Counter-narratives and social transformation: insights from an experience of legislative theatre inspired by Augusto Boal

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reflect and discuss about the potential of social transformation of an experience of *forum theatre* – more particularly the Boal's *legislative theatre* form – using a counter-narrative perspective.

At the one hand, Augusto Boal – theatre director, dramatist, theorist, writer and teacher – was the founder of the movement "theatre of the oppressed", a repertory of techniques and tactics that seeks to motivate people, restore true dialogue, and create space for participants to rehearse taking action. The underlying vision is that everyone has the capacity to act in the theatre of their own lives, everybody is at once an actor and a spectator. People are "spect-actors!". Among the different types of interventions conceived by Boal, one that is prominent is the *forum theatre*, a short play or scene that dramatizes a situation, with an oppressive ending, to provoke spect-actors to react. In its turn, the *legislative theatre* is essentially a *forum theatre* performance, but that leads the audience to further discuss policies or laws that could help bring about some of the solutions the engaged audience - "spect-actors" - had offered during the performance.

At the other hand, we have *Mise au Jeu*, an organization of theatre-intervention. The organization is a participatory, theatre-intervention team whose mission is to mobilize knowledge, solidarity and people power to create a more just and equal world. It has been doing *forum theatre*, in the Augusto Boal's tradition of Theatre of the Oppressed, for over 20 years. In 2015, the organization decided to experiment with *legislative theatre*. *Mise au Jeu* combines *forum theatre* and a theatricalized form of democratic assembly to give voice to the citizens and to engage the dialogue with the political and economic decision-makers of their community in order to identify, in a collaborative mode, solutions to the pressing problems of our contemporary world. In the same way that the theatre of the oppressed allows spectators to become protagonists of dramatic action, the legislative theatre makes the citizen a co-legislator, seeking individual and structural transformation.

Our aim is to understand how the social interventions promoted by *Mise au Jeu* – inspired by Boal's theatrical activism – succeed in encouraging people to be protagonists and led

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them to a collective engagement with political and social changes. We use a narrative perspective (Fisher, 1984; Bruner, 1991) to explain how these spect-ators struggle to give sense to their experiences, identities and practices. More specifically, in this article we adopt the concept of *counter-narratives* (Andrews, 2004; Frandsen et al, 2016). Alone, narratives are defined as powerful discursive constructions that provides a means for individual, social, and organizational sensemaking and sensegiving (Vaara, Sonenshein and Boje, 2016). Nevertheless, narratives are oftentimes deterministic and fateful leading to reinforce or "petrify" oppressive cultural values (Czarniawska, 1997; Derrida, 1979; Boje, 2011). Conversely, counter-narratives are defined as the stories people tell and live to precisely provide resistance against dominant, hegemonic, and mainstream narratives and values (Andrews, 2004). We therefore draw on this notion of counter-narrative with the purpose of illustrating empirically how spectators counter-narratively contest meaning, redefine their identities and subject positions, and claim for more political power.

Augusto Boal and the legislative theatre[4]

In this section, we present the work developed by Augusto Boal: theatre director, dramatist, theorist, writer, teacher and political militant. Born in 1931, Rio de Janeiro, from a family of Portuguese immigrants, he worked as director of the Arena Theatre in Sao Paulo for fifteen years (1957-1971), when he developed his most important contributions to the Brazilian theatre. Earlier, the work of Boal and his group was marked by the political engagement they conceived each theatrical intervention and the development of a work aligned with the Brazilian culture and reality. In 1964, with the military coup, the life of many Brazilian artists were totally disrupted, with severe censure and prisons. After the institutional act of 1968, that suspended that civil rights and freedom, Boal and his group were obliged to ask for exile outside Brazil.

> "*I believe that theatre should bring happiness, it should help us to know better ourselves and our time. Our desire is to better know the world we inhabit, so that we can transform it in the best way. Theatre is a form of knowledge and must also be a means of transforming society. It can help us build the future instead of waiting for it.*" (BOAL, 2008, p. xi)

Boal's experience and background sowed the seeds for the development of the *theatre of the oppressed,* a repertory of techniques and tactics that seeks to motivate people, restore true dialogue, and create space for participants to rehearse taking action (Boal, 2002). After fifteen years of exile across different American and European countries, Augusto Boal return back to his home city and launch the *center of the theatre of the oppressed*, in 1986. One year before his death, 2009, he was named for the Nobel Prize and also received the title World Ambassador of Theatre by UNESCO. Boal's methodology, created during 55 years of work, put together

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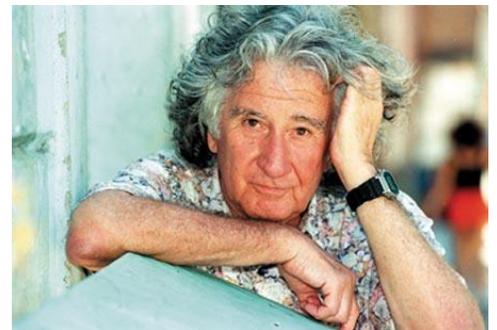
[4] The main reference for this section is a working-paper produced by Araujo (2012) under the supervision of Pozzebon.

theatre and social action and is applied in more than 70 countries. The main goal is the democratization of the production and consumption of theatre as a tool for social transformation.

