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Field Studies and the Study of Power: Reflections from the Margins of the Indian Social Landscape

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**Field Studies and the Study of Power: Reflections from
the Margins of the Indian Social Landscape**
[Ricerca sul campo e studio del potere: riflessioni dai margini del paesaggio
sociale indiano]

*Matilde Adduci**

Abstract

[It.] Muovendo dal riconoscimento dell'ineluttabilità della questione inerente gli spazi analitico-metodologici per lo studio del potere, questo articolo offre una riflessione su un principio analitico-metodologico che ha crescentemente informato il terreno delle scienze sociali, vale a dire l'individualismo metodologico di matrice neoclassica. Contestualmente, attingendo all'esperienza di ricerca dell'autrice, l'articolo richiama il tema del dialogo fra teoria e campo, a partire da un approccio informato da olistico metodologico, che adotta le lenti dell'economia politica critica per interrogare il dispiegarsi di specifiche dinamiche di potere. Nel far ciò, si soffermerà sull'importanza riconosciuta, nell'ambito di tale approccio, alle storie di vita individuali.

[En.] Starting from an acknowledgement of the inescapability of the question of the analytical-methodological space for the study of power, this paper presents a reflection upon an analytical-methodological principle that has increasingly informed the terrain of social sciences, namely methodological individualism, as it features in neoclassical economics. Contextually, by drawing upon the author's research experience, the paper offers some reflections on the dialogue between theory and the field. It takes an analytical approach informed by methodological holism and which adopts the lens of critical political economy to interrogate the unfolding of specific social power dynamics. In so doing, the paper dwells upon the importance recognized, within such an approach, of individual life stories.

Parole-chiave: Individualismo metodologico – Olistico metodologico – Potere – Ricerca sul campo – India.

Keywords: Methodological Individualism – Methodological Holism – Power – Field-Based Research – India.

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1. Introduction

In August 2004, while I was conducting my first fieldwork in the Indian State of Odisha as a PhD student, I attended a ceremony to celebrate the 57th Independence Day of India held on a university campus in the State capital, Bhubaneswar. Significantly, the introductory speech ended by emphasizing Odisha's need for "less government and more governance". By drawing upon the apparently technical language of "governance" – supposedly a "good" one – those words presumed the need to relentlessly redraw the boundaries of the State's activities in the socio-economic realm to the advantage of the market. Words spoken in the face of the disturbing socio-economic scenario of the State, not least partially embodied by the slum extending outwards, right next to the campus itself. By the time I attended the ceremony, I was well aware that the State of Odisha, historically characterized by widespread social imbalances and profound levels of material deprivation, was permeated by illegal activities, significantly related to the exploitation of the abundant local natural resources. Yet, the apparently simple – to some even commonsensical – words categorically pronounced by the orator left me thoughtful. My thoughts inevitably ran to the blatant hardships experienced by Chilika Lake's poor fishing community, as at that time my research was focusing on the social conflict engendered by a (still) ongoing process of *de facto* privatization of the lake's waters, which I was interrogating from a class perspective, through the theoretical maps of critical political economy. By extension, I started thinking about the lot of all those who have been historically pushed to the margins of a capitalist development characterized, since the inception of market-oriented reforms, by the intertwining of a nationwide process of labour informalization with renewed trajectories of displacement related to the processes of privatization of the natural resources of the State. What did the theoretical and methodological assumptions underlying the orator's words explain – and what did they actually conceal – about the reality of the processes of socio-economic marginalization unfolding in and beyond the State of Odisha?

More recently, while reflecting upon my research trajectory in India – which over time continued to acknowledge the importance of interrogating reality through the lens of critical political economy – my attention was drawn by a paper authored by Henry Bernstein, focused on field-based research inspired by Marx and Marxism. Significantly, Bernstein notes that the adoption of this analytical stand

indicates an explicit or implicit «opposition, and critique of, other approaches ‘on offer’ in social science and in wider public discourse (...) that either deny or explain away the savage inequalities and contradictions of capitalism»¹. This reflection brings into play the far-reaching question of the analytical-methodological spaces for the study of power – namely, for interrogating in its complexity the historical unfolding of social power dynamics, in order to contribute to shedding light on the processes through which multidimensional, ruthless inequalities are (re)produced across and within societies. Ultimately, we might add, this raises the issue of the social role of research, powerfully evoked, not least, by Michael Burawoy’s consideration of ethnography, pointing out that this latter «by engaging with suffering and domination, hierarchy and inequality (...) calls attention to our accountability to a world beyond»².

Starting from an acknowledgment of the complexity and also the inescapability of these questions, I will reflect here on the limited, historically-specific analytical-methodological principle of methodological individualism as inflected by neoclassical economics. Since the late 1970s it has increasingly informed the field of social sciences, thereby making it inevitable for scholars to engage, explicitly or implicitly, with it. In parallel with the rise of the neoliberal social order, its echo has reverberated loudly in the “wider public discourse”. Reaching the Odishan landscape it resonated, not least, in the above-mentioned call for “less government and more governance”. I will also devote attention to the issue of the analytical spaces for the study of power. Alongside the increasing influence of the principle of methodological individualism, this issue has informed significant debates among all those who are interested in the (re)production of social power relations – as well as in the possible unfolding of counter-hegemonic practices. Contextually, by drawing upon my field-based research experience in India, I will propose some reflections on the dialogue between the theory and the field, within an approach informed by methodological holism. This approach adopts the lens of critical political economy to interrogate social conditions historically engendered by «underlying deep structures (...) invisible in themselves, manifest only in their effect»³. In so doing, I will dwell upon the acknowledged importance, within this approach, of individual experience and life stories, through which the “lived realities” of multiple, intertwining social inequalities – as well as of emancipatory processes – can be brought to light.

¹ H. Bernstein, *Into the Field with Marx: Some Observations on Researching Class*, in A. Mezzadri (Ed.), *Marx in the Field*, Anthem Press, 2021, 23.

² M. Burawoy, *The Extended Case Method: Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations and One Theoretical Tradition*, University of California Press, 2009, xviii.

³ H. Veltmeyer, *New Social Movements in Latin America: The Dynamics of Class and Identity*, in *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, No. 1, 1997, 143.

2. Homo Economicus as the Fundamental Unit of Analysis of the (Socio)-Economic Sphere: What Spaces for the Study of Power?

Methodological holism «gives primacy to the social whole, as opposed to individuals, without necessarily precluding analysis pitched at the level of the individual»⁴. It follows that the adoption of a perspective informed by methodological holism implies the acknowledgment of the complexity of the social sphere, with the ensuing refusal to reduce this latter to an aggregate of individual agents⁵. This leaves space for taking individual inclinations, actions, choices and life stories into consideration, read within the context of the unfolding of broader socio-historical dynamics embedded in space. Methodological individualism, on the other hand, explains the realm of the social in terms of individual action and, through an individualist analytical reductionism, ultimately portrays this realm as a mere aggregation of individuals⁶. It has been widely remarked that the discipline most openly adherent to the «strictures» of methodological individualism is neoclassical economics⁷, which, incidentally, emerged in a specific socio-spatial context characterized by the consolidation of capitalism and the intensification of its inherent social tensions; namely late nineteenth century Europe⁸. Now, the

⁴ D. Milonakis, B. Fine, *From Political Economy to Economics: Method, the Social and the Historical in the Evolution of Economic Theory*, Routledge, 2009, 13.

