Dichotomies in democratic participation: conformation and disillusionment in Brazilian urban planning

Dicotomias na participação democrática: conformação e desilusão no planejamento urbano brasileiro

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Abstract

This study analyzes the contradictions of democratic participation in Brazilian urban planning, examining the gap between the discourse of inclusion and practices that perpetuate socio-spatial inequalities. The objective is to investigate the limitations of participatory processes and propose alternatives to transform them into tools for social justice. Using a deductive method and a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive approach, the study employed a literature review and secondary data analysis from academic studies, official documents, and legislation. Cases such as the Porto Maravilha Project, the Minha Casa Minha Vida Program, and the Participatory Budget of Porto Alegre were analyzed. The study concludes that transformation requires effective decentralization, equity in processes, and civic engagement, which are essential for ensuring the right to the city and promoting social justice.

Keywords: democratic participation; urban planning; socio-spatial inequality.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa as contradições da participação democrática no planejamento urbano brasileiro, examinando a distância entre o discurso de inclusão e as práticas que perpetuam desigualdades socioespaciais. O objetivo é investigar os limites dos processos participativos e propor alternativas para transformá-los em ferramentas de justiça social. Com método dedutivo e abordagem qualitativa, exploratória e descritiva, a pesquisa utilizou revisão bibliográfica e análise de dados secundários de estudos acadêmicos, documentos oficiais e legislações. Foram analisados casos como o Projeto Porto Maravilha, o Programa Minha Casa Minha Vida e o Orçamento Participativo de Porto Alegre. Conclui-se que a transformação exige descentralização efetiva, equidade nos processos e engajamento cívico, essenciais para garantir o direito à cidade e promover justiça social.

Palavras-chave: *participação democrática; planejamento urbano; desigualdade socioespacial.*

Introduction

Democratic participation in Brazilian urban planning is often highlighted as one of the pillars for promoting social inclusion and spatial justice. However, in practice, there is a profound dissonance between the democratic ideal and participatory processes, which, in many cases, reinforce socio-spatial inequalities rather than mitigate them. This study investigates the dichotomies between the promise of inclusion and the practice of exclusion in participatory processes, analyzing how these mechanisms are shaped by power dynamics that favor dominant economic and political interests.

The relevance of this research lies in its contribution to the debate on citizen participation in Brazil, demonstrating how it has been used both as a tool for legitimizing elitist practices and as a potential catalyst for social transformation. The study seeks to provide theoretical and practical insights for the reformulation of participatory mechanisms, considering the urgency of fostering more inclusive and democratic cities. This theme is justified by the persistent socio-spatial exclusion characterizing Brazilian urban planning and the need to understand the factors that limit the effectiveness of participatory processes to inform more equitable public policies.

The central objective of this study is to analyze the limitations and potentialities of democratic participation in urban planning, highlighting the contradictions between the discourse of inclusion and the exclusionary practices, and investigating alternatives to overcome these dichotomies. The research is anchored in a theoretical-conceptual framework that articulates perspectives such as the right to the city, critiques of hegemony, and the dynamics of social capital. The theoretical foundation is based on authors such as Jürgen Habermas, David Harvey, Pierre Bourdieu, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, among others, whose contributions enable a critical and contextualized analysis of the studied cases. The study also considers international experiences, such as Porto Alegre's Participatory Budgeting and Participatory Budgeting NYC.

The text is structured into five main sections. Following this introduction, the second section addresses the rhetoric of democratic participation in Brazil, exploring the contradictions between the discourse of inclusion and exclusionary practices in emblematic public policies. The third section analyzes the materiality of conformation, highlighting how these dynamics manifest concretely in urban space and gentrification practices. The fourth section discusses the impacts of disillusionment generated by symbolic participatory processes, examining their consequences for democracy and civic engagement. The fifth section presents proposals to overcome the dichotomies between conformation and transformation, drawing inspiration from successful models of citizen participation in Brazil and abroad. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the main findings, identifies the study's limitations, suggests directions for future research, and outlines pathways for more inclusive public policies.

Methodologically, the study adopts a deductive method, with an exploratory and descriptive approach regarding its objectives and a qualitative approach regarding its

methods. Data collection was based on a comprehensive literature review, which enabled the mapping of the recent state of the art and the analysis of classical texts relevant to the topic. Secondary data from sources related to urban planning and citizen participation processes were analyzed, including academic studies, official documents, and pertinent legislation supporting the analyses conducted. For data analysis, hermeneutics was employed as an interpretative approach, connecting theoretical foundations to empirical evidence, allowing for a critical examination of the dynamics observed in participatory processes.

