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ABSTRACT

This article examines recent social uprisings in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, in order to discuss the impact of social movements on public policy, on new practices and political subjects and, more generally, on the urban imaginary. It specifically discusses the action of two urban movements: the *Free Fare Movement* and the movement for adequate housing. Our theoretical framework is based on the view of philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre: in present conditions of urbanization and modernization, social struggles are predominantly spatial struggles, that is, a struggle to participate - in terms of redistribution, access and active voice - in the production of the collective work that the urban phenomenon is. The analysis is divided in two parts. The first block is a diagnosis of the impacts of the global economic crisis in Brazilian cities, highlighting the local history of irruptions in urban life. The second block discusses the recent course of certain social movements and balances the matters that approximate and disconnect them: *Movimento Passe Livre – MPL* (Free Fare Movement) and the movement for adequate housing, more specifically *Frente de Luta por Moradia – FLM* (Housing Struggle Front) and *Movimento de Trabalhadores Sem Teto – MTST* (Homeless Workers Movement).

Figure 1: Paolo Colosso. *Free Fare Movement* demonstration 2015.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article examines recent social uprisings in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, in order to discuss the impact of social movements on public policy, on new practices and political subjects and, more generally, on the urban imaginary. It specifically discusses the action of two urban movements: the *Free Fare Movement* and the movement for adequate housing. Our theoretical framework is based on the view of philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre: in present conditions of urbanization and modernization, social struggles are predominantly spatial struggles, that is, a struggle to participate - in terms of redistribution, access and active voice - in the production of the collective work that the urban phenomenon is. It is in this perspective that the speech looks at the role of social movements in the establishment of empowerment and active citizenship practices, demanding from the municipality a revision in policy priorities and requiring the public opinion to address the urban issues in a way in which conventional media rarely does.

The analysis is divided in two parts. The first block is a diagnosis of the impacts of the global economic crisis in Brazilian cities, highlighting the local history of irruptions in urban life. The second block discusses the recent course of certain social movements and balances the matters that approximate and disconnect them: *Movimento Passe Livre – MPL* (Free Fare Movement) and the movement for adequate housing, more specifically *Frente de Luta por Moradia – FLM* (Housing Struggle Front) and *Movimento de Trabalhadores Sem Teto – MTST* (Homeless Workers Movement).

2. URBAN FEATURES OF GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS

In the last three years, a series of mobilizations have taken the streets of São Paulo, having a chain of socio-political, economic and cultural issues as their causes. The uprisings erupted

from situated events and for contextual causes. Many of them were unpredictable, but the economic crisis, caused by the financial collapse in 2007-2008 and its stabilization measures that cast a social burden to every corner of the globe, certainly brought such phenomena together.

Trying to reverse the local signs of the global economic crisis, the federal government invested heavily in urban infrastructure and construction through incentives to the private sector in two major programs. In the first one, *Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento - PAC* (Growth Acceleration Program), credits are assigned to construction of highways, railways, hydroelectric plants and, with the news that Brazil would host two major sporting events, the construction of stadiums as well. The second program, *Minha Casa Minha Vida - MCMV (My Home My Life)*, is aimed at building popular housing. With these incentives, the construction sector lead GDP growth, construction companies went public and, the contradictions of a market system were accentuated.

The growth of land demand and the absence of price control mechanisms accelerated real estate speculation. In the period 2009-2015, the estimated rise in real estate prices in São Paulo is around two hundred percent, something obviously well above the inflation, of around thirty five percent, and wage increase in this period.[1] Such dynamic is concretely expressed in the city's features: a multiplication of skyscrapers, the expansion of the urban frontier, low-income populations pushed to the more segregated outskirts. In addition, an increase in rental prices proportional to the rise in the value of real estate strongly impacts the living cost for the working population. Between 2009 and 2012, the *My Home My Life* program delivered more than two million units nationwide, but the housing deficit only decreased somewhere around five hundred thousand homes. Paradoxically, the number of families that pays rent increased by two hundred thousand units. So far, it seems that the social housing construction model based on incentives to private initiative, without effective measures of urban control, tends to maintain the socio-spatial segregation patterns and also to worsen living conditions. Urbanist Ermínia Maricato (2013, p. 24) states: "The land dispute between the real estate capital and the labor force in semi-periphery pushed the frontier of urban expansion even further: the poor population were expelled to the periphery of the periphery".