⁵ *Ibidem*; J. B. Davis, *Individualism*, in J. Peil, I. van Staveren (Eds.), *Handbook of Economics and Ethics*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2009, 261; S. Gibril, *Methodological Individualism and Holism*, in J.-F. Morin, C. Olsson, E. Ö. Atikcan (Eds.), *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, Oxford University Press, 2021, 167.

⁶ C. Arnsperger, Y. Varoufakis, *What is Neoclassical Economics?*, in *Panoeconomicus*, No. 1, 2006, 7; J. B. Davis, *Individualism*, cit., 262-263; D. Milonakis, B. Fine, *From Political Economy to Economics*, cit., 14.

⁷ J. Heath, *Methodological Individualism*, in E. N. Zalta, U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2024, plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/methodological-individualism/, section 2.

⁸ The relationship between theoretical approaches to social phenomena and the socio-historical contexts in which these approaches mature is admittedly a complex one. While acknowledging this complexity, critical scholars have pointed out that the rise of neoclassical economics may be traced back to a historical phase of capitalism where the capitalist classes in Europe were facing – and reacting to – crucial challenges. More specifically, the last thirty years of the 19th century witnessed, on the one hand, the advance of working class organization and working class militancy and, on the other hand, the economic depression triggered by the 1873 financial crisis, that marked the beginning of a protracted period of monopolistic restructuring and consolidation of capitalism. These developments need to be read within a broader socio-historical context characterized, since the 1830s, by the increasing determination of ascendant capitalist classes to join forces with a declining aristocracy in order to curb the mounting power of the working classes. See, in this respect, J.F. Henry, *The Making of Neoclassical Economics*, Routledge, 1990, Ch. 6; B. O' Boyle, T. McDonough, *The State of Nature and Natural States: Ideology and Formalism in the Critique of Neoclassical Economics*, in J. Morgan (Ed.), *What is Neoclassical Economics?*, Routledge, 2016, 212-216; M. Lavoie, *Post-Keynesian Economics: New Foundations*, Edward Elgar, 2014, 26-27. For a wider discussion on the restructuring of social science at the turn of the XIX-XX century in response to working class militancy in Europe see K. van der Pijl, *The Discipline of Western Supremacy: Modes of Foreign Relations and Political Economy*. Vol. III, Pluto Press, 2014, Ch. 2.

importance of reflecting on the principle of methodological individualism as inflected by neoclassical economics lies, as anticipated, in the epistemological implications of the process of reassertion of neoclassical hegemony, which occurred in the second half of the twentieth century both within and beyond economics⁹. Since the 1970s in particular, against a socio-historical background marked by the implosion of Keynesianism – and the parallel ascendance of neoliberalism – an incipient intellectual tension towards the extension of the individualist assumption of neoclassical theory to the sphere of socio-political life took on new vigour, with significant implications for the conceptualization – and the study – of this sphere¹⁰.

It is worth mentioning at this point that within the neoclassical framework the principle of methodological individualism revolves around a specific conceptualization of the individual. Namely as a rational agent endowed with fixed, exogenous preferences – that are the expression of his/her own self-interest (utility) – oriented to the maximization of the latter through voluntary market exchange. It follows that this «single-minded and selfish utility maximizer» variant of Adam Smith’s *homo economicus* is identified as the fundamental unit of analysis¹¹, through the assumption of the universality of rational decision-making oriented to the maximization of the individual utility¹². Faced with the endurance of the construct of the neoclassical individual, critical scholars have importantly questioned it over time by reason of the transhistorical character of the motivation driving this individual, seemingly abstracted from time as much as from space. In parallel, critical voices did not shy away from problematizing the construct of an «economic subject» who seems to be «economically unconditioned – especially in his preferences»¹³ and whose practices seem to be subject to an economic logic «obeying narrowly economic interests»¹⁴. After all, this paved the way for a scenario where the meaning of individual action seemed to be «imputed rather than studied»¹⁵, which led to the issue of the construction of a reified model of rationality¹⁶ being ultimately portrayed as universal “human nature”.

This was fraught with implications, not least in terms of conceptualization of the market. In fact, the representation of the market as the «primary points of reference» of the «rational calculating self-interested individual – epitomizing a transhistorical “human essence” – conveyed an understanding of the market itself as a «natural

⁹ See, in this respect, M. Blaug, *The Formalist Revolution of the 1950s*, in *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, No. 2, 2003; D. Milonakis, B. Fine, *From Political Economy to Economics: Method*, cit., Ch. 15.; R. Swedberg, *Economics and Sociology: Redefining Their Boundaries*, Princeton University Press, 1990, 3-27.

¹⁰ B. O’ Boyle, T. McDonough, *The State of Nature and Natural States*, cit., 216.

¹¹ D. Milonakis, B. Fine, *From Political Economy to Economics*, cit., 17.

¹² B. O’ Boyle, T. McDonough, *The State of Nature and Natural States*, cit., 2013-214.

¹³ P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Polity Press, 1990, 47.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 50.

¹⁵ M. Burawoy, *Mythological Individualism – The Metaphysical Foundation of Analytical Marxism*, in T. Carver, P. Thomas (Eds.), *Rational Choice Marxism*, Macmillan, 1995, 191.

¹⁶ I. Ermakoff, *Theory of Practice, Rational Choice, and Historical Change*, in *Theory and Society*, No. 5, 2010, 528.

and universal sphere of rational human conduct»¹⁷. This was a perspective openly antithetical to a historically specific approach to markets that aimed at investigating the “making” of the latter, conceived as socially constructed institutions created through political processes ridden by conflict – exemplified by Marx’s renowned analysis of the process of primitive accumulation. In any case, as has been widely pointed out, a perspective that evokes the naturalization of markets risks reducing the terms of the debate about capitalism to whether «the essential human essence (...) is unfolding as it should with the expansion and intensification of market relations»¹⁸. Which spaces remain, within this perspective, for concepts such as class, exploitation and social conflict in the study of the (socio)-economic sphere? This is a question that arose repeatedly over time in the works of critical scholars¹⁹. Ultimately, in fact, the risk inherent in the shrinking of the spaces for the study of social power dynamics – where the analysis of class dynamics should be intertwined with the study of a wider realm of oppressive relations based on gender, ethnicity and religion – consists of favouring a representation of (socio)-economic phenomena “as if” they were «unalterable and inevitable», ultimately obscuring the idea that «human beings can modify them, overcome them, and create their own story»²⁰.