Methodological rigor is present in all stages of the study, with an emphasis on the triangulation of collected data, theoretical review, and interpretative analysis. The use of hermeneutics enabled an in-depth reading of participatory practices, shedding light on the contradictions between democratic principles and the outcomes observed in Brazilian urban reality. This methodology allowed for a critical analysis of selected cases, such as the Porto Maravilha Project and the Minha Casa Minha Vida Program, and their articulation with broader debates on urban democracy.

The rhetoric of participatory democracy in Brazil

Democratic participation in Brazil, particularly in urban planning, faces significant challenges despite being supported by legislative advancements such as the 1988 Federal Constitution (Brazil, 1988) and the City Statute, regulated by Law No. 10.257/2001 (Brazil, 2001).

These legal frameworks consolidated the right to the city and formalized the social function of property, requiring citizen participation in the development of Master Plans. However, despite this institutional framework, practice reveals a clear disconnection between legal mechanisms and the social exclusion that continues to characterize Brazilian cities. Although these legal provisions have the potential to democratize urban planning, they often fail to ensure effective citizen participation, remaining confined to formal procedures that do little to alter local power dynamics.

To understand the complexity of this context, a solid theoretical foundation is essential. The concept of the "right to the city," formulated by Lefebvre (1968), extends beyond mere access to urban space; it involves a collective struggle for control over the processes that shape space production. Harvey (2008) reinforces this idea, arguing that the right to the city is fundamentally a collective right that demands a reorganization of the social, political, and economic relations shaping the urban environment. In Brazil, the City Statute (Brazil, 2001) sought to institutionalize this right; however, structural barriers hinder its effective implementation. Policies aimed at democratizing land use and promoting inclusion face resistance from power structures that continue to favor real estate capital.

Popular participation, as provided for in Master Plans and public hearings, is often reduced to a formal ritual without genuinely influencing decisions. As Maricato (2011) observes, these processes are frequently captured by economic and political elites who shape the discourse and dominate the urban agenda, resulting in a neoliberal urbanism that

prioritizes the real estate market over collective interests. This exemplifies what Bourdieu (1996) terms the "reproduction of power structures," where formal inclusion serves as a façade, concealing the perpetuation of socio-spatial inequalities.

Empirical examples such as the Porto Maravilha Project in Rio de Janeiro highlight these dynamics. Launched in 2010, Porto Maravilha aimed to revitalize the city's degraded port area, transforming it into a tourist and cultural hub while attracting real estate investments. The stakeholders involved included the Companhia de Desenvolvimento Urbano da Região do Porto do Rio de Janeiro (CDURP), major construction companies, and private investors. Citizen participation was officially incorporated through public hearings, but these consultations were widely criticized for being scheduled at times and in formats that limited access for local residents, particularly low-income communities. In practice, the gentrification resulting from the project led to the displacement of vulnerable populations, reinforcing patterns of social and territorial exclusion.

Another example is the Minha Casa Minha Vida (MCMV) Program, launched in 2009 as a housing policy designed to expand access to housing for low-income families. Although the program delivered a significant number of housing units, it faced criticism for prioritizing peripheral areas with poor urban infrastructure, distancing beneficiaries from essential services and employment opportunities. Community participation in determining locations and project characteristics was virtually nonexistent, resulting in housing solutions that perpetuate socio-spatial segregation.

This process illustrates how the absence of effective citizen participation mechanisms can undermine the outcomes of supposedly inclusive public policies.

These cases resonate with global participatory processes facing similar challenges. For example, in Barcelona, the participatory planning model is often praised but also criticized for being co-opted by local elites. This comparison underscores the importance of understanding the particularities of the Brazilian context, where the intersection of historical social inequalities and the persistence of patrimonialist power structures significantly limits the impact of participatory initiatives.

These dynamics reveal that, in many cases, citizen participation in Brazil is restricted to rhetoric that legitimizes processes already established by economic and political elites. Holston (2009) notes that urban citizenship in Brazil is marked by contradictions, as the formal rights guaranteed by legislation, such as the right to participation, do not translate into real accessibility, particularly for marginalized populations. In practice, vulnerable groups—such as low-income residents and ethnic minorities—are often excluded from decision-making processes, a situation exacerbated in contexts of gentrification and forced evictions. These phenomena highlight that, rather than fostering inclusive participation, institutional mechanisms frequently fail to ensure the effective distribution of urban rights, reinforcing inequalities and perpetuating social injustice.

