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Urban communities and participation in the XXI century:  
the informal urban century

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## **Law and the struggle for urban space**

The struggle for urban space has been the characterising element of the relation among citizens of different social classes and between the mass of poor population and the government during Brazil's urban growth. Land has become the most valuable and desired resource.

Urban development in Brazil has been excluding and segregating. Maria de Azevedo Brandão (Brandão M., 1997; 187) speaks of a "bloody urbanisation", through which all is urbanised and it does not matter if this process does not take a wealthy, healthy, sheltered and protected life.

The city has been developed according to necessities, priorities and interests of the privileged minority. We speak of social apartheid, where the man-land relation suffers the heritage of the period of colonies and slavery, subduing relations to the reproduction of capital. Urban space reproduces hence archaic relations while the goal is modernisation and development.

The history of the metropolis of São Paulo is characterised by the profound rift between town-planning legislation and factual reality, often linked to the failing willingness of recognising the informal city in all its aspects. The recognition of the reality built by millions inhabitants is hence linked to the political period, to electoral clientships, to real property interests. The political aspect of poverty is the cruellest in the urban struggle for land and for citizenship. Urban space is imposed as the place for the commercialisation of what is at the base of citizens' identity: citizenship.

In this context, law is hence an expression of privileged classes which define differently legality and illegality according to different moments. As stated by Raquel Rolnik Rolnik R., 1997; 13-14), urban legislation acts more as a delimitation of power boundaries, rather than defining permitted or prohibited modalities of space appropriation, or than regulating effectively the production of the city. Law organises and classifies urban territories, giving them meaning and creating the notions of civilisation and citizenship directly respondent to the way of life of the groups more involved in their definition. Law functions hence as the cultural reference in the city, also when it does not actually define its final shape. "This is why it determines only the minority of the used space, and this is certainly true for the case of São Paulo and probably for the main part of Latin American cities, (...) but, establishing permitted and prohibited solutions, it finishes to define territories in and out of the law, that means territories of full citizenship or limited citizenship". This means that also when the law does not operate in the sense of determining the shape of the city, like in Brazilian cities where the most of the occupied areas is illegal, then it has the power in the sense of connecting cultural differences to the hierarchical system.

## **Illegal features to coping with housing problem in São Paulo**

In the Brazilian cities, an enormous mass of people cannot enter the official housing market. The State policy concerning the creation of urban space could neither satisfy the great housing demand from the poorer class, nor restrict real estate speculation (cause of the socio-spatial periphery process), nor fight efficiently illegal zoning. As a consequence, the only possible option, for a great part of the population, has been illegality (Apuzzo, 2001), i.e. housing that, in different ways and in different degrees, is illegal. However, the word "illegal" is not completely correct because these settlements are not illegal in the meaning of hidden or invisible, but they are rooted since many years and visible to everyone who want to see them.

The alternative options to the housing problem are: self-building, *cortiços* (collective rent housing), *favelas*. Every alternative has different illegality degrees. The *favela* and the invasion are totally illegal while self-building and *cortiço* can be more or less illegal. In fact, for the *favela* the main feature is the clear illegality, both for the land usurpation and building.

It is clear that illegality is strictly connected with precariousness in housing, infrastructures or land. In addition to physical precariousness has to be considered the social one. The illegal city includes features, which cannot be neglected by a program aiming to restoration and poverty fight.

As demonstrated by different recurrent collections of data, the informal housing solutions are more and more increasing. Regarding housing conditions, the most significant data are related to the augment of the population living in *favelas*. A study of SEADE detecting quality of life in São Paulo between 1990, 1994 and 1998, stated that the percentage of hovels (*favelas*) and the percentage of the population obtaining its own houses illegally (invasions) increased. The percentage of hovels and *favelas* has increased by 50%, passing from 6.2% to 9.1% of the total amount of houses, and the proportion of families occupying illegally their house has passed from 6.5% to 9.1% (SEADE, 1999). In spite of different methodologies and definitions, all the researches show this tendency and, as we will see, the *favela* is becoming the housing solution for many people not considered as poor.

### **The century of urban informality**

The social and economic processes of the XX century's last decade produced a significant rise in inequalities affecting the cities of the South. The two key dimensions guiding society towards an increasing social polarisation are: the global technology-driven processes and the market-driven social policies.