Notice, here, that historically, with the ascendance of neoclassical economics, the “scientific” status of economics seemed to be derived increasingly from the reinforcement of those conceptual boundaries, intended to enshrine a separation of the economic sphere from the socio-political sphere as well as from history – a tendency reasserted by a growing propensity to adopt mathematical techniques and modelling²¹. After all, the «universal trait of rational choice making» to which the neoclassical framework reduced the complexity of (socio)-economic events, could be easily deployed in formal models, by reason of its «*determinist* nature»²². Tellingly, over time, the unfolding of this process was underpinned by a philosophical stance on science that privileged the predictive power of theory –

¹⁷ D. Cahill, *Market Analysis Beyond Market Fetishism*, in *Economy and Space*, No. 1, 2020, 30.

¹⁸ G. Albo, *Contemporary Capitalism*, in B. Fine, A. Saad-Filho, M. Boffo (Eds.), *The Elgar Companion to Marxist Economics*, Edward Elgar, 2013, 85.

¹⁹ In this respect see, *inter alia*, D. Sayer, *Marx’s Method, Ideology, Science and Critique in Capital*, Harvester Press, 1979; P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, cit.; P. Bourdieu, *Anthropologie Économique: Cours Au Collège de France 1992-1993*, Raisons d’agir, 2017; D. Milonakis, B. Fine, *From Political Economy to Economics*, cit.; M. Burawoy, *Mythological Individualism – The Metaphysical Foundation of Analytical Marxism*, cit.; F. García-Quero, J. Ollero-Perán, *Is Neoclassical Economics Scientific Knowledge Detached from Ethics? A Kantian Answer, an Institutional Alternative*, in *Review of Radical Political Economics*, No. 1, 2015, 56-69.

²⁰ F. García-Quero, J. Ollero-Perán, *Is Neoclassical Economics Scientific Knowledge Detached from Ethics? A Kantian Answer, an Institutional Alternative*, cit., 65.

²¹ J.B. Davis, *Individualism*, cit., 262; S. Dow, *Prospects for the Progress of Heterodox Economics*, in *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, No. 2, 2000, 164; M. Lavoie, *Post-Keynesian Economics: New Foundations*, cit., 27-30; D. Milonakis, B. Fine, *From Political Economy to Economics*, cit., 95-96.

²² T. J. Barnes, *Rationality and Relativism in Economic Geography: An Interpretive Review of the Homo Economicus Assumption*, in *Progress in Human Geography*, No. 4, 1988, 477.

rather than the explanatory one – wherein the realism of the assumptions at the basis of predictive models was ultimately considered an irrelevant issue. In other words, the emphasis was to be put on the predictive capacity of “science” based on assumptions – such as the universality of rational decision-making oriented to utility maximization – which could be treated “as if” they were true. This would provide, it was further argued, the ultimate basis for “objective” policy design.²³ It was the early 1950s; the dawn of a process of progressive legitimization of the individualist assumption of neoclassical theory in the study of the socio-political realm.

3. The Abiding Eclipse of Social Power Relations: The Comprehension of Socio-Political Life through the Lens of Methodological Individualism

The progressive legitimization of the tenets of methodological individualism as inflected by neoclassical economics, in the study of the social sphere was favoured by the elaboration and consolidation of the “rational choice” approach to social theory. Emerging in the early 1950s, this approach gradually extended into the overall realm of the social sciences in the course of the following decades, gaining momentum in the 1960s and 70s. This development can be considered part of a phenomenon defined with complacency by its very advocates as “economic imperialism” – whose success, as per the words of one of its proponents, Paul Lazear, could be measured by the capacity of «imperialists» to induce «others to adopt the economic approach to explore issues that are not part of classical economics»²⁴. In any case, the increasing influence of the rational choice approach

²³ This philosophical stance was notably asserted in the early 1950s by Milton Friedman, one of the most prominent defenders of the neoclassical framework and its normative implications. In a piece of work that was destined to become highly influential within and beyond economics, Friedman noted in fact that «the belief that a theory can be tested by the realism of its assumptions independently of the accuracy of its predictions is widespread and the source of much of the perennial criticism of economic theory as unrealistic», underlining the «irrelevance» of this criticism. See M. Friedman, *The Methodology of Positive Economics*, in Id. (Ed.), *Essays in Positive Economics*, University of Chicago Press, 1953, 41. Over time, the question of the realism of rational choice assumptions was subject to debate among scholars who recognized themselves in rational choice theory. In particular, some of them dismissed the idea of the irrelevance of such a question in favour of the idea of the self-evidence of rational choice assumptions, whose roots may be partially found in the Austrian school of economics. See J. Friedman, *Introduction: Economic Approaches to Politics*, in Id. (Ed.), *The Rational-Choice Controversy*, Yale University Press, 1996, 11. For a critical discussion of this intellectual stance see, among others, B. Caldwell, *A Critique of Friedman’s Methodological Instrumentalism*, in *Southern Economic Journal*, No. 2, 1980, 366-374; Id., *Friedman’s Predictive Instrumentalism: A Modification*, in *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology*, No. 1, 1992, 119-128; J. Peck, *Orientation: In Search of the Chicago School*, in R. Van Horn, P. Mirowski, T. A. Stapleford (Eds.), *Building Chicago Economics: New Perspectives on the History of America’s Most Powerful Economics Program*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, xxv-lii.

²⁴ P. Lazear, *Economic Imperialism*, in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, No. 1 2000, 104. Significantly, it has been pointed out that the ultimate foundations of “economic imperialism” were laid in the 1930s. In particular, the expression is credited to Ralph William Souter who, as reported

– also known as “rational choice theory”, “public choice theory”, or “formal theory” – on the realm of social sciences has implied a significant reorganization of different disciplines around a philosophy of human being that identifies neoclassical rationality as the basis of human action²⁵. This process was laden with implications for the conceptualization of the realm of the social, all the more equated to the sum of single “rational” individualities, seemingly suspended in time and space²⁶. I discussed in a previous work the way in which this favoured a conceptualization of the public sphere as populated by “rational individuals” – politicians and bureaucrats – inherently prone to seize the earning opportunities generated by State regulations – as per the definition of rent-seeking behaviour – which contributed to the assumption of an absolute causal relationship between government size and

by Swedberg, wrote in 1933: « [t]he salvation of Economic Science in the twentieth century lies in an enlightened and democratic ‘economic imperialism’, which invades the territories of its neighbours (...) to aid and enrich them». See R. Swedberg, *Economics and Sociology*, Princeton University Press, 1990, 14. In retracing the history of “economics imperialism” Swedberg invites us furthermore to reflect on the «aggressive stance» that contradistinguished it, emanating from the assertion of the inherent capacity of neoclassical economics to address social science problems better than any other approach – combined with the allegedly undisputed rigour of mathematical model building. See R. Swedberg, *The New ‘Battle of Methods’*, in *Challenge*, No. 1, 1990, 36. On the issue of “economic imperialism” see, moreover, B. Fine, D. Milonakis, *From Economics Imperialism to Freakonomics: The Shifting Boundaries between Economics and other Social Sciences*, Routledge, 2009; P. Bourdieu, *Anthropologie Économique*, cit.; B. Fine, *Economics Imperialism and Interdisciplinarity: Before the Watershed*, Brill, 2024. For a contribution to the debate on “economic imperialism” that raises the issue of the specific historical role of the University of Chicago, see E. Nik-Khah, R. Van Horn, *Inland Empire: Economic Imperialism as an Imperative of Chicago Neoliberalism*, in *Journal of Economic Methodology*, No. 3, 2012, 259-282. In particular, these scholars highlight the tensions existing in this institution towards changing «the policy approach of the state», in order to limit state intervention in the economic arena (Id., *Inland Empire*, cit., 271).

