Democracy and participation: moving beyond dichotomies

Democracia e participação: para além das dicotomias

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ABSTRACT In this essay some elements of analysis are presented in order to ponder on democracy and participation, moving beyond traditional dichotomies, and beyond the health field. An overview of present day forms of participation, and changes in the relation of citizens with politics is proposed, observing its potential and weak points. We advocate that, in order to further people's participation in the administration of public policies, there must be a complementarity between the institutional channels and other forms of involving the citizen with public affairs, more fluid and sporadic, recognizing each single element that is a part of, and qualifies, living and participating in a democracy.

KEYWORDS Democracy. Social participation. Politics. Public policies. Health councils.

RESUMO *Neste ensaio apresentam-se alguns elementos de análise para pensar a democracia e a participação para além das dicotomias tradicionais e do campo da saúde. Propõe-se um olhar sobre as atuais formas de participação e sobre as mudanças na relação dos cidadãos com a política, observando suas potencialidade e fragilidades. Advoga-se que, para avançar na participação da população na gestão das políticas públicas, se faz necessária uma complementaridade entre os canais institucionais e outras formas mais fluidas e esporádicas de envolvimento do cidadão com os assuntos públicos, reconhecendo cada um dos elementos que integram e qualificam o viver e o participar em uma democracia.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE *Democracia. Participação social. Política. Políticas públicas. Conselhos de saúde.*

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The now 40-year-old Brazilian Center for Health Studies (Cebes) faces a political and social environment quite diverse from the one in which it was created in 1976. During the dictatorship, as political agent of the resistance and militant of the right to health, it was the cornerstone and an active member of the democratic health movement. Cebes, in conjunction with other social forces, upheld the motto 'Health is Democracy', which became 'Democracy is Health' during the VIII National Health Conference (1986). With ups and downs, it toggled moments of intense strength with reflux and paralysis, followed by a relaunch in 2006. It remained a political entity whose academic knowledge always grounded its principles and proposals – improvement of health conditions and health care for the Brazilian population by means of a public system, universal, equitable and participatory. Gradually, it abandoned the idea of democracy as an instrument to take over power, of hegemony, in order to adopt the proposal of democracy as a universal value (COUTINHO, 1984).

Over these years, we have witnessed and participated in the creation of municipal and state health councils, in the renewal of the National Health Council and of National Health Assemblies. During the democratic transition, it was possible to notice the belief in a better life and in a fairer society, capable of paying off the social debt left by the dictatorship, followed by a loss of faith in democracy as a means of wealth distribution. In other words, formal democracy would not, in itself, embody substantive democracy.

Although the 1988 Constitution established the legal basis that bestowed isonomy of rights, the inequality in the enjoyment of these same formally established rights maintained the existence of different standards of democracy in daily life. In one of them, applied to the wealthy and the middle classes, rights are acknowledged and respected, as well as the ability to vocalize, to be represented in the public sphere and to

claim, by various means, those rights perchance denied. In the other standard, which is the poorest people's daily experience, there is an exhausting pilgrimage to be able to enjoy, even partially, the rights advertised. The former are treated as consumers while the latter are treated as beggars, to whom, at most, a favor is granted.

In addition to the obstacles standing in the way of the exercising and the enjoyment of full citizenship, there is a democratic standard lacking civility. Citizenship, civics and civility, according to Vera Telles (1992, P. 65) mean

> three ways of affirming the place of rights: the law and public culture, the rule of sociability and the world of subjectification and identity construction.

Civility leads us, therefore, to respect differences, to actual possibilities of not facing discrimination due to whatever intrinsic feature, be it natural or chosen, that constitutes one's identity. However, in the micro and daily scenario, where the freedom to exist and identify as one wishes is exercised, there is still a lack of respect and recognition of individuals as equals.

Therefore, the limits of parliamentary representative democracy have been identified and its need to be replaced or, at least, supplemented by direct democracy – referendums, plebiscites, public consultations, popular bills of law – and by participatory fora, such as health councils and assemblies, has come to be an example, followed by other sectors, of how to overcome democratic deficits due to the traditional way of formulating public policies restricted to public managers, technicians and government bureaucracy, as well as politicians (FUNG, 2006).