Moreover, the rhetoric of democratic participation often serves to legitimize processes of real estate speculation and the privatization of public spaces. Rolnik (2017)

observes that, although the City Statute (Brazil, 2001) advanced in recognizing the right to the city, its implementation is marked by power asymmetries. Urban revitalization projects in cities such as São Paulo, like the Nova Luz program, exemplify these dynamics. Announced in 2005 to redevelop the city's central region, Nova Luz aimed to attract investments and modernize the deteriorated area. However, the absence of effective dialogue with residents and the prioritization of real estate interests led to strong opposition from social movements, which denounced the risk of evictions and gentrification. Although the project was eventually suspended, it illustrates how the lack of genuine participation can undermine urban revitalization initiatives.

Despite these limitations, in some cities, social movements and civil society organizations have resisted this exclusionary logic, asserting their full right to the city. Santos (2006) emphasizes that the struggle for urban space in Brazil is ultimately a struggle for the democratization of cities themselves, which entails confronting the power relations that shape land use and production. The critique of democratic participation in the country goes beyond denouncing the capture of participatory processes; it also highlights the urgent need to reconstruct these mechanisms so that they become genuinely inclusive and capable of promoting an equitable redistribution of power and resources.

In this context, democratic participation, in its current form, fails to fulfill the transformative potential it should have. The capture by elites and the exclusion of vulnerable populations make evident the need for a profound reformulation of these processes. The challenge, as Harvey (2008) proposes, is to reconceptualize the right to the city as a collective struggle for the transformation of power relations that structure urban space. This implies a radical restructuring of participatory mechanisms so that they become not only formally inclusive but effectively democratic, ensuring social justice and equity in urban planning.

Deconstructing the discourse of democratic participation

Habermas's (1997) deliberative theory proposes that, under ideal conditions, rational communication should foster an inclusive public sphere where all citizens can participate in the deliberative process equitably. However, this reality rarely materializes in societies marked by deep inequalities, such as Brazil. The structure of public communication in the country is distorted by power asymmetries that favor political and business elites, transforming popular participation into a mechanism of legitimation rather than transformation. In practice, participatory processes create the appearance of democracy but often serve to consolidate the hegemony of privileged groups.

The discourse on democratic participation, widely promoted, often conceals the fact that the most vulnerable citizens are systematically marginalized from decision-making processes. Harvey (2012) highlights that capitalism shapes cities according to the

interests of capital accumulation, and citizen participation, rather than functioning as a tool for contestation, is frequently instrumentalized to legitimize urban projects already designed to serve these interests. In Brazil, this phenomenon is evident in urban revitalization projects where peripheral residents are consulted, yet their contributions do not significantly alter the project's direction. In such cases, participation provides only a superficial legitimacy to the process without bringing meaningful changes for excluded groups.

Bourdieu (1986) offers an important contribution to understanding how symbolic power operates within these processes. His concept of habitus helps explain how citizens internalize structures of inequality, accepting their subordinate position as natural. In public consultations and participatory forums in Brazil, many citizens participate with the perception that they have a right to be heard but without the expectation that their voices will truly influence decisions. Thus, their presence paradoxically reinforces their subalternity, as decision-making power remains concentrated in the hands of those who hold greater social and cultural capital.

Additionally, Freire (1987) criticizes what he calls "banking participation," in which citizens are mere passive recipients of information imposed by elites, without a real opportunity to critically contribute to the process. Freire (1987) advocates for critical and emancipatory participation, in which citizens do not simply respond to a pre-established agenda but co-create the decision-making process, particularly in the urban context. However, in Brazil, this emancipatory form of participation is frequently disregarded. Even when invited to participate, citizens remain trapped in a logic of submission to established power, reinforcing a cycle of marginalization.

Santos (2006) adds an important critique, arguing that participatory democratic processes in the Global South, including Brazil, operate under models imported from the Global North, which fail to recognize local realities and the needs of marginalized populations. The ideal of democratic participation is often limited to those who already possess economic and political resources. Elites successfully mobilize the rhetoric of inclusion to maintain their privileges, while marginalized populations become disillusioned by the lack of tangible results. This exclusion, disguised as inclusion, perpetuates inequalities, turning citizen participation into a symbolic practice that, in reality, preserves existing power structures.

Thus, the deconstruction of the discourse of democratic participation in Brazil reveals how promises of inclusion often conceal dynamics of exclusion. Although the rhetoric promotes popular empowerment, control over participatory processes remains in the hands of elites. This dynamic not only marginalizes vulnerable populations but also weakens the transformative potential of citizen participation, reinforcing the political and economic hegemony that sustains social and spatial inequalities in the country.

