Another American City: Disagreement and Recognition in the Production of Urban Space

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INTRODUCTION

At first sight, São Paulo is as hard to understand as a mosaic of misplaced pieces. Informal practices of urbanisation and urban life coexist with regulated urban development in a vast territory of contrasting physical, social, and legal conditions. The metropolitan region of São Paulo is formed by the city of São Paulo itself and 38 other adjacent cities with a population of around 16 million residents occupying an area of more than 900 square kilometres (370 square miles). The occupation of two large river valleys and an irregular topography, the accumulation of cultural and economic capital, and massive waves of migration into the city produced both considerable wealth and substantial poverty.

Historically, the regular development and urban amenities of the city have concentrated in the areas southwest of the historic centre, areas which stand in contrast to irregular settlements that have developed throughout the metropolis in conditions of extreme poverty. This metropolitan reality is the result of a process of modernisation that took place in a discontinuous way both in time and space. São Paulo offers no recognisable plan or preconceived layout, even though there are legible patterns of urban development. There are not many visible traces of historic continuity, even though there is plenty evidence of how the city grew from a small town in the turn of the twentieth century into one of the largest metropolitan areas in the world in the turn of this century.

One can no longer identify the sharp divisions between the city's centre and its periphery, which, respectively, marked regular and irregular occupation a few decades ago. São Paulo became more complex and more socially complicated and so did its physical form. A closer look at the historic centre of the city presents an interesting case for understanding this phenomenon and how formal and informal practices are intertwined in the production of the urban spaces of this large metropolis. Although some areas of downtown are physically deteriorated, the region has a rather vital urban life. It still represents a strong symbolic centre as well as an important commercial and service destination for business and professional people, public workers and a large low-income population living in dormitory neighbourhoods and engaged in formal and informal commercial activities.

The central area is served by excellent mass transportation such as bus, suburban train and subway lines. It also concentrates a large and valuable stock of empty real estate property, infrastructure, and public services, which have been the target of a remarkable struggle between different social agents in the city in the last two decades. Despite the fact that the Stock Exchange and main banks are still in the historic centre, the area has gradually lost its permanent population and many commercial and financial institutions moved to south-western regions of the city and beyond. Land value decreased in the old downtown, and consequently the number of tenements and informal economic activities increased. On the one hand, public and private initiatives have tried to reverse this devaluation process by investing in the construction of cultural institutions and new urban projects in order to embellish and gentrify the area. On the other hand, a growing number of

social movements have intensified their claim to create alternatives for the inclusion of low-income housing in the city centre, some of them, developing more drastic actions such as the squatting of empty buildings.

URBAN SPACE, DISAGREEMENT AND RECOGNITION

São Paulo, like other cities, is defined by the image and layout of its buildings, open spaces and infrastructure as much as it is defined by the formal and informal social life that shapes and reshapes its physical spaces. The effect of urban modernisation in Brazil — either planned by the state or left in the hands of real estate developers — has often been accompanied by inequity and by manifestations resisting the unbalanced distribution of material and social benefits. The presence of social movements in public spaces since the 1980s and the competition for specific urban areas have revealed how social and physical coexistence in a metropolis like São Paulo is often based on values that are mutually incompatible.

Informal practices have transformed democratic urban life and the space of the city based on two simultaneous political premises: the ability to introduce new voices in existing public social and political discourses, and the increasing need to recognise and to value these voices and the social groups they represent. In other words, the productive practice of disagreement and the claim for social and moral recognition have increasingly had a strong impact in the way the city is used, imagined and produced.

These two political premises have important conceptual and practical implications. The notion of disagreement, or dissent, comes from Jacques Rancière's use of the term to rethink the constructive potential of political conflicts. He suggests that the term enhances difference as an alternate possibility to work out social antagonism and cultural specificities. It mediates the definition of urban public and private spaces, as well as the varying interests of individuals and groups included in and excluded from them. Disagreement entails the conflict between different voices, but not necessarily a belligerent opposition. As Rancière puts it, 'disagreement is not a war of all against all' (Rancière 1996: 374). Instead, its purpose is to foster ordered situations of conflict. Above all, it has the potential to define the mode through which social and public argumentation takes place and, therefore, to reshape the way through which new public subjects and public spaces are created.

