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Enhancing the right to the city by politicizing participative urban governance: the case of Caracas

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I would like to begin my talk by quoting two scientists:

- In 2007, a Venezuelan sociologist, Roberto Briceño León published a paper in which he wrote: “we have lost the right to the city”. In a context of dramatic urban insecurity and homicide rates, of an invasive fear of insecurity in Caracas, where, supposedly, anybody can evenly be a victim, anywhere, at any time, which is wrong, by the way. But who is “we” and what is “the city” that has been lost?
- The same year, 2007, Allan Gilbert published a paper titled “the return of the slum: does language matter?” where he states that of course, language is performative and can be instrumentalized. Unquestioned categories are homogenizing and have concrete consequences on social orders, urban spaces and the people who live in.

There are two parts in my talk. Following the two authors, I will consider examples of participation and urban governance of security and housing in Caracas, after a brief history of “participation” in democratic Venezuelan. But beyond the assessment of decision-making processes, I will focus on the right to the city for whom? When? Where? And what for? According to Lefebvre’s statement, the right to the city is not the right to be in the city. It is barely the right to be part of it. It is rather the right to make it, to embody it, as one of its inhabitants, and to be recognized as an active element of the historical condition of the city-making. The right to the city is a matter of justice as Nancy Fraser defines it: a combination of distribution (as traditional Marxists always said), but also recognition (in terms of social or cultural status) and representation (in political terms). In such “triple time” I will wonder about the relation between participation and the right to the city in Caracas.

A brief history of participation in democratic Caracas

I will bring to your attention only three comments from previous works in order to acknowledge the presentation of examples related with security and housing.

- Venezuela is a democratic regime since 1958 and “participation” has always been part of political discourse since the constitution of 1961.
- The institutional consequences of such discourse have been really uneven over time and have pretty much depended on the claims of grassroots mobilizations and pressure (an example: the *parroquia*, very local level of grassroots participation, appeared in the constitution of 1961, it has been created by law in 1978 only, and it has been given real power –though consultative power only– in 1989).
- Participatory mechanisms are framed in structural unequal drivers that keep working at full blast over time. This way, participation is not questioning inequalities and can even worsen them (an example: grassroots claims and mobilizations in the 1970’s are not mainly addressing issues of distribution, but aim at democratizing democracy. Neighborhood associations and local movements are mostly class-oriented and defend specific interests. The experience of “partnership” in the 1990’s, involving NGOs and poor communities among others, is not exactly a successful experience regarding justice matters. In spite of significant – though discriminated – improvements in participation mechanisms, in the late 1990’s the *barrios*, shantytowns of Caracas, are still not appearing in many of the official maps of urban planning services).

Participation has been a buzzword of Venezuelan democracy and still is, but not always achieving the goals it states, not always acknowledging the improvement of justice issues. I

will proceed with two examples to make a grounded assessment of participation, governance and justice today in Caracas.

Governing insecurity, governing housing issues

According to the hegemonic discourse on urban insecurity in Caracas, every initiative, even private initiative, aiming at preventing your violent death when you go to work, to hang out, or even when you stay at home is socially legitimated. I am not saying that urban insecurity does not exist. I want to say that some dominant discourses on urban insecurity are justifying grassroots organizations and private initiatives in handling urban insecurity that strengthen mechanisms of segregation and social or racial discrimination that existed pretty much before the emergence of a dominant and unanimous narrative of urban insecurity.

Representational mapping of insecurity in Caracas is much more consistent with the distribution of social or racial aspects and territorial practices than it is correlated with the objective distribution of delinquency and crimes.

The right to the city, and to be safe in the city, is not only the result of the combination of grassroots interests or of any enhanced participation. It is also a question of life conditions for all. If it is not, it is a right to the city for some.

Housing problems in Caracas give the opportunity to account for active grassroots organizations under the Chavez era. The *Comités de tierras urbanas* – Urban land committees are pretty much autonomous (maybe the most autonomous) popular organizations in participating in housing policies. ULCs claim their differences with 1990's ways to participate, through the *consorcio* – partnership, in which they say most of poor people get lost, and not recognized as responsible or respected as informal dwellers in the city.

Urban land committees are long-standing Chavez supporters, but they also make strong critics, through the media, directly during the President TV programs, through demonstrations in the street, by occupying public offices, or using “friends” in the institution, through lobbying. It is not enough to define political participation as a bargaining capacity, or as the ability for emerging actors to get an “equal” voice... These aspects do not account for the broad scope of strategies that grassroots organizations are using in Caracas, much beyond the normative toolbox of urban governance.

I will not make a balance of Chavez governments as regards participation and justice in the city. I will only highlight some elements because it cannot be said that Chavez era is “more of the same” regarding marginalized people and social justice. At the opposite it cannot be said Chavez is the revolution either.

Nowadays, most of the traditionally marginalized people are fully integrated in political debates at different scales. Such a democratic improvement seems to have no possible return, and that is an unquestionable victory. Most of the invisible inhabitants can now vote and participate through new mechanisms and institutions of participation. **But** the ability to participate doesn't say anything about the capacity to be heard, or to act, or about the efficiency of making claims through new institutions. Recognition issues have been addressed through innovative initiatives, but in practice and on the ground, participatory mechanisms are still embodying structural unequal socio-spatial orders or racialised and classist social relations. They are still depending on the economy of an oil-producing country, as well as on the authority of an interventionist State which **paradoxically** open spaces that cannot be totally controlled. And more than through urban governance, such spaces could be the start point of surprising processes of making decisions under democracy, in Caracas and elsewhere.

Conclusion

I would like to bring forward a couple of points with regards to the link between participation and the right to the city through the lens of justice, drawn on the case of Caracas:

- 1- On the one hand, there is no reason to believe that “participation” gives automatically more appropriate decisions;
- 2- On the other hand, participation can be only discursive, either as wishful thought at best or at worst as a political instrument that can hide other claims and inequalities. Participation does not address necessarily root causes of the structurally unequal urban orders we know in Latin America. Participation and justice must be differentiated.

Instead of focusing on the ability to act or participate of different actors as governance assessment does, their agency must be addressed. And agency is not ability; it is rather capacity to act. It depends on social, cultural or power relations, on information and knowledge or economic opportunities. Agency stems from a politics of choice that we have to understand thanks to a situated, place-grounded and politicized approach.

We have to figure out such complex mechanisms of decision-making. With bustling practices of democracy in structurally unequal orders, southern cities are pretty much innovative and stimulating laboratories:

What is really at stake when dealing with urban governance: more participation or more justice? It can be both, it can be none. But I think that we are more likely to achieve a true right to the city when we're talking inequalities, misrecognition and representation than when we're implementing a normative framework of participation. Or at least, this framework needs to be critically unpacked.