Simulated inclusion: the rhetoric of brazilian democracy

The discourse surrounding democratic participation in Brazil often presents itself as a promise of inclusion and citizen empowerment, particularly in urban planning policies. However, a critical analysis reveals that in many initiatives, this inclusion is more illusory than real. Rather than challenging power structures, citizen participation often reinforces social and economic hierarchies, limiting access and influence for marginalized groups while favoring those who already possess social and political capital. This dynamic of exclusion disguised as inclusion is particularly evident in participatory processes related to urban planning, where the outcomes, in practice, reflect elite interests.

To understand this exclusion, it is essential to consider Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital, which refers to networks of relationships and access to social and political resources that allow certain groups to exert greater influence over decision-making processes. In participatory processes implemented in Brazil— such as public consultations and municipal hearings—individuals and groups with higher social capital, typically middle- and upper-class citizens, academics, and business leaders, tend to dominate the debate and shape outcomes. These groups have privileged access to information, a greater familiarity with technical language, and a more effective ability to organize their demands. In contrast, the voices of marginalized individuals and communities, particularly in urban peripheries, are often silenced or minimized, exacerbating existing social and economic inequalities.

A clear example of this dynamic can be observed in urban revitalization projects in major Brazilian cities such as São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Although public hearings are technically open to the population, they often take place at times and locations that make it difficult for low-income workers—who have long work hours and little flexibility—to attend. Furthermore, the technical language used in these projects often makes the process incomprehensible to a large portion of the population, preventing disadvantaged communities from fully participating. In these cases, exclusion is disguised as inclusion: while the opportunity to participate exists formally, the practical conditions favor those who already have resources and privileges.

This dynamic of structural exclusion reflects Young's (2002) concept of structural injustice, which argues that participatory processes can be unjust when the resources needed for meaningful participation are unequally distributed. Factors such as education, time, money, and political capital determine one's ability to influence decisions. In Brazil, these disparities are particularly evident in urban planning forums, where poorer and more marginalized communities rarely manage to articulate their demands in a way that challenges dominant interests. As a result, participatory processes, rather than promoting social justice, often reinforce preexisting social and spatial hierarchies.

Exclusion disguised as inclusion is also deeply connected to local social networks and interactions between individuals. Jacobs (1961) emphasizes that social capital is built through everyday relationships and neighborhood networks that foster trust and cooperation. However, these relationships are often dismantled by revitalization projects that displace communities and disrupt these connections, destroying the social fabric necessary for meaningful participation. In contrast to this optimistic view, Putnam (1993) warns that the decline of social capital – evidenced by the loss of voluntary networks and community fragmentation – undermines communities' ability to resist exclusion and gentrification processes.

In many cases, participatory processes serve to validate decisions that have already been made behind closed doors, favoring real estate speculation and the privatization of public spaces. Gentrification practices, frequently associated with urban revitalization projects, are a notorious example of this exclusion disguised as inclusion. Although these projects are often marketed as initiatives promoting social inclusion and improving quality of life, in practice, they result in the displacement of low-income residents to urban peripheries, forcing them to leave their communities in the name of urban development. As Harvey (2012) argues, the production of urban space, rather than being a democratic and inclusive process, is driven by the interests of capital Citizen participation is used merely as a tool to legitimize this process of exploitation.

Exclusion disguised as inclusion is also intrinsically linked to the concept of hegemony developed by Gramsci (1999). The author argues that elites maintain their power not only through coercion but also through the active or passive consent of the subordinate classes, who accept existing power structures as natural or inevitable. In Brazil, the rhetoric of democratic participation often functions as a hegemonic mechanism: elites use the discourse of inclusion to legitimize their actions while preserving their own interests. As a result, exclusion does not manifest explicitly but operates through symbolic participation, where the lower classes are invited to take part in processes that do not substantially alter power relations.

In this context, exclusion disguised as inclusion perpetuates social and spatial inequalities by keeping participatory processes under the control of privileged groups. Democratic participation, in such cases, becomes a mere formality, serving to validate the decisions of political and economic elites while the true redistribution of power and resources is continuously obstructed. Overcoming this dynamic requires a profound reformulation of participatory mechanisms to ensure that they are genuinely inclusive and capable of promoting social justice.

The materiality of conformation

The promise of social transformation through popular participation fades in the face of the realities of participatory processes in the Brazilian urban context. Rather than challenging power structures, citizen participation often reinforces them, resulting in a materiality of conformation. Urban planning projects frequently embed within their core the prioritization of dominant economic and political interests, relegating the most vulnerable populations to the margins of decision-making processes. This phenomenon is not limited to theory but manifests concretely in urban space, perpetuating inequalities and fostering disillusionment among those who should be the protagonists of change.