However, over the years, the development of health participatory fora also revealed the dilemmas and limits of institutionalized participation (ESCOREL, 2015). Even being deployed for years in every Brazilian municipality and state, and involving a set of about

70 thousand councilors (ESCOREL; MOREIRA, 2009), health boards failed to be the privileged channel of popular participation in their quest for an improved health system. The 2013 'June Journeys' showed that limit.

Public health was a recurrent theme in all of the manifestations that occurred in June 2013, appearing on posters, in intoned cries and even in the protests' legitimacy justification. In the survey conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics (Ibope) during the demonstration carried out on June 20, 2013, the largest of the period, 12.1% of the protesters responded that they claimed for the improvement of public health (G1, 2013). Public health also appeared as the third most claimed motive of the protesters for taking part in the demonstration, accounting for 36.7% of the responses. Considering the existence and institutionalization of participatory spaces in the Brazilian health system, some questions come up: how many protesters knew about the health councils? How many had already participated in a council? And how many protesters had considered those spaces as a place to give vent to their demands regarding the improvement of the health system?

Thus, there took place a reinforcement of the dichotomy between the demonstrations, an alive and pulsating movement, and institutionalized participation, such as the councils – meant to be an example of the transformation of political spaces, deliberative and designed to give voice to the people in debates on policies – turned into management bodies to hold technical discussions, directed by health managers, over which users' representatives can barely interfere.

In the context of the events that took place in June 2013, followed by the 2015 and 2016 demonstrations, a new way of doing politics appeared, as did new political agents that amplified the intrinsic dilemma of participative public policies responsible for institutionalizing a social practice that is dynamic by essence (AROUCA, 2015).

Based on previous research (ESCOREL, 2008; 2013; 2015; ESCOREL; MOREIRA, 2009; 2012; AROUCA, 2015), this essay offers some elements of analysis to think democracy and participation beyond the traditional dichotomies and the health field, advocating a complementary approach that recognizes each of the elements that integrate and qualify living and participating in a democracy.

Participation, demonstration, organization

Democratic deficits arising from the traditional representative democracy are also presented in the participatory bodies. Moroni (2009) analyzes the process of participation in the 2004-2007 multi-year plan (PPA) – intensely stimulated during President Lula's first term by means of public hearings in all Brazilian States and the Federal District, with the attendance of multiple entities, networks and forums – as a

> real 'spectacle' of participation, in which civil society's contributions were not considered nor existed any government strategy to actually create and deepen institutional spaces of popular participation in strategic areas for the implementation of rights in the Country. (MORONI, 2009, P. 262).

That is, a play to which those who had been invited to star in, ended up in the audience, watching the unfolding events without any possibility of intervention.

Other modes of participation, more valued by some, are the campaigns, whose example is the National Crusade for Literacy undertaken in Sandinista Nicaragua (1979-1980). These are processes of social mobilization in which the population itself "faces and solves its problems" instead of relying on "public policies to be carried out by the institutions"

(SANTOS, 2016, P. 15-16). This concept would ground the appreciation of E-Communities bringing together people that face the same problem, for example, one of health. Their perceptions and knowledge would be considered more legitimate since they come from those who experience the problem.

Once again a dichotomy is established, now between 'popular' and technical knowledge. In this conception, technical knowledge is seen as 'elitist', i.e., originally unable to understand what is actually experienced by the population; and there is also a valuation, maybe an excessive one, of popular knowledge as the one who knows what has to be done and how it should be done, being the one who suffers, directly, the consequences of the problem in question. In this way, both the contribution of organic intellectuals to popular causes and the conservatism of these classes are disregarded. The anti-abortion stance or even the fear of any change – understandable given how fragile their means of subsistence are, but, nevertheless, a conservative attitude – are examples which value exclusively those processes born from the population concerned, without the mediation of political organizations or instances of debate. This is as pernicious as to merely value institutionalized channels of participation, being these either electoral representatives or deliberative participatory ones.