²⁵ P. Bourdieu, *Anthropologie Économique*, cit., 13. In this respect see also P. Dardot, C. Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, Verso, 2013; B. Fine, D. Milonakis, *From Economics Imperialism to Freakonomics: The Shifting Boundaries between Economics and other Social Sciences*, Routledge, 2009.

²⁶ It is important to recall that the rational choice approach was characterized by important internal diversifications, as noted by the scholar Ellen Meiksins Wood. Although the origins of the rational choice paradigm can be traced in a rebirth of right-wing thought, it does not follow that its adherents should automatically be associated with the political right. See E.M. Wood *Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?*, in *New Left Review*, No. 177, 1989, 44. A significant example, in this respect, is the rise, between the 1970s and 1980s, of “rational choice Marxism” (also referred to as “analytical Marxism”), a body of work that prompted fresh reflections on the hegemonic reach of neoclassical economics. With regard to the vibrant debate generated by this body of work see, *inter alia*, E.M. Wood *Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?*, cit.; J. Weldes, *Marxism and Methodological Individualism: A Critique*, in *Theory and Society*, No. 3, 1989, 353-386; T. Carver, P. Thomas (Eds.), *Rational Choice Marxism*, Macmillan, 1995; Z. Cheng, J. Chambers, *Against Methodological Individualist Interpretation of Marxist Explanations of Social Phenomena*, in *International Critical Thought*, No. 4, 2018, 626-642.

corruption²⁷. Here, I would like to add that the conceptualization of the public sphere informed by methodological individualism paved the way for a reified notion of the State – insofar as the latter appeared to be populated by “rational” individual agents, seemingly isolated from the historically and spatially specific unfolding of social power dynamics – and from the related social conflict.

On the whole, it has been noted that the rational choice framework offered a model of socio-political behaviour founded upon the self-interest of *homo economicus*, which was intended to capture the essence of the socio-political life, allegedly in isolation from the capitalist society. A society in which, as a matter of fact, the socio-political life itself occurs²⁸. Indeed, this model of socio-political behaviour has echoed importantly in the public discourse since the ascendance of the neoliberal social order – as exemplified by Margaret Thatcher’s famous statement «there is no such thing as society»²⁹, and by the growing popularity of an image of the State as populated by «unrepentant rent-seekers, inclined to waste and corruption»³⁰ – intended to legitimize neoliberal policy practices.

This is not to deny that the above-described intellectual scenario went through sophisticated developments over the course of time. On the contrary, significant developments sprang up following the emergence of the theoretical approach known as new institutional economics – or neo-institutionalism – which, nevertheless, moved along a line of continuity with the analytical-methodological premises of neoclassical economics.

Recall, at this point, that the roots of new institutional economics lay in sophisticated debates that gradually emerged in mainstream economics from the 1970s on, when issues such as market irregularities became a subject of thorough discussion, and was further elaborated during the 1980s and 90s³¹. Importantly, as Douglass North, one of the main and most prominent proponents of new institutional economics sought to underline, this latter «builds on neo-classical theory» to allow it to «deal with an entire range of issues heretofore beyond its ken»³². New institutional economics recognized that market exchange is permeated by uncertainty and, in particular, revisited the assumption of full information among rational individuals who engage in market exchange, in favour of the notion that

²⁷ M. Adduci, *Per un’analisi critica del tema della corruzione nella corrente dominante gli studi sullo sviluppo: percorsi teorici e riflessioni dai territori marginali dell’Odisha (India)*, in *Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie: Diritto, Istituzioni e Società*, No. 2, 2023, 6-7.

²⁸ B. Ollman, *What is political science? What should it be?*, in *New Political Science*, No. 4, 2000, 560. In this respect, see also N. Holmstrom, *For a Sustainable Future: The Centrality of Public Goods*, in L. Panitch, G. Albo (Eds.), *Beyond Market Dystopia: New Ways of Living: Socialist Register 2020*, Merlin Press, 2019, 199-215.

²⁹ Interview released by Margaret Thatcher on 23rd September 1987 to the British magazine *Woman’s Own*, retrieved on 7th August 2024 at margaretthatcher.org/document/106689.

³⁰ A. Mastroianni, *Is Democracy a Lost Cause?*, ECPR Press, 2012, 105.

³¹ C. Lapavistas, *Mainstream Economics in the Neoliberal Era*, in A. Saad-Filho, D. Johnston (Eds.), *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*, Pluto Press, 36.

³² D. North, *The New Institutional Economics and Third World Development*, in J. Harriss, J. Hunter, C. M. Lewis (Eds.), *The New Institutional Economics and Third World Development*, Routledge, 1995, 17.

information in the market is typically spread in an asymmetric way. In other words, the selfish, utility maximizer *homo economicus* was now fundamentally conceived as imperfectly informed – while remaining the fundamental unit of analysis. In essential terms, asymmetrically held information was associated to the emergence of costs in market transactions (such as the costs inherent to the negotiation, conclusion and enforcement of contracts) destined to affect the efficiency of the market. Along these lines, market failures – which were now acknowledged – could lead to a condition where choices made by rational individuals might «fail to elicit allocation of resources that maximize the social welfare», thus engendering «social dilemmas»³³. On the whole, this construct paved the way to a recognition of the role played by institutions and institutional change in ameliorating the functioning of the market and mitigating uncertainty in market exchange³⁴. This construct, it should be noted, still assumed that the institutions themselves and the changes within them are a product of “rational” individual agents.

Within this framework notable emphasis was placed on the role of “well-specified and well enforced” property rights in creating the conditions for an efficient functioning of the market. These rights were identified in fact as the crucial institution at the basis of the trajectory of growth experienced by modern Western economies³⁵. As North underlined «[t]he establishment of such a set of property rights will then allow individuals in highly complex interdependent situations to be able to have confidence in their dealings with individuals of whom they have no personal knowledge and with whom they have no reciprocal and ongoing exchange relationships»³⁶.