The first dimension has been deeply debated and it is not worthy to explore its theoretical aspects. In this situation, existing social distances and inequalities naturally increase. In M.Santos's words, "a technological system unable to favour the development of everybody, but imposing its own rules, is an "invader": what has been created is not unity, but unification" (Santos M., 1994; 56).

Therefore, all over the territory, more rigid hierarchies are created, because only who has the access to the *loci* of global power, can win the struggle for space in IT era, through reaching the place where technological know-how, speed of flows and instantaneous times are concentrated. In the cities "lit and dark spaces" (Santos M., *ibid.*) are consequently created: hegemonic and dominated spaces and hence hegemonic and dominated times. In this perspective, the time of global economy subdue other slower times, and particularly, social time.

The struggle for space in Brazilian cities is hence structured on two levels: a space for technical and scientific élites and the physical urban space of "slow city" (Apuzzo, 2000; 75). The first requires an increasing amount of specialised knowledge and, as a consequence, generates new exclusion (e.g. surpassed and out-of-date professional training). The second is the arena where "the slow city" still struggles to be a city from every point of view, to have, in other words, decent housing and urban services.

Secondly, the increasing development of informal practices seems to be more probable, if one considers the new orientation for public social policies since the middle 1980s. I could say that the pivotal role of the State- Market conflict, where the social system and its internal relations were preserved by State is arriving to its end. Today, State is no

longer the subject of social reproduction and maintenance of cohesive values, and the society not governed through the traditional channels for social relations.

These new processes imply a growing regulative role of the market in social relations, redefining Government and civil society's roles (Sottoli, 2000; 3) through the dissolution of the traditional form of policies and the development of new types of political legitimisation and social integration. There is a shift from a government-based paradigm to a market-based one, aiming to extend market mechanisms to social relations, which means to favour competition, profit, individual action.

It cannot be neglected the inefficacy of the traditional governmental action in social services: highly centralised services, high administrative costs, institutional fragmentation, waste of resources and "clientship". However, it has to be recognised the dangers, weaknesses and inequalities of a market-driven social policy.

Decentralization should be a key element to support and promote associations and community organisations, favouring the civil society's democratic participation and initiatives. Such an attitude is based also upon budget considerations and drives to a dramatic abandonment of direct public initiative in the field of social action and to a sort of recognition and acceptance of the informal practices.

Self-help practices are developing as an answer to the dramatic exclusion and to the failure of State in providing basic services, and these informal pathways are increasingly organised. Mutual cooperation and help is accorded, through exchanging individual skills and knowledge.

In the cities of the South, informality is a determining part of social life in housing, trade, transports and services. Such examples allow to consider the XXI century as the century of urban informality. This arises controversies on the features of illegality behind this kind of practices, which requires a distinction between need-centred and profit-centred illegality. Urban policies have to recognise this feature of urban life to avoid promoting patterns of development overcome by real-world dynamics.

The key issues are both to shorten the distance between inhabitants and the decisions regarding the future of the places where they live and to imagine the possible developments of an increased cooperative potential. Citizens' participation has to be promoted and facilitated and had to be outlined as "power of doing and deciding something" in the public space.

This situation defines a return to the communitarian base of urban space. Citizens' identity is in their place of living, even smaller than the district and there they are able to activate solidarity and capacity of planning, and to take their responsibility. In this framework, Government is to act as a facilitator, e.g. starting to involve inhabitants in urban renewal and management projects.

In my opinion, the success of these policies has its basis in the consciousness of the value of "time", considered as human time opposed to economic and technological time. The time of social participation has to be measured on the goal of implemented policies: social promotion. A space for a "slow city" is to be built, to permit citizens to express their relational potentiality, among citizens and between them and institutions. A man-centred rhythm can revitalised citizenship without throwing it out from the historic and technological context.

A new and wider image of time-space concept shall be given. The provision of services is to be combined to a project of development, which offers a shared and sharable normative vision of the future. The system has not only to function, but also to be directed.