In addition to the direct or indirect participation, by means of representatives in councils or election moments, petitions gain more and more importance, as do sites that collect signatures on topics ranging from personal matters – sick family member in need of medicine and surgeries –; local issues – hospitals to be saved from scrapping –; shared causes – against broadcasting the ox spree and images suggesting mistreatment of animals –; up to even requesting interference in other countries – interruption of death by stoning of women accused of infidelity in Iran. In this set of causes, political examples can be exemplified by petitions such as those against congressman Marco Feliciano's homophobic attitudes – 'he doesn't represent me' –, and by the forfeiture of ex-congressman Eduardo Cunha. Thereby, it highlights a mechanism of public opinion formation and pressure that has come to reveal significant capacity of intervention. It is a modality of distance participation that creates collectives that are diffuse, though no less political.

In the various forms of participation, it is also necessary to take into account their temporality and the participants' degree of commitment. Crusades or national campaigns cannot endure long term because they demand social forces, resources and full and absolute dedication throughout their duration. Demonstrations may carry greater or lesser presence, according to their demands' aggregation potential, being its temporality also dependent on the responses obtained, which may range from a single episode to their characterization as 'journeys'. On the other hand, participation in institutionalized boards requires a constant commitment to representation activities and is potentially permanent, but, for this very reason, shows their tendency to bureaucratize themselves.

Other elements to be considered in the analysis are the visibility, for society as a whole, of the different forms of participation as well as the will and ability to interfere in established power. While the demonstrations are intensely visible and interfere with the life of cities, their demands can be addressed to quality of life aspects without, necessarily, requiring governmental changes. In turn, boards of social participation, whose activities are barely visible, have a set up that aims to change the hierarchy of power.

Contemporary social participation introduces a series of analytical challenges. How to understand current and different ways of intervening in politics? There are movements that occur in various forms, heterogeneous, not always having a known organizational process, that do not always

want to compete for a position in the institutional logic, that seek changes, but that are also permeated by an ambiance of feasting, by carnival. They are not only done by collectives but also by individuals without any political party ties, pertaining to no unions or organizations planning future steps, defining a strategy or a final goal.

A transformation is underway regarding political participation in Brazil. It manifested its concrete signs in 2013 but revealed its contradictions in 2015 and 2016. Those who extolled the manifestations carried out in 2013 for their power and originality would regard, with great suspicion, the 2015 and 2016 demonstrations against the Workers' Party (PT) government. However, they are part of a same logic, share a common basis, reveal a 'new way of doing politics'. This new form is pervaded by generational changes, by access to technology and the internet, but is also determined by the political history of the Country and by the social changes that recent governments were able to produce. In that sense, the analysis of such transformation requires looking into its potentialities and its contradictions.

Potentialities

In 2013, millions of people took to the streets with claims initially linked to public transportation, but that grew to embrace a series of demands concerning social rights. These aspects became clear. However, a transformation in the form of 'doing politic' was embodied there. Although then lacking deeper analysis as to causes and demands, new features would show over the following years. Agents arose from those public demonstrations that, besides evoking their individual and collective rights, called attention to themselves as political entities. They wanted to be seen and heard by the State, by the media, by their friends, by social networks. That would be one of the first characteristics

of a transformation in the 'way of doing politics', a new relation between recognition and visibility.

The June Journeys neither symbolized the struggle for cultural recognition, characteristic of the new social movements, nor the fight for a right, in the field of Justice, as did the traditional social movements. The June demonstrations expressed the struggle for a symbolic place for citizens in a democracy, related to their importance in the political context. Thus, the recognition was not restricted to the State, to a legal or institutional resolution. It was the dispute over a symbolic power to the extent that it relied on the recognition, from the rest of society, of the legitimacy of those subjects' role within the democracy, the legitimacy of the act of protesting and presenting their demands and criticisms. Marcos Nobre (2004) had already pointed out that change at the time he analyzed the new model of citizenship, stating that, despite the lack of clarity of this new model's outlines, a change existed in the relation between State and society that reached society as a whole:

> For the demands of this new citizenship are not only addressed to the State's recognition of the legitimacy of the claims of a citizen or group of citizens, but also to the recognition, by society, of the legitimacy of a particular situation. (NOBRE, 2004, P. 30).

