On the Construction and Indexation of Class in a Transnational Social Movement

Maria Rosa Garrido
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

This paper examines the situated symbolic, discursive and material construction of social class through an ethnography of an Emmaus group in the Barcelona area (Catalonia). In particular, it explores how a group of transnationally informed activists appropriate mobile symbolic capitals at a time of global crisis. Emmaus is a post-war transnational movement of solidarity that (re)inserts formerly marginalised people who live and work with other privileged people in local ”communities” dedicated to recycling. Social class is at the heart of the daily encounters that Emmaus fosters. Since all ragpickers have access to the same material resources, the shared space of meaningfulness and stratification relies on the access to symbolic resources by virtue of their life trajectories and transnational capitals.

The first goal is to move beyond methodological nationalism (Beck 2004) in class analysis. Emmaus is a loose transnational network of heterogeneous communities that circulate and appropriate ideas, texts and discourses across national borders. At the nation-state level, the ragpickers are considered as lower socioeconomic class due to their income and occupation. In the transnational movement, these people appropriate shared symbolic resources to craft middle-class activist subjectivities, which often encompass alter-globalist discourses, linguae francae and short-term mobilities across the Emmaus transnational network.

The second goal is to ethnographically grasp the construction of social class as a stratifying and categorisation practice that (re)produces inequalities in everyday life. In the physical and symbolic space of the community, class dynamics and tensions arise in seating arrangements in communal meals, active participation in assemblies, language choice in this bilingual community and even academic knowledge display. Emmaus residents and external volunteers are discursively categorised between those who are aware of the transnational Emmaus ethos and those who are simply there without analysing global problems.

Keywords: ethnography, social class, transnationalism.