another's* life. The reason why the 'I' and the 'you' are ambiguous is that they are each bound up in other systems of interdependency, what Hegel calls *Sittlichkeit*. And this means that although I perform that recognition of myself, some set of social norms is being worked out in the course of that performance that I author, and whatever is being worked out does not originate with me, even as I am not thinkable without it" (Butler, 2015: 214).

analyze their arguments through their claims, and access some of the experiences of disrespect they communicated to the public sphere.

Among the arguments reproduced here, those related to violations of constitutional rights have potential to explain the strength of the movement, constituting a common language that could be shared and apprehended by diverse social sectors. Moreover, the organisation of the occupations - through direct, inclusive, and horizontal participation in decisions - also indicates the importance that violations of right acquired in movement formation and embodiment of its demands. The practices and strategies defined by the students already prefiguratively indicated possible forms of response to experiences of disrespect activated by the governmental reform package.

In the occupied schools, students claimed rights already guaranteed by the Brazilian Constitution, such as the rights to education and democratic participation in the management of public affairs. Simultaneously, they expressed a desire for greater control over their lives in society (Campos et. al., 2016: 127-140; Rodriguez, 2019: 124). These rights-related arguments showed capacity to influence and gain support from the other social sectors; prefigurating and realizing in the occupations the changes they expected to occur in their broader social reality. The occupied schools received support from those sectors close to the students but also reverberated in distant social sectors, which did not suffer from the same experiences or even know the São Paulo public education system, but which apprehended protestors' motivations and supported their movement.

Some understand the students' demands as not specifically rights-related, but as a desire for social life not centered on the paradigm of the liberal State and its institutions. It is not that the occupation movement was not claiming rights, however, but that its demands were shaped by a different conception of rights and social life itself: one guided by principles of democratic self-organisation and horizontality; characteristics that the state apparatus is unable to accomplish. In other words, the students' demands did not abandon the legal-constitutional form, but pointed prefiguratively to a different conception of institutions. This can be observed in the organisation of the occupations themselves, as well as in students' statements about violations of their constitutionally guaranteed rights.

In this sense, a theoretical implication of the analysis proposed here is that certain modalities of occupied public spaces and social movement formation carry their own internal "normativity" in the sense of self-regulation. The students had claimed, and sought to concretise in their social microcosm, the "institutional imagination" they wish to see at work in society as a whole (Castoriadis, 1975; Rodriguez, 2019: 314; Unger, 1998). In this way, occupy movements or acts of civil disobedience, when invested with social legitimacy and acceptance, are ways of

instituting alternative normative orders, sustaining and updating relations of recognition[29], and enabling liberation in the public sphere[30].

The conception of the sphere of rights in Honneth's theory of recognition is not a conception that is limited to the state, its "legal form", or its judicial institutions. The "image" of law that Honneth provides is closer to a "social conception of law" which gives more attention to intersubjective relations mediated by rights than to the functions of institutional arenas. Experiences of disrespect caused by the non-fulfillment of recognition expectations are a driving force of subjects' critical behaviors. The violation of rights can be seen as a parameter for reflection on the indignation, demands, and self-comprehension of the students' own critical behavior and its reverberations. To express indignation and social criticism - to give "voice" to suffering, resist oppression and social domination - is, necessarily, to struggle for recognition[31].

At a time like the present, of intensifying political conflicts, mistrust in institutions, and in democracy itself, it is necessary to consider the importance and the meaning of other forms of rights claims – unconventional forms that do not fit the channels normally used to promote such claims or to expand social participation in the development of public policy and legislation. As can be seen here from the performance of the São Paulo State Government, adopting aggressive or restrictive postures in the face of these manifestations seems to contribute to a creativity which finds other channels to articulate claims to recognition and rights - whether these are linked or not to formal institutions (Rodriguez, 2016; 2019: 42).

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[29] These new forms of protest, constituting possibilities of innovative practices for claims mediated by the language of rights, may allow another point of view to observe new arrangements and forms of normativity that are already at work in the practices of social agents.

[30] In this sense, civil disobedience can be mobilised in contexts of institutional closure also to force a possible institutional reopening to social claims. Allied to this, forms of political contestation can also aim at the democratisation and pluralization of the public sphere itself (See Celikates, 2016; Medeiros et. al., 2019).

[31] On this topic, see the chapter "*Social Critique as a Voice for Suffering*" in Renault (2019: 181-201).

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