Following this logic, the June demonstrations won their success in terms of recognition and visibility. It was society that provided their legitimacy. Throughout June, public support increased, rejection dropped and, concomitantly, the demonstrations gathered greater participation in several regions of Brazil. Even the hegemonic media, which initially condemned the protests, went on not only to follow them step by step but also to evoke their democratic merit. So, throughout June, those agents had addressed their demand to be seen and

considered important, thus occupying their place in democracy.

One may note that, if democratic institutionalization ensures a place for citizens, with their rights and means to intervene, there is another process necessary for the realization of this place that belongs to the very agent, to the recognition of himself as a political agent. In that sense, social networks played a key role. They served as previous and everyday spaces for building individual importance and individual opinions. In a society where inequality forges and determines the relation between State and society, social networks served as spaces that allowed a certain number of citizens to live the experience of being seen and recognized and, consequently, to consider themselves important in their views and opinions. That dynamic, particular of our time, where the individual is the center, embodied in the explosion of selfies and in the success of networks geared to the strengthening of individual identity (Facebook, Instagram etc.), had shifted to the streets, where citizens shouted out their opinions and demanded to be seen, assured of their importance. That process became possible because there existed a democracy guaranteeing the real and symbolic place of citizens, and because those citizens occupied that place to the extent that they changed their relationship with themselves as political agents, in which they saw themselves as equally important and carried opinions that should be listened to and respected. What emerged in June 2013 was an individual who recognizes his/her place in democracy, because he/she believes that his/her opinion matters.

That same logic can be observed in the 2015 and 2016 manifestations, although they may seem opposed to those carried out in June 2013. Another public and ideological profile was at stake, which, although having some demands in common (ORTELLANDO; SOLANO; NADER, 2016), differed radically regarding their main demand: Dilma Rousseff's

impeachment. But it was the same political doing observed in the June 2013 explosion: individuals carrying their opinions took to the streets to manifest them, because they recognized the importance of their own voice and wanted to be seen and heard.

Those processes draw another form of doing politics due to its core in the centrality of the individual. Such centrality modifies the way of doing politics, because it is no longer designed by collective structures, political parties, trade unions, social or collective movements; it does not base itself on a certain individual sacrifice in favor of the collective demand, and it does not necessarily follow a political horizon or a strategy of power. In this sense, the individual brings his/her idea, poster, and quest, and joins others without necessarily creating an organization. This new way of doing politics also comes loaded with a certain level of festivity, pleasure, contravening a vision of the traditional left-wing militant effort. The demonstrations are filled with music, drumming groups and performances. In their extreme shape they become parties, with an appearance of carnivals or football match days. Maybe that's why, even facing the 2016 crisis, it was the cultural sector that most mobilized, took over the streets and voiced demands. Because traditional politics barely dialogues with the changes taking place in the way of participating, while the arts have the ability to talk politics through the soul, through pleasure, even when this is mixed with the pain of revolt.

Weaknesses

The weaknesses of these processes have already been analyzed by different authors and viewpoints (ALVES, 2014; BRINGEL; PLEYERS, 2015; CAVA; COCO, 2014; CHAUÍ, 2013; GOHN, 2014; SOUZA; NUNES, 2014). This new way of doing politics appeared to some, in 2013, as groups with no horizon, no goals, and no transforming

capacity; in 2015/2016, as lack of political awareness, aggravated individualism etc. We do not mean here to analyze the ideological differences of these demonstrations and protests, but to show how both reveal a new way of doing politics that, regardless of political spectrum, are transforming the way people see themselves in politics and, consequently, how they do politics. This new form, which has the individual as central, is connected, therefore, to the need to have their individuality and opinions seen, heard and recognized.

Such 'empowerment' does not necessarily come bound to a political organization, but this does not limit its ability to act and impact, as we note in alternative media, in the individual filming of protests: individual actions with a cell phone allowed thousands of people to monitor people's acts by means of networks, mobilizing and ensuring immediate information about the protests, also being useful as evidence of police violence, transcending the streets to achieve the institutional framework. Those changes have impacted, as well, the structure of traditional political organizations attempting renewal by using the networks and other ways to attract young people. The impact can also be seen on new organizations that arise based on horizontality and on the absence of leadership, building a new way of doing politics by means of artistic and cultural interventions.

