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

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To cite this version:
Julien Rebotier. Enhancing the right to the city by politicizing participative urban governance: the case of Caracas. Our Common Future Conference, Nov 2010, Hannover - Essen, Germany. <halshs-00536070>

HAL Id: halshs-00536070
https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00536070
Submitted on 15 Nov 2010
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. Repres...
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.