Emerging forms of democracy: cities as source of civic engagement

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Abstract

Beyond hierarchic top-down planning led by public authorities, or corporative, politically biased civil society organizations, an alternative track of planning actors has emerged in recent times, led by independent and versatile civic groups, working on concrete problems and key questions, connecting civic engagement and technical competence. The recent Portuguese movement 'Cidades pela Retoma' is a collective civic initiative, both a platform for urban action and a think tank for planning and policy debate, linking people from different professional backgrounds, dedicated to discuss and promote the role of cities in times of transition of social and economic models.

Such movements express emergent forms of democracy that appear under certain basic conditions, allowed by the specific nature of cities. Cities are the 'tipping point' of articulated public policies and sectoral initiatives and normally concentrate the most important part of a nation's economic, knowledge and infrastructural potential. Also, they offer a specific quality that makes social change possible. The agglomeration of people, infrastructure and ideas generates features of innovation, collective action and mutual gain that other spatial and social contexts cannot create. Notions of collaborative planning and complexity theories can be easily applied to cities as the adequate place to deliver a certain speed, scope and depth of change. Key aspects of this debate involve cities as a 'never-ending' collective production; cities as forceful cohabitation of latent creative conflict; cities as a key place to improve collaborative practices; and cities as continuous revitalizing of civic action to answer new problems. As such, they are a strategic asset of public policies in most parts of the world.

Contemporary urban civic movements also depend on the nature of civic engagement and public space. The question of why it is important to include citizens in urban decision-making processes is a given in western societies, but the question of how it can be improved and qualified remains open to discussion. Actually, the nature and motivation of civic intervention has changed deeply. Technology, access to information, liberalization of lifestyles and a growing multicultural context have relieved citizens from merely corporative, over-assertive and socially confined types of intervention. A parallel growth of individual differentiation and mutual interdependencies has turned un-nostalgic views of unitary thinking impossible but has also strengthened links, while variable and fragile, between typically divergent people or groups. These transformations, together with a general weakening of the role of the 'state' and several voids of political-administrative power at metropolitan-urban scales have opened up a new space of discussion and participation, promptly occupied by citizens.

Therefore, the new role of citizens represents a transition in scale and highlights the issue of perception: by including parameters and visions coming from the micro-scale of citizenship, the essential problem is to understand how the grand 'strategic' gestures and visionary slogans that nurture urban planning are perceived at the scale of the house, street or neighborhood. Two corollaries of this transition converge and justify civic initiatives such as 'Cidades pela Retoma': first, the priority to perception, the scale of intervention and the autonomy of civic actors clearly indicate that the common ground of civic action is no longer ideological or social, but material- the city, neighborhood or street as spatially consistent arenas of collective concerns; second, the multiplication and differentiation of quasi-individual views and actions implies the need to filter, organize and support them technically and culturally.
'Cidades pela Retoma' appears precisely at this convergence. By joining several dimensions of urban thinking, it serves both as a confirmation of the new role of citizenship and a tool to go beyond mere reclamation towards collective reflection about our common future. 'Cidades pela Retoma' is a public challenge to promote and understand cities and civic movements as the source of new paradigms for economic and social development.

This platform is a meeting point of engaged citizens and innovative experiences in several domains of urban intervention, so that their methods and results can inspire other experiences, stimulate deeper dialogue and collective learning and enhance the role of cities as effective catalysts of regional and national development. The basic notion is that urban issues are in

many ways transversal, meaning that a solution to a problem anywhere can help to solve a similar problem somewhere else, as long as dialogue is promoted between normally detached spheres. Hence, instead of inventing the wheel over and over again, collaboration and dissemination of information are tools that strongly enhance the effectiveness and quality of urban policies.

'Cidades pela Retoma' has launched two anchor projects so far. The first one tries to define 'local agendas for recovery' by identifying projects and initiatives already under way, at different scales, with visible effects on job creation, economic and social improvement, and spatial and functional renovation of cities. The second project is called 'Global City 2.0' and tries to build a global network of urban civic movements and a space to think about the potential of such emerging forms of democratic intervention. Global City 2.0 is currently building a world map of civic movements with online presence- from the scale of the street to the neighborhood or city- promoted by citizens or groups thinking collaboratively about the future of the places where they live and work. The initiative is developed under the spirit of the European Year of Volunteering to promote active citizenship.

The scientific and academic debate about the civic movement serves, most of all, to frame it in its wider context. Key results of such debate might be the recognition of generic conditions nurturing such initiatives and the main obstacles they face, and the comprehension of the social, spatial and economic specificity of cities, particularly in Portugal. By connecting the object of civic intervention to the material space of the city, at any scale, a deeper investigation of its spatial, social, economic and environmental conditions becomes crucial: only then can the role of a civic movement be clarified and directed, avoiding redundancy and identifying key areas for the future.