Thus, these are ongoing transformations. They may be appropriate for different political groups with different goals. Changes do not belong to a political spectrum, but, rather, to a generational transformation, which is shaped by the historical and cultural aspects of our Country, which, in turn, interacts with the changes under way in several regions of the world. Many authors (OGIEN; LAUGIER, 2014; GOHN, 2014; CASTELLS, 2012) have analyzed the similarities between the Arab Spring, the Occupy movements, and the mobilizations in Spain.

Those important uprisings coming from the population that demanded to take part in the State's decisions, make the contradictions of participatory public policies even clearer. For a public policy of participation to be legitimate, it must, firstly, be able to gather the largest number possible of people involved in the topic. Therefore, it is necessary to create open spaces for the existing diversity in society. However, the institutionalized character of participation within governmental administration requires the creation of a working model and, therefore, a certain type of behavior on the part of individuals and of interaction with public power and other social actors. As a result, what we see is that this institutionalized participation, and its consolidation by means of a general model within the State, ends up excluding the participation of certain groups while arousing the interest of others. The particularity of participatory public policies is to have as their main object a fluid and diverse human activity, and their challenge is to be able to institutionalize that human activity without losing its intrinsic dynamics at the time of its involvement in the State management. If this is an issue that has existed since the creation of the participatory framework by the 1988 Constitution, the June demonstrations served to re-ignite it (AROUCA, 2015).

Tying up

In this essay, we considered the challenges of participatory public policies and their limits before a fluid and dynamic object: political participation. Our intention was, therefore, to analyze the ongoing transformations that we consider to be fundamental elements of current expression of political participation in Brazil. We underline that certain characteristics are not necessarily negative or limited to a political spectrum. On the contrary, they are changes expressed in different

types of political manifestation and, in some of their formats they are useful to strengthen democracy and have the ability to intervene in the State's decisions.

The centrality of political action on individual change, on the way 'to live life', guides people who choose to fight against social injustice by changing their daily practices; many include at the bottom of their messages *"be the change you want to see in the world"* – Gandhi. This perspective is also intersected by limits, since certain social struggles depend on collective changes or major ruptures. For example, to be concerned about recycling household waste and limiting the personal use of chemicals and plastics, does not save the environment from contamination of rivers and groundwater by large industries and mining companies. On the other hand, as we have seen recently, the women's movement in the campaigns #myfirstharassment *(#meuprimeiroassédio)* and #mysecretenemy *(#meuinimigosecreto)* was able to mobilize public opinion on rape culture, on gender inequality, gathering together and creating spaces for women's empowerment as political agents. Those movements also talked about personal changes because it led partners, co-workers, friends to think about machismo/sexism and to question sexist practices. In those movements and campaigns, there wasn't a single political organization nor clear leadership or defined objectives, and, in many instances, the activities arose from groups of women without political linking, but who were able to summon large mobilizations and to promote important reflections on gender inequality in our society.

So, this tying up is a call to think about the institutionalized participation, looking at current changes, noting its complexity, weaknesses and potentialities, without labeling because it simply does not correspond to what we knew before as political movements. It is necessary, therefore, to dialogue with different forms of political participation so that they feed and strengthen participatory public policies.

As democracy is a never-ending process, the existing forms of participation should be permanently improved by modifying their organization, discussing their role, and, when recognizing their limits, by identifying the need to create and enable the emergence of new forms of participation that have an impact on policy design, since the mere fact that they arise is enough to question and enhance existing forms (ESCOREL, 2015).

As the existing fora are not able to seize all demands or to open room for the various interests, it is important to think about complementarities of forms of participation: representative and direct; councils, demonstrations and campaigns; networks and streets; movements and institutional spaces.

We can benefit from the existing structure of participation and dialogue channels if we are able to interface with those ongoing transformations, valuing the new and considering the boards as spaces to make democracy progress. The challenge is set. The danger of not interfacing is that we may see, in a short period of time, structures that once were the product of historical and social struggles being drained of meaning and strength, ending up as a mere skeleton of a dream. It is necessary to keep dreaming together for the dream to become true.

Authors

The authors have substantially contributed to the conception and analysis of the text, in the drawing up of the draft, and in the approval of the final version of the manuscript.■

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