Another old problem aggravated in this period is an urban mobility model that is oriented towards encouraging private car ownership and giving little attention to public transportation. The daily journeys have become more sufferable, buses are constantly overcrowding and traffic congestions hit records daily. Maricato (2013, p.25) points out that "in São Paulo's traffic, 5.2 million cars circulate daily and congestions take up to 295 km of roads. The average car speed measured between 5 and 7 pm in June 2012, was 7.6 km/h, which is almost the same as the walking speed."

In terms of political culture and encouragement, it becomes more difficult to map the causes of social unrest that erupted in 2013 and marked a turning point in São Paulo's urban atmosphere. It is quite plausible to remember that in 2011 the city had its own Occupy movement, *Occupy SP*. The militancy for mobility had already organized few acts years earlier, though with less public attention.

In June 2013, the announcement of an increase in public transport fares became a flashpoint of social upheavals. Initially led by the *Free Fare Movement*, in only a few days and after a protest under heavy police repression, the demonstrations gain support from various strata of society. The city streets are taken, gaining visibility in social networks and even in traditional media. The mobilizations, previously restricted to Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo,

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[1] See: http://www.zap.com.br/imoveis/fipe-zap-b/

diffuse through Brasilia, Curitiba, Recife, Porto Alegre and smaller cities.[2] The phenomenon draws the authorities' attention.

On national broadcast, the president affirms the importance of "the streets' voice", which gives legitimacy to demonstrations and encourages local leaders to review the fare increase. Once more on a national broadcast, the president says she will call a Constituent Assembly to deliberate with citizens on a structural political reform; the effort is muffled by several conservative groups – in the opposition but also in the governing coalition. During June and July, the activities of the legislative resort to what became known as "positive agenda": projects that had been stalling for years were finally analyzed with unusual dynamism - but some days later, all that goodwill turn into mere staging.[3] In addition, developments of these phenomena become subject of discussion in many universities' departments of Urbanism, Philosophy and Human Sciences, and also in professional associations. [4]

We dare say that in these socio-spatial conditions, the conception of "public space" has shifted: what was regarded before as a place for leisure and outdoor saunter, in some cases related to a culture of spectacle and consumption, turns into space of active citizenship, of struggles for recognition, of collective desire for participation in shared alternatives and in construction of commons, therefore, the space where the urban imaginary is in dispute.

3. STRUGGLES FOR THE RIGHT TO THE CITY: MOBILITY AND DECENT HOUSING

In São Paulo, the impact of the demonstrations of June 2013 was felt immediately. In the following months, mobilizations reverberated in many other spheres of public opinion, such as the Architecture Biennial, which reserved a privileged space for posters, graphs and a documentary produced in the heat of the moment by members of these uprisings.[5] In 2014 *Free Fare Movement* interventions featured in another exhibition, this one about graphic design, called *Cidade Gráfica* (Graphic City). At least two major media outlets, newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* and *Carta Capital* magazine, produced retrospectives of their versions of the events[6]; media researchers analysed how the phenomenon was perceived by the public opinion and the limitations of the media's take on the matter.[7]

The meaning of June remains in dispute. Social actors evaluate it and use it in very different ways – some, it must be said, in a regressive way. For urban studies, it seems more prudent to not idealize it, neither empty it, but realize the vectors formed at the times that followed.

In 2014, the political atmosphere of social participation stimulated various categories to expose their demands in the streets. Subway workers, teachers, truck drivers and sanitation workers go on strike. The World Cup, a mega event, boosts the rise in real estate in the host cities and massive resettlement of local inhabitants, which becomes another trigger for insurgency of the working classes directly affected, and also of many who saw no social benefits in investing huge sums in an ephemeral event. This is an elucidative moment to clarify aspects of the urban entrepreneurism of mega-events (HARVEY, 2006), which first appeared in Barcelona, reached its summit in Beijing and has come to its moment of truth in periphery countries. Intended to build "showcase cities" that are centers of transnational assets, this spectacular urban planning impels architecture's star system and speculative

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[2] Statistics count mobilization in 150 cities, with 1,5 million people in the streets.