The practice of disagreement operates according to what Rancière defines as 'alternating acts of emancipation' (Rancière 1996: 374). These acts imply a polemical, discontinuous and precarious — and not universal — process challenging the status quo based on the confrontation between proper and improper values, needs and manifestations. They call into question the difference between formal, recognisable enunciation and informal, unrecognisable background noise. They challenge how dominant forces define who and what may or may not be represented in the public sphere. Dissent presents the simultaneous possibility for establishing a debate and for changing the sensible field in which different social experiences exist. This change depends on how the debate promotes and effects values, practices, and cultural and social forms that are kept invisible and recognises them in the transformation of a common, collective realm.

The notion of recognition comes from the works by Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser, and Seyla Benhabib about the organisation of manifestations against social and moral discrimination. These movements have defined a paradigmatic form of political and cultural conflict in the last few decades. In due course, their goal is to modify patterns of social representation and interpretation that sustain social injustice. The struggle for recognition involves the transformation of social and cultural urban life in order to promote co-existence and equal access to rights. It points to the difficult but necessary revision of how the common public sphere of cities serves collective participation and how social subjects position themselves in it. As a result, it calls into question existing physical boundaries, interests and values attributed to places in order to redo — and, in the best case, to even out — the topography of interdictions that control the access to and enjoyment of social benefits and esteem.

Movements for recognition take place through the productive practice of disagreement. Together, they define the democratic public space as a space of political debate between social projects

and goals in constant transformation. By doing so, they promote constructive disagreement as an important part of social and political life and not as an obstacle to be avoided. They call social justice and responsibility into question and increasingly expose and absorb the struggle for individual and collective moral recognition.

The historic centre of São Paulo is a good example of this situation, since it has been the stage for several housing movements in the last couple of decades, which have amplified the meaning and practice of citizenship. They have increased the social and legal recognition of lower-income citizens who informally live and work in the area, by promoting formal rights and mechanisms for them to continue to live in the city.

LIVING IN THE CENTRE, LIVING ON THE EDGE

Housing remains one of the central problems of urbanisation in Brazil and in São Paulo in particular. Political rhetoric and administrative decisions have often treated this problem with fragile promises and weak results. Since the later part of the twentieth century, the historic centre of São Paulo has suffered the effect of profound transformation in the economic life of the metropolis brought about by decreasing investments in economic activities, urban infrastructure, and social programs.

The deep recession of the 1980s, which affected the world in general and the country in particular, accelerated the impoverishment of the historic downtown as well as other areas of the city. The changes associated with deindustrialisation and expansion of business and services have caused great impact in the urban structure and life of São Paulo as well as in the models used to understand its dynamics. For example, the model centre-periphery previously used to describe social-spatial inequity in the city has progressively become insufficient to describe the complexity of the spatial distribution of population and material resources.

The metropolitan region presents a high demand for housing and also a very aggressive pattern of urban occupation, while most areas resent the lack of investments in urban development. Illegal occupation by squatters has grown up to 223% in the last couple of decades in some of the met-

ropolitan areas and, today, around 20% of the inhabitants of São Paulo live in shantytowns. Informal growth rates are also considerably high in areas of environmental protection, which constitute a large problem for the preservation of river sources in the region. The general growth rate of the city decreased from 5% per year to 0.5% per year in the last three decades.

Since the 1980s, the central districts of São Paulo, described by urban historians as the 'expanded centre', have lost population while urban growth has happened in peripheral regions within an area of influence of up to 100km from the city centre. This inversion presents a striking paradox: regular, urbanised areas of the city lose population while areas which are not urbanised, or have a lack of basic infrastructure, gain population in an expanding movement of poverty Bonduki 2001: 8).

The historic downtown lost 11% of its permanent population in the last decades, and one estimates that, because of real estate devaluation, the rate of under-occupation and vacancy in the area is around 30% (Piccini 1999: 66). Yet, there are about 185,000 people living in tenements in the central area of São Paulo. It is very common to find lease contracts that are not regulated. This informal and mostly illegal practice, which is overlooked by corrupt city inspectors, favours the imposition of conditions determined by landlords, leaving tenants with no rights of permanence or even rent negotiation guaranteed by the legal system. Although a large number of these informal tenants have often little or no access to the same rights that protect landlords, they actively participate in the formal labour market. Tenement residents subject themselves to such situation because it is often the only alternative to live close to their jobs, since there are no housing policies or even mortgage and financing mechanisms available to low-income residents in the country and in the city.