The *theatre of the oppressed* is inspired by the idea that people might be transformed from spectator – passive individuals, the audience – to actors – active citizens. For Boal, oppressed could be workers, peasants, unemployed, women, immigrants, vulnerable young or old people, people with physical or mental disabilities, in brief, all those who are "silent" or from whom the right to full existence is withdrawn.

> "*The theatre of the oppressed is the theatre in its more archaic meaning: all human beings are actors, because they act, and spectators, because they observe. We are all spect-actors*" (Boal, 2008, p. ix.).

He shows how theatre might be seen as a new way to know the reality that might be mobilized to serve the oppressed, to lead them to express themselves and by this expression, to discover new meanings.

> "*Citizens are not those who live in society, but those than transform it*" (Boal, 2009, p. 22)

Across its development, the *theatre of the oppressed* took multiples forms: *newspaper's theatre, invisible theatre, image theatre, forum theatre* and *legislative theatre*.

The *forum theatre* is one of the most known forms. A problem or issue is presented as a conventional theatre scene (the model one wants to transform) and then the public is invited, jointly, to collectively search for solutions, seeking dialogue through theatrical action. The debate does not come at the end, the forum is the spectacle itself. The dramaturgy of the model generally has the following structure: presentation of the characters; oppressed (protagonist) and their allies; oppressor (antagonist) and their allies; presentation of the conflict; presentation of the protagonist's desire (counter-preparation); development of dramatic action, where oppressed and oppressors face each other; moment of crisis, crucial point where the protagonist must make a decision; and ending, which concludes the dramatic action with the failure of the protagonist, experienced in the real situation of oppression. The problem dealt with in a forum session should be relevant to the audience present in such a way that the audience feels not only the desire but the need to transform the represented reality.

The *legislative theatre* is also a forum theatre performance, but one that leads the audience to further discuss policies or laws that could help produce from some of the solutions the engaged audience – "spect-actors" – had offered during the performance. This form was born for the combination of theatre and policy-making. It is starts as a *forum theatre*: a short play about a particular issue or set of issues that ends in a crisis, which the audience is then invited to help solve by taking the place of one of the characters on stage. However, the main difference is that, with the *legislative theatre*, the audience interventions are followed by a brainstorm and discussion of policies or laws that could help solve some of the problems that came up in the performance, or that could help bring about some of the solutions "spect-actors" (the engaged audience) had offered during the performance (Mitchell, 2017).

Mise au Jeu, an organization of theatre-intervention

Mise au Jeu has largely relied on Boal's repertory of techniques and tactics to develop his theatrical interventions, although it has adapted them over the course of its interventions on 24 years. Since its beginnings, _Mise au Jeu_ creates and presents interventions on realities often hidden to the general public in Québec. The organization worked to uncover the often discriminatory and abusive living conditions of domestic workers living with their employers, the world of sex work, violence in relationships among young people, etc. It addresses the issues of cohabitation between homeless people and citizens living in downtown Montreal, the upheavals faced by newly arrived immigrants, racial profiling, acceptance of the diversity of sexual orientation, etc.

The organization seeks to embrace approaches that are inclusive and participatory and that enable members of the participating communities to target and discuss the issues they wish to address. To do so, and inspired by Boal's work, they developed a set of practices at the basis of every of their theatrical interventions. These practices are: (1) creating a climate of equality and confidence conducive to self-expression and learning in a group; (2) sharing narratives of experiences of unresolved oppressions or conflict situations; 3) writing and staging of a play; 4) holding a representation of the play; 5) facilitating a _forum theatre_; and 6) identifying individual, collective and institutional solutions through a democratic assembly.

1. Creating a climate of equality and confidence

The interventions of the organization draw their inspiration from the lived stories of the populations. To draw this inspiration, individuals are invited to come together to share their experiences. Starting from the observation that no one is learning in a climate of fear, the practitioners of the organization have in their tool chests a panoply of games and exercises that allow to tame one another and to put themselves in a position of equality and learning. This is the starting point. Through collective play, individuals touch their limits, surpass them, go beyond the fear of ridicule, we have fun and we learn together.