Finally, François Ascher's *citadinité* offers a valuable insight of this issue. The complexity of urban civilisation may have two contrasting consequences on individuals' social life: a *civilisation riche*, where differentiation favours the enrichment of relational

space; and a *civilisation minimale*, characterised by fragmented and indifferent relations limited to micro-social groups. The option between the two solutions is determined by the specific dimension of the consciousness of belonging to an urban community and the exercising of the related rights and duties. In this sense, Ascher prefers to introduce the concept of *citadinité*, distinguished from *citoyenneté*, describing the belonging to the national community (Ascher F., 1995; 155) .

### **Urban communities and participation: participation for whom?**

During recent years, lots of theories have tried to evidence the necessity of community action to get the results, which the Government is no longer able to obtain. Community development is increasingly discussed and considered as the promotion of the capacities of a social group settled in a territory to guarantee the individual and environmental development and well-being, that is the well-being of the community itself.

We could define community organisation as a development strategy based essentially on participation and it represents a process of change supported by the community itself. The goals of the community organisation can be summarised as the following: empowerment, problem-solving, improving local democracy, redistributing resources and wealth.

Such considerations are linked to the definition of a community as an active subject on the territory and not only as an audience. Local communities are increasingly considered in social policies, as a resource and not only a collector of needs. A new model is hence developed: from a model centred on needs, to a different one centred on competences and skills. In this perspective, citizens are not considered as beneficiaries/target group of a policies, but they are actors themselves.

The key concept for the community is hence participation. It is linked to a lot of interpretations and it is widely debated. It has been stated that it is a overused concept and often used in contexts all but participative. Participation is fashionable since great intellectuals (e.g. Amartya Sen's writings on Equality) and, as already said, considerations of International Organisations working in the field of development, established that participation is a right on which the fundamental processes overcoming human poverty and promoting a form of real development are based.

As far as participation is fashionable, it has been accepted uncritically and it has been inserted in policies and plans to generate social legitimisation. Participatory processes are too often included in town planning and they are limited to transmitting ideas and decisions already fixed (even if there are local very interesting experiences). Participation is limited to the transmission of objectives and results, to legitimise popular knowledge. Participation is hence used to reinforce the *status quo* and not to promote civil society (Mitilin, Thompson, 1995; 235).

Therefore, all that is defined participation gets to definitely activate people and not all participatory methodologies are able to involve the community both in the project and decision phases. The segregated parts of the population are not permitted even to be informed and they cannot hence do the first step to be an active part of the project.

The problem is that generally, participatory processes are implemented through methods, space and time pre-decided, and hence this rigid starting structure represents by itself a selection on the possible.

Trying to summarise what are the different participatory realities, we have to consider, in addition to their involvement degree, the direction of information, actions and decisions, in order to comprehend if one can understand whether participation is active

but also if this participation is the result of a bottom-up planning attitude. We can list the following levels of participation:

- knowledge participation (information and communication) = passive and top-down participation
- investigation participation (questionnaires, interviews) = passive and flat
- communication participation (communicating goals to share them) = between passive and active
- partnership participation or negotiation participation (negotiations among actors)=active and top down
- sharing participation (information, feedback, understanding, shared planning, alternative analysis, choices)= active and flat
- “conflicting” participation (civil society’s projects and planning)= active and bottom up

I think that participation may be divided into three levels, based on the considerations of four dimensions influencing participation considered as a prospective and shared process: 1) actions generated; 2) time they are referred to; 3) the reached social level; 4) participants’ attitude.

The first level is what we can define “passive participation”, where citizens are informed and made participate through the knowledge of what is happening. This information is not connected to any feedback and it is hence generally limited at the individual level, and , first of all, it is at the individual level and individuals are not involved in “thinking about the future”.

There is also the opposite “active participation”, which is divided into two different degrees of action: “reactive participation”, when there is a mobilisation successive to a previously taken decision, and “proactive participation”, when an anticipatory mobilisation characterises the planning and decision phase of the action.

## **Two different examples of housing policy in São Paulo: the Cingapura Project and the Mutirão**

In past decades, several interventions of local authorities tried to solve the problem of houses for the poorest part of population, but the achieved results have always been unsatisfactory. The informal city is such diffused that it is not easy to benefice everybody with a single action. However, it has to be underlined that housing policy, both at the federal than municipal level is not considered a priority. Furthermore, there are some problems related to any political faction on government.