[3] See Folha de S. Paulo (2013)

[4] I refer to the Congress of the National Association of Philosophy in Brazil and the magazine of the brazilian Architects Association.

[5] See COLOSSO, Paolo(2014)

[6] Carta Capital (DATA) and Folha de S.Paulo (DATA).

[7]See Coletivo Brasil de Comunicação Social (2014)

forms of capital accumulation - financialized real estate, especially. However, if analysed from the urban development perspective, its legacy is seen as controversial, if not irrational, to say the least.

Considering urban studies perspectives, other aspects are worth noting. Over the last three years, intervention initiatives of active citizenship, militancy and "artivisms" have intensified. There has been a clear empowering of existing collectives and movements, as well as emergence of many others, poetical and political. These movements have the city as mediation, arena and object of collective libido. For them, something obvious becomes clearer: the future of the city involves their individual fate.

Recent literature emphasizes that the change in political climate - and, if we may add, in practices and spatial representations - was also felt in other cities out of the Rio-São Paulo circuit. In Recife, capital of Pernambuco state, activist groups report that these years reencouraged social struggles regarding the city, although they do not idealize the so called June 2013. It is the case of the movement called #OcupeEstelita (#OccupyEstelita), which also began then and carried on through the following year and represented the struggle to take part in the urban design of an important part of the downtown area called Estelita Pier (thus the movement's name). This movement became known for questioning the business model of local urban management, organizing camps with various educational and cultural activities, and taking the local city hall to demand dialogue and participation after being removed from the old pier.

In order to make our analysis more accurate, this article focuses on the journeys of some movements in São Paulo that have played a significant role when it comes to organization and manifestation: the MPL and the housing movement, specifically the MTST and the FLM. Although their agendas differ - MPL's is related to public transport, while the others' relate to public housing - they share the struggle against a segregating urbanization and for the observance of the Right to the City, which is understood not only as an access to basics goods and services, but also as participation in the production of urban space – which includes the production of their own collective lives.

3.1 Free Fare Movement: direct action, autonomy and insurgent political culture

The Free Fare Movement gained visibility in 2013, but its origins date back to demonstrations against bus fare increase, known as *Revolta do Buzu* (Bus Revolt) in Salvador (2003) and *Revolta da Catraca* (Ratchet Revolt) in Florianopolis (2004), and to the plenary session that founded the movement during the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (2005). A first aspect to be highlighted in the *Free Fare Movement* is its clarity about the fact that a specific agenda requires different and deeper restructuring. That is, an efficient and universalized public transportation is the main object of demand, but it is known that its implementation requires a broad political repactuation. Not coincidentally, the Movement states that "transportation is understood as a cross-cutting issue to many other urban agendas" (MPL, 2013, p. 16). A second aspect on which it is necessary to reflect concerns the action model of the movement:

> If reclaiming urban space features as the aim of the protests against the bus fare, it also takes form as a method in the practice of protesters occupying the streets and directly determining their flows and uses. The city is used as a weapon for its own recovery: knowing that blocking a mere crossing compromises all circulation, the population uses its own chaotic transport system, which prioritizes the individual transport and leaves them to face a collapse. In this process, people collectively take the reins of the organization of their own daily lives. It is in the direct action of the people on their own life that a real popular management is established, not behind closed doors, in the municipal councils ingeniously established by municipalities or in any of the other institutional artifices (MPL. 2013, p. 16).

The occupation of public space is not a mere contestation device against the bus fare increase, as a superficial and conservative sight would perceive it. As the members of the movement acknowledge, blocking crossings leads the city into chaos, bringing up the fact that the urban mobility planned for individual transport – evident cause of big congestions - is fragile and unsustainable. In this way, the movement has played a political role in publicizing and pressing public opinion on the urgency to rethink the matrix of urban mobility, a reform, it is worth remembering, that has been known and made known by urban studies for at least thirty years. In São Paulo, a progressive government has been able to give meaning and political orientation to urban tensions, transforming pressure into social force to implement policies for the recovery of public transport and alternative means in medium distance journeys. In an interview, Mayor Fernando Haddad recognizes that the movements' strength allowed him to open, in six months, an extension of bus corridors and lanes that would have taken four years in *realpolitik* climate to be done.[8] However, the relative absorption of the movement's demands has not made negotiations easier between the municipality and the MPL.