2. Sharing narratives of experiences of unresolved oppressions or conflict situations

Once this opening is created in each one, the sharing of experiences of oppression or conflicts experienced and badly resolved can be initiated. Different techniques are used to allow participants to use body language, symbolic, to express without even using words to do so. This great freedom allows the members of the group to emerge from isolation by realizing that each has its history of oppression. Therefore a sense of community emerges. The collective work undertaken here is to draw inspiration from the stories of several in the group to identify common features of the situations presented in order to create together, or by the hand of an author, a story that evokes what is known to the audience and will certainly provoke the desire to act to avoid the foreseeable consequences of not resolved the deadlock.

3. Writing and staging of a play

The next step in the process is the writing of a short piece that is to be presented to the persons called upon to intervene. Constructed from experience, practice and academic

knowledge, the situation presented is nevertheless the result of a number of choices made by the author or the co-authors, aimed at producing an effect on the public.

The way in which the situation is described, defined, the qualities that are given to the persons and objects staged, the associations that are made between the elements of the scene, the ordering of the elements, which leads to a dead end for certain actors, affect the way people in the room react, can intervene and think of new articulations.

For example, the actors staged will never have a character that could be described as "wicked". The victims or oppressed people could also be oppressors. They have no fixed ontology. All actors are conditioned by their own systems and interests and are therefore not immutable, they can be displaced, transformed (by becoming aware of conditioning and by changing relations between elements of systems, etc.). Through the next step, the spec-actor will have an opportunity to help a character caught in a system, to include him in a solution.

The individuals can be caricatured on stage. Caricature is used to touch values (and to show that they are constructions that can be reconstructed). It also serves to make people laugh. If it is possible to laugh at the two protagonists, the oppressor as well as the oppressed, it is therefore that there is room for change.

The staged objects are also invested with meaning. A particular object presented with care in a scene can have a very strong symbolism. The persons and objects in the scene must allow the spectator to identify himself or at least to develop sympathy for the oppressed characters. It is this identification that allows the emergence of a solidarity.

4. Holding a representation of the play

The actors arouse emotions among the spectators, as they touch them emotionally as well as symbolically. Indeed, actors use their own emotions, their bodies, to produce a vibratory effect. Thus, representation distinguishes itself from a simple speech by not remaining solely at the cognitive level, but by mobilizing the affects. Telling a story also makes possible to talk about a situation by not analytically distinguishing its cognitive, affective, social or political dimensions. Performance disrupts the audience cognitively and emotionally. The problematic situation presented in the play triggers a process of reflection and the search for new solutions

5. Facilitating a theatre-forum

This part aims to co-construct together solutions to a problem, but again, not in the context of a discussion or a reasoned dialogue, but of a game. The solution consists in rewriting the situation and thus reorganizing the order presented at the outset, to create a new assemblage that will not lead to a stalemate and that will reveal a new potential for action and new capacities.

During the forum, the starting situation is reorganized with the help of the public. The spectator comes on stage and borrows another identity in a space of freedom and power. In doing so, he demonstrates that identity is in part something constructed, it thwarts the idea that behaviors are fixed and established.

The playmaker that animates the forum does not just take questions and mediates who speaks up. He also provokes, he can stop the game if it goes too far. He puts people at ease, questions them, allows them to take a step back, and can also express gratitude, recognizing the importance of what just happened in the debate. For spectators, this feels like a safe space. The forum set-up thus activates both the strategies of combat, resistance, frustration, questioning, combatively, and perhaps also hope.

Here again, there is an affective part around the game, an affective solidarity is created, a connection through actions. Everyone sees people intervene and play. "Do you see what happened?" Did you feel his emotion in his voice? Did you feel this emotion? " Very different people in opposition can have a moment of affective solidarity. A "together" then becomes possible. There is a strength of the experience lived in common.

Beyond the emotion and recognition of a new reality, people say they learned things they did not know. At the forum, a lot of information is exchanged in addition to the opinions and feelings of the people. People learn about organizations, rules, associations, resources that they did not know.

6. Identifying individual, collective and institutional solutions through a democratic assembly.

It is in the will to broaden the practice presented to other publics, to intervene in other scales of transformations that *legislative theatre* initiatives have been explored. *Legislative theatre* aims to extend the reach of the solutions found by focusing, in addition to values, norms, or beliefs, rules and laws.

Theoretical lens: mobilizing counter narratives to understand social transformation

Storytelling is an essential human activity: people act as actors and spectators of scripts they create from plots provided by existent institutions (Fisher, 1984). In addition, people look not only for understanding causal relationships, but they are essentially in search for meaning (Bruner, 1986). These are the elementary optics of the narrative perspective, which has its theoretical foundations on the Russian formalism and in the literary and narratology schools. In the social sciences, the narrative perspective has been useful to understand the way human beings experience life and create meaning by analyzing their accounts (Fenton and Langley, 2011).