For instance, there is absolutely a lack of continuity in the implemented projects. Without entering details of each project, when governments change, housing policies change. Also the small benefits connected to any new situation are hence reversed by political change and the consequent abandon of the current projects. This is a very serious problem, because it is not related only to housing, but to the entire social policy. For instance, Professor Ubiratan D’Ambrosio (Faculty of Education Universidade de São Paulo), in a conversation with the writer, affirmed that “to reach the necessary continuity, we need the culture of bureaucracy, intended in a positive sense, as an administrative mechanism that is organised, functional and autonomous in relation to all the political factions which alternate to power”.

I would like to propose two examples, the Projeto Cingapura and the Mutirão, representing two different types of interventions linked to two different political phases of the municipal administration. The Projeto Cingapura is a classic project of restoring planned and implemented directly by the Prefecture, without any participation of

inhabitants. On the contrary, the Mutirão is a project mutual help and ground social organisation in house building.

The Cingapura Project started six years ago and it gave a wide visibility to the São Paulo Prefecture. Cingapura is a Project of “Favelas Urbanisation through Verticalisation” (SEHAB, 1998), started in 1994 according to a law defining the new municipal housing policy and it had the merit of recognising that the *favela* is not a transitory house and that social and financial costs of removals are too high to be sustained and do not produce results.

The importance has been hence maintaining the families in the place where they already live, surpassing clearly the policy of removals. The project planned the demolition of hovels and of the existing houses and the construction of buildings with flats in the same place. The different phases are articulated as follows: census of the families living in the *favela*; the moving of inhabitants to provisional flats; in 6-8 months, families are given the new flats.

The Projeto Cingapura is a top-down project where no participation of the population is required at all, which means that there is no participation of the beneficiaries. One more element of the Projeto Cingapura contrasting community development requirements, is that the project does not consider community itself but only the residential aspect. It seems that new districts are under construction, but that communities are being destroyed. The *favela* is considered only as a complex of hovels and not as a relational system, creating a structured and enrooted social life. In a sense, the division in flats and buildings closes the open relational spaces characterising informal districts. The integration of the *favelado* in the city, which happens through the acquisition of residence thanks to the new flat, appears to many as a loss of one’s own social life in the city.

The most felt problem is that the property of the flat is linked to these payments and it is acquired after five years. The question of property may be the most debated, because who enters a flat signs a contract with the municipal prefecture, which still is the owner of all buildings. The inhabitants have the right to buy back the flat, but only if all the payments have been regularly made. How many people will be able to afford it?

How can we not think that many will have to go after losing this way not only the possibility of living in the Cingapura building, but also in their past house? A 40-years-old lady, with three children, living with her husband’s salary told me: “I had a hovel, but I knew it was mine; if we could not pay the expenses or because of any different reason we had to move, we knew that we could sell everything and with the money, to buy another one. Now, if we leave, we lose everything”.

These observations make clear how the program has been implemented and planned from an economic perspective and the relation between the citizen and the government has been inserted in an economic frame. The impression is that, presenting the Cingapura Project with a wide-range advertisement campaign, which underlined the social and town-planning perspective, the prefecture has really reacquired the land and the right of using it for economic profit.

The Mutirão philosophy is opposed to Cingapura’s and is focussed on the direct involvement of inhabitants in house building. It started during 1989 and 1993 and has been developed through a partnership of the public administration with community organisations. It is a project of social production of houses, through a public but not governmental managerial approach, combining the positive aspects of the private initiative with public and social goals. The first phase benefited 60,000 people.

The Project dates back to similar experiences linked to the cooperative movements in other Latin American Countries. The three key aspects of this type of policies –

organisation, mutual help and property – are promoted through three fundamental steps: training, building, living together (Gonzales, 2001).

It has of course a few critical aspects, like the time of its implementation and access to credit, but Mutirão seems to reach two fundamental goals: the social and not only material development of inhabitants and the increase of their responsibility in respect to the community, as far as they develop an increased sense of belonging to what they themselves are building.