I have elsewhere recalled how such a perspective led to a rethink of the issue of the disparities between global North and South in terms of quality of the institutional framework, which led to a recognition of the centrality of institutional infrastructure such as “property rights” and “law and order” in the so-called “good governance agenda”³⁷. In that article, I retraced criticisms inherent to an understanding of institutions – and institutional change – which, informed by the individualist assumption of neoclassical theory, seemed to leave no space to interrogate the complexity of the social processes through which, historically and in diverse spatial contexts, institutions have been created and transformed.

Here, I would like to recall another equally important issue raised by critics of neo-institutionalism, related to the very representation of the capitalist economy. As underlined by Fine, within such a framework, capitalism seemed to be essentially reduced to «a construct imperfectly informed individuals, imperfectly

³³ R. Bates, *Social Dilemmas and Rational Individuals: An Assessment of the New Institutionalism*, in J. Harriss, J. Hunter, C. M. Lewis (Eds.), *The New Institutional Economics and Third World Development*, cit., 35.

³⁴ *Ibidem*. Cfr. D. North, *The New Institutional Economics and Third World Development*, cit., 24.

³⁵ D. North, *Institutions and Economics Growth: An Historical Introduction*, in *World Development*, No. 9, 1989, 1320.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ M. Adduci, *Per un'analisi critica del tema della corruzione nella corrente dominante gli studi sullo sviluppo: percorsi teorici e riflessioni dai territori marginali dell'Odisha (India)*, cit., 12-13.

coordinated through the market place»³⁸. Also, as noted by others, in this terrain the market seems to preserve the status of «a primordial system» or «the original institution», rather than being the capitalist market(s), whose specificities need to be explained³⁹. All in all, this perspective contributed, on the one hand, to reproducing the premises for the naturalization of the market as well as, on the other hand, to the opening up of new spaces for the subsumption of the realm of the social within the logic of the (micro)-economic.

In any case, it was under the above-mentioned premise that neo-institutionalism recognized the importance of formal and informal institutions – expected to play an inherently “market-friendly” role – as harbingers of “technical”, “win-win” solutions to “social dilemmas” by virtue of the specific view of the socio-economic sphere underlying neo-institutionalism itself. Indeed, the acknowledgement that the role to be played by institutions should be one favouring the functioning of the market led, significantly, to conceding the relevance of the «vocabulary» of the social sciences – with explicit reference to political science⁴⁰. On closer inspection, however, what appeared to be recognized was, more precisely, the relevance of the “vocabulary” of a political science that had proved to be responsive to the call of economic imperialism. It is interesting to note, here, that the importance of conducting the study of political and social institutions within an analytical terrain consistent with a rational choice approach to individual action was advocated, among others, by Elinor Ostrom⁴¹. This would enable, according to the scholar, a fruitful analysis of those contexts where rational individuals face a lack of information – and the related conditions of uncertainty – by adopting «a view of human action that is both rule-governed and rational»⁴². While calling for a leading role for political science in this development, Ostrom strongly contributed to a view of the discipline according to which rational choice and institutional analysis should be «essential complements in the political science of the twenty first century»⁴³.

In all events, as anticipated, over time neo-institutionalism made significant inroads into the social sciences as a whole, reasserting a tendency towards the comprehension of socio-political life through the logic of the utility-maximizer individual, now conceived as imperfectly informed in a scenario where, as Pierre

³⁸ B. Fine, *Neither the Washington nor the Post-Washington Consensus: An Introduction*, in B. Fine, C. Lapavistas; J. Pincus (Eds.), *Development Policy in the Twenty-First Century: Beyond the Post-Washington Consensus*, Routledge, 2001, 7. See also D. Krier, *Finance Capital, Neo-Liberalism and Critical Institutionalism*, in *Critical Sociology*, No. 3, 2009, 395-416.

³⁹ D. Ankarloo, G. Palermo, *Anti-Williamson: A Marxian Critique of New Institutional Economics*, in *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, No. 28, 2004, 421; D. Milonakis, B. Fine, *Douglass North's Remaking of Economic History: A Critical Appraisal*, in *Review of Radical Political Economy*, No. 1, 2007, 48.

³⁹ R. Bates, *Social Dilemmas and Rational Individuals: An Assessment of the New Institutionalism*, cit., 47.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ See, in this respect, E. Ostrom, *Rational Choice Theory and Institutional Analysis: Toward Complementarity*, in *American Political Science Review*, No. 1, 1991, pp. 237-243.

⁴² E. Ostrom, *Rational Choice Theory and Institutional Analysis*, cit., 242.

⁴³ *Idem*, 243.

Bourdieu noted, (mainstream) economics tended to portray itself as «the general science of human practices»⁴⁴. Tellingly, the analytical terrain where neo-institutionalism intersected with rational choice theory witnessed the flourishing, *inter alia*, of a political approach to governance, a concept which gained wide circulation in the social sciences and in the wider public discourse from the mid-1990s on⁴⁵. This approach did not underestimate the peril of rent-seeking behaviour by public officials, justified by the attitudes that contradistinguished *homo economicus*⁴⁶. This, as noted above, had contributed significantly to legitimize the “natural” desirability of the core neoliberal policy practices. Rather, it paved the way to the widening of these latter, by advocating the establishment of governance structures at the service of an ostensibly socially neutral notion of efficiency. The idea according to which this development would have built the foundations for an apparently socially neutral, “problem-solving” oriented collaboration among “stakeholders” supposedly endowed of equal negotiating power, has engendered a vibrant debate among critical scholars, both in the global North and South, where the political approach to governance was adopted in terms of the “good governance agenda”.

The review of this debate – as well as of the related debate on the promotion of a notion of participatory policymaking abstracted from social conflict – goes beyond the scope of this essay⁴⁷. Here, I would like to return to a qualifier of the “good governance agenda” already introduced, namely the provision of institutional infrastructure such as “property rights” and “law and order”, aimed at encouraging the efficiency of the market. It has been significantly noted that the analytical ground underlying this prescription produces a questionable, exquisitely juridical, notion of “well-specified and well-enforced property rights”, to the detriment of the wider notion of «property relations, or social relations of production», thus

⁴⁴ P. Bourdieu, *Anthropologie Économique*, cit., 14. For a nuanced and timely analysis of new institutional arguments in comparative social science, see P. Cammack, *The New Institutionalism: Predatory Rule, Institutional Persistence, and Macro-Social Change*, in *Economy and Society*, No. 4, 1992, 397-429.

⁴⁵ A. Mastropaolo, *Is Democracy a Lost Cause?*, cit., 118; J. P. Gaudin, *La gouvernance a double-face. Declinazioni e contraddizioni*, Aracne, 2017, 15.

⁴⁶ M. Khan, *Corruption, Governance and Economic Development*, in K. S. Jomo, B. Fine (Eds.), *The New Development Economics: After the Washington Consensus*, Tulika Books, 2006, 200-221; B. Fine, *The Developmental State and the Political Economy of Development*, in K.S. Jomo, B. Fine (Eds.), *The New Development Economics*, cit., 110.