Even if oftentimes considered itself as a paradigm (Fisher, 1984), the narrative perspective permeates other paradigms, approaches and methodologies. In a recent literature review, Vaara, Sonenshein and Boje (2016) present how this perspective may be used according to three different paradigms.

First, in the realist paradigm, narratives are essentially a *representation* that reflects a given phenomenon. Narratives may be whether the empirical data treated by researchers or still the final "tale" that he or she will construct in the research project. This approach is in line with positivist and postpositivist epistemological positions. In the second paradigm, the interpretative one, narratives are conceived as individual and collective *constructions* that help to understand a phenomenon. Interpretative narrative analysis based on social

constructions of the reality are the essence of this epistemological strategy. And finally, the third paradigm refers to the poststructuralist view, where narratives are *plural* and *performative*. Narratives may perform reality since they hold the power to whether silence or give voice to actors; and therefore, to legitimate (or illegitimate) subject positions.

Moreover, narratives may equally be distinguished as *dominant* (hegemonic assumptions subject to deconstruction), and as *emergent* (the polyphony created around such hegemonic assumptions).

We situate our analysis inside the poststructuralist paradigm and we use the counter-narrative theoretical lenses (Andrews, 2004; Frandsen et al, 2016) to understand how spectators counter-narratively contest meaning, redefine their identities and subject positions, and claim for more political power.

Put simply, counter-narratives are defined as the stories people tell and live to precisely provide resistance against dominant, hegemonic, and mainstream narratives and values (Andrews, 2004). Alone, narratives (or dominant narratives) are defined as powerful discursive constructions that provides a means for individual, social, and organizational sensemaking and sensegiving (Vaara, Sonenshein and Boje, 2016). Besides, dominant narratives are usually deterministic and fateful, leading to reinforce or "petrify" oppressive cultural values (Czarniawska, 1997; Derrida, 1979; Boje, 2011). In turn, counter-narratives "highlights struggles over meanings, values and identities that take place in organizing" (Mumby, 1987 quoted by Frandsen et al, 2016: 3).

As a theoretical concept, counter-narratives may not exist independently of dominant narratives (Frandsen et al, 2016). In fact, one may not exist without the other: counter-narratives emerge because of the existence of dominant narratives, and dominant narratives may take advantage to incorporate counter-narratives into their discourse with the purpose of acquiring some legitimacy (Khun, 2016; Gabriel, 2016). Counter-narrative analysis examines this intricacy (or intertextuality) between dominance versus emergence that ultimately unveils power relations and subject positions expressed by actors in their communicative acts.

As a methodological approach, counter-narrative analysis consists in the identification and exposure of contradictions and tensions, that are not necessarily the focus of traditional narrative methods (Frandsen et al, 2016). To achieve this, counter-narrative analysis requires ethnographic and participatory methods since alternative and marginalized views are not often spontaneously and freely voiced only through interviews (Idem, ibidem). Therefore, the presence of the researcher on the site is paramount to identify such polyphony and diligently distinguish both *dominant* and *emergent* narratives; as well as to unravel their intertextuality and expose interwoven power relationships.

Narrative theoretical lenses have been useful to understand contestation over meaning as well as acts of resistance inside organizations in the management field (Boje, 1995; Boje, Driver and Cai, 2005b). Particularly, counter-narratives have been also valuable to shed a light on political and post-colonial issues (Ingrid, 2015 and Boukhris, 2017), cultural studies (Sosa, 2009), social activism (Dixton, 2014), public policy (Næss and Vabø, 2014) and education (Schneider, 2014; Godwin, 2015; McCarthy and Tomlin, 2017). In this article, we contribute to the social transformation literature by analyzing how counter-narratives generated on the social interventions promoted by *Mise au Jeu* – inspired by

Boal's theatrical activism – succeed in encouraging people to be protagonists and led them to a collective engagement with political and social changes.

Methodological design: research-action

One of the researchers is following *Mise au Jeu* from 2015, using a set of participatory inquiry techniques. During a first phase of research at the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016, she conducted 10 individual semi-directive interviews with the members of the organization to understand their activities, work, and the types of intervention and the details of the intervention phases. These interviews made it possible to collect the essential materials for the analysis of the organization's know-how and expertise. From that first analysis, she elaborated further a second interview grid and an observation grid in order to observe 5 legislative theather experimentations. She conducted furthermore 19 individual semi-directive interviews with representatives from all stakeholders in the experiments

Provisional results

The writing of the main results are in progress and we pretend to present them in October.

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