As the excerpt above makes clear, the *Free Fare* movement avoids institutional mediations. For them, most significant political changes occur when there is a direct participation of the people concerned (the inhabitants) in the course of the production of urban space. It implies taking urban issues beyond the decision-makers and technical experts. It also implies reinstating politics to the daily lives of individuals and communities, shaping an insurgent way of participation and a insurrectionary urban culture. It is in this process of protagonism they reestablish the principles and actions of an effective democracy, guided by horizontality and popular management. It is in this tone they say: "the decentralized organization of the struggle is a test for another organization of transportation, of the city and of the society" (MPL 2013, p. 17.). The access to a democratized transport is not just a demand for improvement in the living conditions of certain sections of the population, which would be legitimate, but forges the experience of horizontal and free lifestyles for everyone. The *Free Fare* builds a political culture based on the experience of daily social transformation. That is why they claim: "direct action of workers on the urban space, on transport, on the city's everyday life and on their personal life cannot be just a distant goal to be achieved, but a daily construction through activities and mobilizations, in debates and discussions" (MPL-SP. 2013, p.18).

After the success of 2013, when the bus fare increase was suspended in São Paulo and in over one hundred cities, the action model based on refusal of institutions and on insurgent culture has been both the power of the movement and its fragility. The movement gets only partial results, but it becomes a reference to other fights. For instance, an uprising of high school students occupied schools and roads, and stopped a process of degradation in public education. The achievement *hic et nunc* of a possible experience is greatly absorbed by the youth and these exchanges extend the action repertoire of the two movements. Moreover, *Free Fare* is a magnet for related issues, such as demands for more bus stops and for the expansion of train and bus routes. The movement makes it clear that the urban space is not only produced by institutional actors, that is the state and major investors: it opens up the perspective that the urban space is amenable to intervention from any citizen who might not belong there. This aknowledgement is convening and aggregative.

On the other hand, when there was a new fare increase in the beginning of 2014, protests were not able to stop it; as a response, MPL announced the strategy of returning its formation work to the peripheries inhabited by the population most affected by lack of safety and by high transportation costs, which requires a larger and more organized militant

[8] See El País (2014)

base. These acts had less media coverage. In early 2015, the government granted free fare to public school students on their home-school commute, indicating an effort to (at least partly) contemplate the demands of the movement, which was receiving support from more sectors of society at that moment. The *Free Fare* did not capitalize this achievement or tried to expand it with the government's cooperation. Instead, it accused the municipality of trying to fragment the movement by granting subsidy to only a portion of the population.

 In 2016, the *Free Fare* received reinforcement of high school students who had recently been victorious in the struggle for quality public education. There was an evident expansion of the connections and network that are more supportive of their agenda. After the achievement of free fare for public school students on their home-school commute, "zero fare" was granted to unemployed people. But the movement insists on not dialoguing with the municipality, despite the advances.

3.2 The housing struggle: the manifold strategy

In this framework of effervescence and social contradictions, the segregating tendency of the capitalist production of space has been accentuated in large urban centers, which turns them into space of contention. In moments like these, those who were forcibly excluded from the city come back to demand their citizenship, which is exactly what has occurred in São Paulo.

The movement of workers without decent housing became known for being populous and for its organization and intelligence in approximating social webs to physical public spaces. They played a big role in opposition to the World Cup events in 2014 by making public the social cleansing policy promoted by the construction works, and also the police's excessive use of violence in its crackdown actions. The group organized an occupation called *Copa do Povo* (People's Cup) reminding that if the government had money to host the World Cup, it would probably have some for housing policies as well. This occupation remains there up to the present, in the east side of São Paulo. A number of documentaries on the subject was produced, one of them with a suggestive title: "2014 World Cup: who wins with this match?".[9] For numerous times, the movement brought fifteen to twenty thousand people to protest and camp in front of the City Council of São Paulo, pressing the legislative power in the approval of the Land-use Plan [10] and the executive power into expropriating around forty vacant buildings downtown. [11]

These same movement built communication with alternative media - some of them also consolidated after June 2013 - which expanded the possibilities for groundwork. One of the coordinators of the MTST began publishing articles weekly in a newspaper of great circulation.[12] From 2012 to 2014, the number of occupations in São Paulo jumped from 257 to 681, and it is estimated that this group alone led around sixty demonstrations in 2014.