⁴⁷ With respect to these debates see, *inter alia*, N. Chandokhe, *Governance and the Pluralisation of the State: Implications for Democratic Citizenship*, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, No. 28, 2003; D. Porter, D. Craig, *The Third Way and the Third World: Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion in the Rise of 'Inclusive' Liberalism*, in *Review of International Political Economy*, No. 2, 2004; A. Mastropaolo, *Is Democracy a Lost Cause?*, cit.; P. Gaudin, *La gouvernance a double-face. Declinazioni e contraddizioni*, cit.; E. Sheppard, H. Leitner, *Quo Vadis Neoliberalism? The Remaking of Global Capitalist Governance after the Washington Consensus*, in *Geoforum*, No. 2, 2010; J. Demmers, A. E. Fernández Jilberto, B. Hogenboom (Eds.), *Good Governance in the Era of Global Neoliberalism*, Routledge, 2005.

contributing once more to the eclipsing these latter from the analysis⁴⁸. It might be added that, more broadly, such a prescription seems to draw upon a reified notion of law and its implementation, which obscures the issue of the relationship between the enactment of law, the enforcement of law – or its denial – and social conflict. This is an issue, however, that resonates strongly in the social landscapes of India and beyond⁴⁹. However it can hardly be acknowledged – let alone explored – through the theoretical framework underpinning the apparently technical language of (good) governance.

Interestingly, the political scientist Colin Leys has pointed out that the progressive hegemony of methodological individualism in the social sciences – leading overall to a shrinking of the space for historically-specific and socially embedded analyses – was supposed to contribute, in some people’s eyes, to bestowing the “other” social sciences with the rigour reclaimed by, and recognized to (mainstream) economics⁵⁰. It has been noted, though, that this development did not seem to prevent the perpetuation of a profoundly asymmetrical relationship between the former and the latter⁵¹. In any event, this development was accompanied by the emergence of a new emphasis on predictive approaches to socio-political phenomena, accompanied by a proclivity towards mathematical modelling, aimed at describing relations within given sets of “variables”, abstracted from any consideration of socio-historical specificity⁵². In this respect, a noteworthy recent article by Elisa Giunchi in the Pakistan context offers an example⁵³. She critically reflects on the assumed correlation between formal democracy on the one hand, and greater welfare expenditure and decreasing levels of conflict on the other.

At any rate, the increasing use of mathematical modelling contributed to the legitimization of the construct of the – ostensibly neutral – “expert”, which in turn was inherently compatible with the notion of socially neutral and value-free policy advice – arguably based on “accurate predictions”. All in all, this was a scenario where the intellectual space for the study of power tended to be narrowed. The issue of the social role of intellectuals and their relationship with power appeared all the more relegated to the sidelines of the debate. Scholars seemed to be fundamentally discouraged – and absolved – from the responsibility to question their own relation

⁴⁸ D. Milonakis, B. Fine, *Douglass North’s Remaking of Economic History: A Critical Appraisal*, cit., 47-48.

⁴⁹ See S. Sinha, *On the Edge of Civil Society in Contemporary India*, in A. G. Nielsen, S. Roy (Eds.), *New Subaltern Politics: Reconceptualising Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary India*, Oxford University Press, 2015, 225-253.

⁵⁰ C. Leys, *The Rise and Fall of Development Theory*, James Currey, 1997, 36.

⁵¹ M. Fourcade, E. Ollion, Y. Algan, *The Superiority of Economists*, in *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, No.1, 2015, 96.

⁵² L.J.D. Wacquant, C.J. Calhoun, *Intérêt, rationalité et culture: a propos d’un récent débat sur la théorie de l’action*, in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, No. 78, 52-54; B. Ollman, *What Is Political Science? What Should It Be?*, cit., 555.

⁵³ See E. Giunchi, *Democratization and the Relevance of History: The Case of Pakistan*, in *Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie: Diritto, Istituzioni e Società*, No. 1, 2019, 1-19.

with power and hence, quoting once more Colin Leys, to reflect upon «who they were writing for, and who might act in the light of what they wrote»⁵⁴. Yet, this issue is doomed to resound powerfully when the unfolding of history and the complexity of socio-political reality are brought back into the research agenda. This is a point we will return to, after proposing some considerations of field-based research informed by methodological holism.

4. Some Reflections on Field-Based Research Oriented towards Exploring the Unfolding of Social Power Relations

While emphasising that analytical theory enables us «to see and thus comprehend the world», the social scientist Michael Burawoy – whose own research trajectory has consistently been informed by the tensions around understanding the inequality that permeates the world – importantly underlined that «the world has an obduracy of its own», which results in continuous challenges to theory⁵⁵. This implies an acknowledgement that the complex set of processes that shape reality, and its transformations cannot be «reduced to, let alone determined by» a mere system of analytical categories⁵⁶. Likewise, this implies recognizing that a historically-specific and socially-embedded analysis of reality implies a continuous dialogue between field and theory⁵⁷. Thinking back to my field-based research trajectory, which has been characterized by an approach informed by methodological holism that recognizes the importance of interrogating reality through the lens of critical political economy, my urge for such a dialogue clearly emerged from the very beginning.

My first field research experience was aimed at exploring from a class perspective the social conflict engendered by what could be read as a process of *de facto* privatization of the waters of Chilika Lake – recognized as illegal by the judicial power. This research interest sprang from my comprehension of “development” as a process inherently ridden with social conflict. As I started to explore the complexity of the conflict that troubled the Chilika Lake waters, it became evident that the socially dominant stratum in Odisha – made up of top-level politicians and bureaucrats – was amply involved at a financial level in the *de facto* privatization of the lake waters. Yet, as for many social groups in developing societies, its position in relation to the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, namely the contradiction between capital and labour, did not seem obvious. On the contrary, it needed to be explained.

This marked the beginning of a dialogue between field and theory, which led me to draw upon an insightful contribution by Gibbon and Neocosmos to the volume *Contradictions of Accumulation in Africa: Studies in Economy and the State*,

⁵⁴ C. Leys, *The Rise and Fall of Development Theory*, cit., 42.

⁵⁵ M. Burawoy, *The Extended Case Method*, cit., xiv.

⁵⁶ B. Fine, A. Saad-Filho, *Marx's Capital*, Pluto Press, 2004, 7.

⁵⁷ M. Burawoy, *The Extended Case Method*, cit., xi-xviii.

published in the mid-1980s⁵⁸. Faced with the complexity of the processes of class formation and reproduction, they argued that capital and wage-labour are: «two sides of the same social contradiction and, among other things, individually represent functions, class places or class bases indispensable to capitalism, *which need not themselves be personified in groups of capitalists or wage-labourers as such in every branch of the economy*, but explain the existence of classes at a general level»⁵⁹.