### **Looking into the future: a few guidelines for action.**

It is difficult to explore the guidelines for the future of informal or illegal settlements. The reasons are both the complex relation between housing and all the other aspects of urban marginality and the impossibility to conceive housing policies that are always and everywhere effective. There is no standard and short-time solution and housing policies cannot be considered as sources of political gain, as far as the time perspective is completely different: it has to be abandoned the present inertia to improve the involvement of a wider range of social actors.

It is hence necessary to realise an integrated, dynamic, flexible and long-term project, which represents a socio-cultural process. It is not to be limited to house building and improvement or service provision, but every concrete result has to mirror a new vision of urban life quality and to contribute to create it.

Therefore, it is needed to start with a cultural shift, recognising the expression of identity and alternative projects in the present informal settlements. A fundamental step in this sense should be finding effective means to make inhabitants active planners of their city. By now, participation is considered as a fundamental aspect of surpassing situation of exclusion and poverty, but not always debates are focused on the level of participation defining a really active attitude and involvement. For instance, São Paulo is improving very much the population involvement in public social communication, but, as demonstrated by the Cingapura project, information does not mean the possibility of influencing governmental decisions.

Scarlatto stated that every public administration should have as a privilege to make possible and the city reflects identity of its inhabitants (Scarlatto F.C., Pontin J.A., 1999; 40). The development of an urban society requires public policies reaching and integrating all citizens within the city life. In this perspective, urban participatory planning represents an enriched experience.

All the expressions of urban life are to be given their dignity, surpassing the implicit assumptions that all that does not correspond to the classic canon of the human settlement, has to be removed or changed. The comparison between the informal settlements and the richest districts is inevitable, but the rehabilitation of the former cannot aim to reach the standards of the latter (Scandaletti C., 2000; 6).

Yona Friedman defined the *bidonvilles* the “*ateliers de l’avenir*” (factories of the future), where an urban identity in need of recognition is built. Since 1970s, Friedman studied the increasing poverty of the world, and mostly of the urban world, and stated the point would not have been to avoid this situation, but to be prepared to face it in the best way (Friedman Y, 1978; 87).

The point is not focussing on projects which cannot be realised, but starting from the everyday needs, which can change the life of thousands and thousands of people. City is continuously to be built and adapted to its inhabitants needs and possibilities (Balbo, 1995; 27). Urban planning for informal settlements has hence to foresee gradual actions and to accept their original patterns. From this point of view, Chiara Scandaletti recognises the increasing role of the “incremental urbanisation” (“*urbanizzazione*”

*progressiva*”) methodology, based on alternative soft and *ad hoc* projects (Scandaletti C., 2000; 6).

A few guidelines for the Latin American reality could be the following:

- to adopt a systemic perspective. Particular local initiatives and experiences have to be supported, but it is essential to create a system, including not only all the actors but also all their relations. The basic step is to define and recognise legally, generally at the national level, the whole of the process originating from the plurality of the different subjects on the territory;
- to make housing policies independent from economic and budget policies, as far as they have different efficiency and quality standards;
- to promote a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach to the study of informal and illegal settlements. This means to combined in a unique vision “housing” and “habitat”, exploring all the dimensions of the social and environmental quality of the urban life;
- to qualify experiences, in order to evidence their positive and negative effects and to evaluate why they have success or they fail;
- as a following step, to connect best practices, in order to both disseminate sharable aspects and stimulate a continuous critique.
- to enforce, promote and disseminate a participatory approach to social projects, in order to develop new paths to make citizens key and responsible actors of the choices regarding the future of their habitat. In this perspective, not only self-building and self-planning have to be promoted, but also self-governing.
- to strengthen the civil society and community organisations in order to make the previous point real. The key elements are information, training and democracy. Training is both “bottom-up”, concerning technical and managerial skills, and “top-down”, that is university training for public administration officers and technicians responsible of social policies and projects.

The fundamental task is to create human relations, which implies to create and reinforce the networks of the territory. Institutions and social organisations have to be linked to promote an increased communication and a shared planning. In this perspective, it seems important to connect social and academic networks to both use at the social level advanced knowledge and competences and to link citizens and technicians to augment and coordinate the involvement of the different socio-professional levels of society in actions against poverty. Such links enhance the social cohesion and develop a higher degree of sharing the future of the city.

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