One of the problems keeping this inversion and unbalance in downtown São Paulo is the combination between unequal historic distribution of public investments in the city and the recent positioning of São Paulo in the margins of the urban network of globalisation. The country adopted neo-liberal policies in the early 1990s shortly after the approval of a new Federal Constitution in

1988. A few important legal changes happened to recognise rights of property and settlement that regulate urban and rural areas, but the practical results have been proportionally scarce in this recent economic context. As São Paulo adopted economic practices that favour of transnational market connectivity, it complicated existing spatial inequities in the city.

RECENT HOUSING MOVEMENTS IN DOWNTOWN SÃO PAULO

Housing movements started in São Paulo in the 1970s and gained political power in a complex and contrasting situation. The struggle for access to land rights and public housing has been strongly supported by entities such as Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (Church Community Groups), which represents progressive sectors of the Catholic Church, and Partido dos Trabalhadores (Worker's Party) among other political institutions engaged in the struggle for human rights (Maleronka 2001: 8). Many of these groups merged into União dos Movimentos de Moradia (UMM) (United Housing Movement), created in 1987 to advocate and act in favour of better housing conditions for low-income residents in São Paulo. Similar coalitions have been formed since then. For example, the groups Unificação das Lutas dos Cortiços (United Tenement Struggle) in 1993, and Fórum de Cortiços e Sem Tetos de São Paulo (Forum for Tenement Residents and Homeless in São Paulo) in 1995, which has over 5,000 members organised to participate in negotiations with the state government of São Paulo to develop policies and programs favouring dispossessed urban populations (Maleronka 2001: 10). Other broader social movements have also included issues of land use and housing such as the creation of Assembléia Nacional Popular e da Esquerda (National Popular Assembly of the Left) in 2005.

Social movements for housing have achieved a few significant results since the late 1970s. Improvement came with the provision of urban infrastructure in the urbanisation of shantytowns and with the approval of legal instruments expanding and socialising the meaning of land and property rights. An important progressive step happened in 1988 when the National Congress approved a new Federal Constitution after the end of the military regime including amendments specifically regarding the problem of low-income housing and

social inclusion. The legislation of 1988 defined the principle of social purpose of urban property, which was adjusted in 2001 with the approval of a federal law titled City Statute. This recent legislation revokes the long-lasting Land Law of 1850 that kept several generations of rural and urban populations from having access to legal rights of land ownership (Maricato 1996: 35). These laws have leveraged many of recent struggles over the use and property of land — both urban and rural — in Brazil.

Nonetheless, not all events have taken the same direction in the struggle over urban space in the central areas of São Paulo. In a different line of action, the City has promoted consecutive attempts of urban revitalisation and gentrification since the 1970s. The creation of Associação Viva o Centro (Live Downtown Association), a non-profit organisation established in the early 1990s has been the largest among these ventures so far. It boosted the energies to redevelop the historic centre of the city. Representatives of real-estate market, civil society and prestigious financial and business institutions are among the founders of this public-private coalition. Several of the private partners have significant national and international projection and financial power, most notably Bank Boston, which has played a leading role in the programs developed by Viva o Centro.

The association emulated the experience of Barcelona in the 1980s as a model for its urban revitalisation projects. The Catalan model helped articulate an apparent consensus based on the purpose that underused and undervalued strategic spaces of the historic centre should be preserved for more noble purposes, meaning economic uses. This is the same discourse that supports current practices of strategic planning and urban development in different centre of global modernisation. In the derivative and less resourceful case of São Paulo, the different members of Viva o Centro legitimised their intentions and activities by announcing that the historic downtown was semi-defunct, violent, and physically deteriorated, an idea that was largely absorbed and broadcast by the press. To counter the imagery of urban decay, the association advocated the need to transform São Paulo into a world city with a strong and well-articulated centre with large investment in projects for capital accumulation.