This formulation suggested the importance of focusing both on the complexities of the core material processes in capitalism and on the social relationships ascribable to the unfolding of these processes. In the case of Odisha, this suggested the importance of exploring the socio-economic dynamics historically underlying the existence and the reproduction of the dominant Odishan social stratum within the context of the unfolding of broader capitalist relations, in order to create the premises to comprehend the “nature” of this social stratum as presently constituted. This required an effort, accomplished through further periods of field-based research, that drew significantly on in-depth interviews to interrogate the processes that explained the specificities of Odishan society within the context of Indian capitalist development – namely, the social (re)production of Odisha as an Indian mining State, historically characterized by abysmal poverty and high levels of inequality.

Contextually, the question of the position of the Odishan dominant stratum in the system of social production needed to be addressed. This led me to reflect upon the definition of class offered by the scholar Ste. Croix, known for his seminal work on class struggle in ancient Greece in an essay on Marx’s conception of ancient and modern history. Starting from the notion that class is «the collective social expression of the fact of exploitation, the way in which exploitation is embodied in a social structure» Ste. Croix argued that a class position in the whole system of production is defined above all «according to [its] relationship (primarily in terms of the degree of *control*) to the conditions of production (...) and to other classes»⁶⁰.

Overall, this led me to conceptualize the Odishan socially dominant stratum as a “neo-rentier” class, integral to capital, which through a historically established control of the State apparatus proved able to control the natural resources of the State, fostering the growth of the extractive sector in response to capital’s needs. Subsequently, the continuous process of dialogue between this field and the theory led me to suggest that this social stratum could be also understood, more broadly, as a specific “class of capital”, distinguished by its interests and strategies in capital

⁵⁸ P. Gibbon, M. Neocosmos, *Some Problems in the Political Economy of “African Socialism”*, in H. Bernstein, B. K. Campbell (Eds.), *Contradictions of Accumulation in Africa: Studies in Economy and the State*, Sage, 1985. This work offered a crucial contribution to the theoretical debate on the social reproduction of petty commodity production on a worldwide basis, whose significance has admittedly gone beyond the specific debate on petty commodity production.

⁵⁹ *Idem*, 156. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁰ G. de Ste. Croix, *Class in Marx’s Conception of History, Ancient and Modern*, in *New Left Review*, No. 146, 1984, 100.

related to natural resources. Here I drew upon a conceptualization offered by Henry Bernstein⁶¹.

It seems appropriate to note, at this point, that the dialogue between field and theory may lead, *inter alia*, to the need for additional discussions with social actors already interviewed – a need, which may in any case arise when early reflections on interviews progressively conducted subsequently point to the need to clarify specific aspects of the studied reality. In this light, the very conduction of in-depth interviews can be considered an (unfinished) process, in the course of which, it should also be noted, significant reflections and information may surface during the time “informally” spent with the interviewees, *i.e.* during a walk, a conversation or a shared meal. Incidentally, these considerations point to the need to conduct the interviews personally, acknowledging the importance of devoting time to this process. This is of particular importance for a research path aimed at exploring the unfolding of specific social power dynamics including attention to individual stories and life experiences. Indeed, it is essential in order to capture the “lived reality” of exploitation and social oppression, as well as of the processes of emancipation. In this respect, I would like to propose some more reflections related to my fieldwork experience.

More than a decade after my first study of Chilika Lake, I conducted new fieldwork in the Chilika area. The threats of occupational displacement related to the *de facto* privatization process of the lake waters had turned into a harsh reality, exposing the poor fishing community to an increasing fragmentation of their livelihoods⁶². Interrogating this reality from a class perspective, I conducted, *inter alia*, a number of focus groups with women belonging to the poor fishing community, in which the discussion focused on their changing occupational trajectories, and left space for their personal considerations and feelings. This led to the emergence of expressions of profound anxiety about the future, marking their lives. They were now exposed to a reality consisting of exhausting searches for any available opportunity of employment, low wages, long working hours, lack of time as well as physical suffering – such as that experienced, for instance, when peeling cashews bare-handed, using boiling water in local factories. The “lived reality” of occupational displacement – within a broader context marked by a nationwide process of labour informalization – was rendered in its entire harshness in the words of a woman, who stressed that notwithstanding all the efforts she was making, there seemed to be no possibility to escape indebtedness and poverty. In saying so, she could not hold back her tears. During these discussions, however, the women participating in the focus groups also acknowledged the importance of continuing to struggle against the illegal process of privatization of the lake waters and, moreover, recalled their attempts – in some cases partially successful – to demand better working conditions when working as labourers in fields, factories and in the construction sector. This pointed to the perceived importance of raising one’s voice

⁶¹ See H. Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*, Fernwood, 2010, 110-112.

⁶² See M. Adduci, *The Relentless de Facto Privatization Process of Chilika Lake, India*, in *Journal of Agrarian Change*, No. 4, 2020.

in the face of overwhelming social injustice – a theme which also emerged during another field-based research piece I have conducted, aimed at exploring the working conditions of miners in Odisha, and workers’ attempts at establishing unions in private mines, notwithstanding that this could expose them to the threat of violence⁶³.

The theme of “subaltern voices” was destined to emerge also during fieldwork conducted in the spring of 2024 for my most recent research project. The aim of this most recent work was to contribute to the investigation of the dialectical processes underlying the design of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)⁶⁴ in the light of the Gramscian concept of “integral State” or “extended State”. Recall here that this concept designates the dialectical union of “political society”, namely the State’s traditional coercive apparatuses, and “civil society”, conceived by Gramsci as the “locus of consent”, or the ensemble of hegemonic apparatuses, sometimes public and sometimes only apparently “private” (such as parties and associations) through which the State acts in order to produce and extend consent⁶⁵. From this perspective – where, as underlined by Gramsci, the distinction between “political society” and “civil society” is “methodical” and not “organic” – the integral State is conceived as an instrument of organization of class power. Simultaneously (in the Gramscian intellectual universe social processes are never univocal) the integral State is also conceived as a terrain of class struggle, a locus of struggle for hegemony, which involves the creation of “counter-hegemonic moments”, the outcomes of which are by no means predefined⁶⁶. Starting from this base my project aimed, *inter alia*, at exploring current subaltern politics in defence of NREGA, with specific attention to the discourses and practices of unions active at national and local (State/district) level. In particular, I was interested in investigating the possible ways in which the struggles to defend and advance NREGA conducted by unions representing agricultural labourers were harbingers of “counter-hegemonic” discourses and practices being elaborated within the universe of labour, able to challenge a notion of social policy geared towards the government of poverty and inequality, prevailing within the neoliberal social order.

Here, I will confine myself to a few considerations of the ways in which a theme of perceived importance of “making one’s own voice heard” – and learning to do so – emerged during in depth-interviews intended to leave space for the “lived reality” of exploitation and oppression, as well as of processes of emancipation. In particular, I will refer to two in-depth interviews with union cadres active at the

⁶³ See M. Adduci, *Neoliberalism, Mining and Labour in the Indian State of Odisha: Outlining a Political Economy Analysis*, in *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, No. 4, 2017.