These movements have also built a clear agenda for changes in housing policies. Important examples are the demand for rent regulation, for a public land bank for social housing and, also, the expansion of projects managed cooperatively, measures that have proven to be possibilities of generating better housing and sociability spaces. In this way, they press the

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[9] See ANCOP(2014)

[10] It is a Plan whose guidelines intend to regulate urban development in the city of São Paulo for 10 years. In 2014, the movement for housing became the social basis for the collection of the so-called progressive property tax that increases property tax of real estate that has been vacant for more than five years, and also pushes other measures.

[11] The protagonism of housing movement gained the media. See *Carta Capital*, 2014.

[12] It is worth seeing the interview with a coordinator of the housing movement to alternative media. See *Outras Palavras*, 2014.

government to seek alternatives for urban policies that are rather different from the neoliberal urbanism imaginary, which is governed exclusively by the market.

Another important point: since the most effective actions of the movement focus on granting housing to those who were dispossessed of this right, these spaces, produced either by occupation or by construction that is collectively managed, gain a heterotopic content and almost countercultural in which it is possible to try and experience freer and more horizontal forms of sociability and organization of the everyday life.

Considerations

In a climate of urban life re-intensification, the agenda about the city circulates more through the social fabric, something that the "knowledge centers" (universities) cannot do by themselves. Differently from a context marked by apathy and emptying, this framework favorable for debate requires the government to open to the public the issues that concern them. In addition, it allows us to realize which social groups are willing to accept necessary changes – the adoption of a mobility model oriented to public transport and the observance of the right to housing – and which actors seek to anchor at the current state of social division of spaces. It is noteworthy that the narrative of the movements is largely diffused by free media, by social networking (including telephone applications), and even traditional media repeat the technocratic narratives.

The explosion of movements for transport and housing brings a new wave of politicization of these issues. Before 2013, in a time marked by reproduction of public consensus and implosion of urban life, adversities tended to concern, at least in the mainstream circuit of public opinion, only to those who could not acquire their own property and automobile. Therefore, they were issues of private order. When such questions start circulating more intensely, especially in the free media, once again it sparks the acknowledgment that it is necessary to think of another mobility system and create mechanisms for the observance of the right to decent housing.

The housing movement's action model has similarities with the MPL but also features some distinctions from it. Both have the clarity that specific guidelines require extensive restructuring and repactuation. In both cases, the actual demand is followed by initiatives of participation in matters related to the common destiny of the cities. It is, therefore, a redistributive welfare demand without assistencialist expectation, but moved by the desire for protagonism and deeper transformations. It can be said, without risk, that these agents combine political intervention with a political project.

However, differences are visible. The housing movement uses its more immediate achievements, with which it pressures and negotiate with the government, to accumulate political capital and share the movement's empowering experience. At the same time, it does not dismiss insurgent practices in the streets that reveal the contradictions of the exclusionary model of urbanization and largely block daily flows in the city. The *Free Fare Movement*, in turn, tends to see immediate gains as a government strategy to weaken the movement. Furthermore, in the measure that the bus fare – the core of its agenda – has increased from 2014 to 2015 and to 2016, the feeling of lack of advances puts to the test the resilience of a non institutional militancy and its supporters.

It is noticed that the most powerful contemporary movements are those whose practices are consistent with the complexity of urban reality. In other words, those that do not reproduce the collective action model from the industrial context, the factory strike that obstructs production, nor is it limited to redistributive demands. They have hybrid action models, which superimpose the force of the bodies in the streets, a direct pressure on decision-

makers (the government and its funders), and the argumentative presence in public opinion, creating a dispute of imaginaries without missing the point of the construction of horizontal and free relations. This is a political formation that is anchored in the spaces and daily life in a network of interventions that increase the possibility of obtaining results, of maintaining the mobilization and glimpsing alternatives. This is why the direct actions with specific guidelines serve as the experience of actualization of aimed horizons. In other words, these are the concrete experiences from which they conceive a free and democratic society.

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