Despite the initial interest in promoting social policies, in concrete terms, this public-private coalition prioritised public investment in symbolic projects to raise real estate value in the area. To cite an example, the investment of public resources has been predominantly directed to the recovery and conversion of historic buildings for cultural institutions catering to the middle and upper classes, which access these places through segregating security systems. The implementation of cultural activity in the city centre is certainly a good cause. However, what underlines this monoculture of urban projects is the shift in use purpose and also in the target population. As these institutions increasingly try to attract high-income users to the city, they tend to exclude low-income citizens who have traditionally occupied downtown areas. So far, this strategy has had little success since new occupation in the historic centre is proportionally small by comparison to the whole urban area. As a result, this situation has made the gap between different social groups in the city even more visible.

HOUSING MOVEMENTS AND NEW POLITICAL SUBJECTS IN SÃO PAULO

Given this controversial and contentious condition, one can see that the strong presence of social movements claiming for better housing policies in the historic centre of the city is not merely a coincidence. Current housing and land movements in São Paulo constitute a basic element in the expansion of rights to the city to a larger population. By incorporating a large amount of individuals kept in the situation of semi-citizenship, these grassroots movements have reorganised the struggle over urban spaces and contributed to their social and physical improvement. They represent the emergence of new political subjects within the public sphere, operating through practices of dissent and claiming for social recognition.

The historic centre of São Paulo has been an important stage for the political conflicts among different sectors of Paulistano society since the end of the military regime in the 1980s. Even though the historic downtown has traditionally been a place of residence for a large population, the novelty in this process has to do with the nature of the political conflict. Housing movements have organised tactics with the technical support of so-

cial workers, architects and urban designers for forcing legal and political authorities to respond to their claim for better housing. One of the most controversial acts of dissent among these groups was the occupation of vacant buildings. The scale of this radical take-over is unprecedented in São Paulo, showing that the exclusion of certain social groups from democratic representation can lead to an even more complicated scenario. In the first few years of the 2000s, seventeen buildings that were vacant for more than ten years were taken over by 1,300 families in the central areas of the city.

Despite the fact that the real estate market sees this kind of appropriation as negative and problematic, some people are more optimistic about its political role. According to architect and former city councillor Nabil Bonduki, the illegal occupation of vacant buildings sets an important political precedent (Bonduki 2001: 4). Under the pressure of squatting and the existence of a considerable stock of vacant buildings in the downtown area, it has become more and more difficult to ignore the problem presented by informal tenements and by the lack of low-income housing. This confrontation potentially contributes to the debate about the rights to housing financed by government agencies. In addition, these policies and practices should also ensure the access to the rights to the city — and to be in the city — to the infrastructure, and economic and cultural opportunities that the formal city has to offer (Bonduki 2001: 4).

The number of activist groups increased since the creation of Viva o Centro (Feldman 2001: 21). This reaction responds to the fact that the programs coordinated by the revitalization coalition present higher threat of eviction among low-income groups in areas of increased real estate value. Fórum Centro Vivo (Live Downtown Forum) is one of the most recent examples of this phenomenon. It includes many of the institutions that have traditionally coordinated housing movements such as labour and student unions, NGOs, the Catholic Church, cultural groups, technical consultants, and entities for the defence of human rights. This large group was created a few years ago to propose low-income housing policies for the central districts that avoid the displacement of social groups victimised by real estate development.

The examples of recent housing movements and redevelopment projects in the historic centre of São Paulo illustrate a complex urban scenario of dissent and also an important step towards social recognition. In this situation, not only is there opposition among different groups, there is also a dialogue about the symbolic and material ways to produce and inhabit urban spaces. These movements have produced positive results such as the creation of public credit lines for financing low-income housing as well as changes in legislation to allow the social use of existing building stock in the city. Housing movements are based on the need to transform both the discourses and the conditions under which social debate and negotiation for the right to the city occur. They ultimately reveal different meanings about what the city is and what it should be.

As one sees the fast changing dynamics of transfer of capital and formal urban models and practices around the globe, new housing movements contribute to consolidate democratic practices in the local scale of the city. They create possibilities for enlarging the exercise of citizenship beyond the realm of the nation-state and traditional politics. They alone do not solve historic problems, but they help create new forms of presence in the public sphere and in the spaces of the city. They are evidence of the need for recognition and access by different social groups to economic, civil and cultural rights that must be represented in the public sphere. Conflicts over the production of urban space and the representation of social differences in the urban territory are necessary elements to the advancement of democratic life. To investigate alternatives in this situation looks like a Sisyphean task, but it is also an invitation to understand the changing social, cultural and political facts that frame the reality in which design and political and social life operate.

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