⁶⁴ This act, which was passed in India in 2005, gives a legal guarantee of 100 days of employment per year in public works to any rural household whose members are willing to do manual labour. NREGA workers are entitled to minimum wage, equal for men and women. In 2009 NREGA was renamed Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

⁶⁵ See, in this respect, C. Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci e lo Stato*, Editori Riuniti, 1976; G. Liguori, *Stato e società civile in Gramsci*, in *Polis*, No. 2, 2017; P.D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, Haymarket Books, 2009, ch. 3-4-5.

⁶⁶ See G. Liguori, *Stato e società civile in Gramsci*, cit., 23.

local level. The first interview was conducted with a female agricultural labourer who held a leadership position in the union *Jan Jagran Shakti Sangathan* (JJSS), based in the poverty-stricken district of Araria in Bihar⁶⁷. The second was with a young female union cadre, active in the Rajasthan *Asangathit Mazdoor Union* (RAMU), based in the poverty-stricken and drought-prone district of Rajsamand, Rajasthan⁶⁸.

The first interview started by retracing the life experiences that had led the interviewee to join her union, before discussing the struggles subsequently undertaken to demand the implementation of NREGA, as well as the ways in which these struggles intertwined with broader struggles spanning from the issue of wages, to the right to health, to the denouncing of caste-based discrimination. During the interview, the theme of attempts to block the process of unionisation in the interviewee's village also emerged, with particular reference to heavy intimidation from some locally powerful landowners. The interviewed union leader described how, faced with this, a discussion was held with other rural labourers that culminated in the decision not to succumb to this intimidation and, in parallel, described her personal feelings about the importance of a choice ultimately leading to the possibility to claim the right to work and live with dignity. This resistance led, *inter alia*, to a struggle for the right to be protected from the threat of eviction, carried out in the not uncommon circumstance where agricultural labourers' living quarters are located on public land. This entailed the making of a demand for legal entitlement to this land. The assertion of this right – based, as the interviewee explained she had learnt from her union, on the right to livelihood enshrined in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution – usually proved to be a process fraught with difficulties, which could include, as she had experienced personally, serious disputes with powerful landowners claiming the right to a share of public land. Reflecting on this, and in spite of the difficulties, she reasserted the considerable importance that she attached to these struggles conducted with the union. She wanted to say that she, along with the other rural labourers, had nothing but her voice to assert her right to a life of dignity.

Similarly, the second interview was focused on the activities that the young female union cadre, from a poor rural household, was undertaking with her union in order to relentlessly demand the implementation of NREGA, accompanied by continuous efforts aimed at countering any form of caste-based discrimination and at promoting awareness of the structural causes of poverty. The interview left space for exploring the personal growth trajectory of the interviewee, or, in other words, the ways in which she felt her experience in the union had enriched her. In reflecting on this, she recalled that this experience had led her to discuss openly with her parents the importance of speaking out against experiences of caste discrimination, remarking that «it is not natural being treated like this». Caste discrimination, in fact, was a crucial issue in the everyday life of her family, which belonged to the

⁶⁷ Interview conducted on 17th June 2024, in the city of Araria, Bihar.

⁶⁸ Interview conducted on 30th June 2024, in the village of Devdungri, Rajasthan.

Dalit community. However, she had never felt entitled to talk openly about it with her parents before joining the union. The union, she recalled, gave her the possibility to address thoroughly, through regular group discussions, the multiple social injustices marking the lives of the union members. This gave her a more in-depth understanding, *inter alia*, of caste-based discrimination and its inherent dangers, including the possible “naturalization” of socially constituted hierarchies. Starting from this premise, she acknowledged that the struggle against caste-based discrimination was an important part of a broader struggle against social injustice – and she felt an urgent need to share this new awareness with her family. In addition, she recounted how she had recently (spring 2023) participated in an all-India protest in defence of NREGA held in Delhi, under the co-ordination of the national platform to which both RAMU and JJSS belong, namely the NREGA *Sangharsh Morcha*. She underlined that this experience allowed her to learn more about the organization of a protest and moreover – and no less importantly – she stressed that on the occasion she had found the «courage to say her opinion» in a public speech. In reflecting on this experience as a whole, she pointed out that by working with the union she had learnt to raise her voice, and this was a learning that would now accompany her through her life.

In-depth interviews have been importantly conceptualized as an «avenue to understanding social structures, as well as individual actions»⁶⁹. The point that I wanted to illustrate, in this respect, is the way in which a research perspective informed by methodological holism, which recognizes the importance of addressing the issue of power – and is alert to the possible unfolding of counter-hegemonic practices – may certainly leave space for individual voices and life stories, ultimately enriching the analysis by making it more nuanced. More specifically, the research trajectories I describe above have contributed to shedding light on the way in which both subaltern demands for the full implementation of existing judgments – as in the case of Chilika Lake – and labour legislation are part of broader struggles aimed at asserting subaltern rights to livelihood and to a life free from exploitation and discrimination. Incidentally, this is a reality that can hardly be captured by adopting a reified notion of law, abstracted from social conflict. Moreover, these research trajectories offer glimpses of the “lived reality” of the processes of oppression and exploitation. They emerge through the words of individuals exposed to these processes. But glimpses of the “lived reality” of processes of emancipation also emerge, through the tales of individuals who have learnt to raise their voices against social injustice.

5. *By Way of Conclusion*

On a final note, I would like to mention that, in the course of my research experience, the issue of researchers’ accountability to a “world beyond” – or,

⁶⁹ A. Peräkylä, J. Ruusuvoori, *Analyzing Talk and Text*, in N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage, 2018, 685.

differently put, the need to consider for whom one writes – was evoked not infrequently during fieldwork periods by those who generously agreed to devote time to one or more in-depth interviews. My interest in exploring the unfolding of specific social power dynamics, the related multiple social inequalities and, not least, the related possible unfolding of counter-hegemonic practices – within the broader context of the unfolding of neoliberalism in India – was sometimes a subject for discussion before and after the interviews. Often, when this happened, the attempt at critically investigating such dynamics was considered as a potentially useful contribution to the comprehension – and to the exposure – of the harsh inequalities marking the “world beyond”. In some cases, unionists and activists expressed an interest in discussing in more depth the way in which I was relating the unfolding of specific oppressive dynamics. However, in one case, which is vividly imprinted in my memory, I was asked with sadness and disillusionment by a poor woman what possible difference my research could make, in the face of the crushing conditions of oppression and exploitation to which she, and so many other women in her village, were exposed daily. These discussions and such exchanges have been for me a valuable source of reflection on the importance of “bringing power back” into the research agenda – especially when, as in the last case so vividly illustrates, the unfolding social power dynamics can prove overwhelming to the point of erasing any space for hope. This, in turn, brings us back to the centrality of the explanatory power of theory, hence to the importance of adopting an analytical-methodological approach able to meet the challenges arising from the complexity of a social reality marked by profound inequalities affecting the lot of so many people in the “world beyond”.