A notable example of how conformation materializes is the Cais do Porto Project in Recife, Pernambuco. Launched in 2008 as part of a plan to revitalize the port area, the project was promoted as an initiative to modernize local infrastructure, stimulate tourism, and transform the region into a cultural and entertainment hub. Among the stated objectives were the requalification of degraded urban space and the valorization of the area's heritage. However, its implementation revealed the predominance of private capital interests over the demands of local communities.

The main stakeholders involved included the municipal administration, large real estate developers, and organizations linked to the tourism sector. Popular participation was formally included through public consultations and hearings, but in practice, these initiatives were marked by limited accessibility and excessively technical language, which hindered the understanding and engagement of low-income residents. Despite being officially open, these consultations functioned more as validation rituals for the project than as genuine spaces for citizen influence.

The disputes surrounding the Cais do Porto project centered on land use and the redistribution of benefits generated by the redevelopment. While real estate investors sought to maximize profits through luxury condominiums and commercial spaces, local communities demanded affordable housing and the preservation of their right to remain in the area. The disproportionate power dynamics between these groups resulted in the displacement of long-standing residents to peripheral areas lacking adequate infrastructure, further entrenching socioeconomic inequalities.

In practice, the project's outcomes reflected the interests of economic elites. The redeveloped space was transformed into a tourist attraction but at the cost of excluding local communities. This contrasts with examples such as Comuna 13 in Medellín, Colombia, where genuinely participatory initiatives integrated residents at every stage of the process, leading to more inclusive urban improvements.

Although this process repeats itself in many Brazilian cities, it also presents local nuances that highlight the structural limitations of participatory mechanisms. In the case of Cais do Porto, the displacement of traditional communities exposed the fragility of local social capital networks, which were unable to resist the dynamics imposed by real estate capital. This situation contrasts, for example, with experiences in Medellín, where urban initiatives that effectively incorporated local

communities into decision-making processes led to more equitable results. These examples demonstrate that when community networks are strengthened and genuinely integrated into planning, it is possible to mitigate the negative impacts of neoliberal urbanization.

The contextualization of these concrete cases makes it clear that conformation is directly linked to the manipulation of participatory processes by economic and political elites. Bourdieu (1986) helps us understand this phenomenon through his concept of social and cultural capital, which enables certain groups to control public debate. Those with greater social and cultural capital—business owners, investors, and political actors—dominate discussions and impose their interests over the most vulnerable groups. The result is the perpetuation of urban inequalities, where revitalized areas cater to the interests of a privileged minority while the needs of the working class are systematically ignored.

Coleman (1998) expands on this discussion by emphasizing that social capital consists of norms, trust, and networks that facilitate collective action. However, he also warns about the risks of these networks being instrumentalized by groups with greater access to economic and political resources, leading to the exclusion of other segments. In urban participatory processes, these dynamics are reflected in the capture of decision-making by organized groups with greater political leverage, while marginalized communities face structural barriers that limit their effective participation.

Siisiäinen (2000), in comparing Bourdieu's and Putnam's perspectives on social capital, highlights that while Bourdieu analyzes the power relations and inequalities associated with

social capital, Putnam views it as a community resource capable of promoting collective well-being. This theoretical tension allows for a reflection on how social capital can function both as an instrument of domination and as a means of emancipation. In the Brazilian context, it is evident that the instrumentalization of social capital generally favors hegemonic groups, while vulnerable populations struggle to transform their networks into effective instruments of political pressure.

Habermas's (1997) critical theory also applies to the analysis of these processes, as it demonstrates how the public sphere, far from being neutral, is influenced by power relations that shape social and political interactions. When less privileged citizens are invited to participate in processes that, in reality, do not alter the course of pre-established decisions, the resulting space reflects elite hegemony. This phenomenon is clearly observable in the cases mentioned, where public consultations were held, but their contributions were either ignored or devalued, perpetuating a segmented and unjust city.

In conclusion, the materiality of conformation in the context of Brazilian urban planning not only reinforces social and spatial hierarchies but also becomes visible in the physical organization of cities. Revitalization projects that prioritize private capital over local communities materialize inequalities, consolidating the conformation of marginalized populations.

Overcoming this dynamic requires not only reforming participatory processes but also understanding how social capital can be redistributed and reconfigured to promote a genuine democratization of urban space.

Disillusionment in citizen participation

Although citizen participation is often praised as an essential mechanism for democracy, providing citizens with the opportunity to influence political and urban decisions that affect their lives, in practice, many of these processes lead to disillusionment as citizens' demands are ignored or minimized. Disillusionment arises when participatory processes are manipulated to legitimize decisions already made by political and economic elites, generating a cycle of distrust in democratic institutions and alienation among citizens. The problem worsens when the expectations created by the rhetoric of inclusion are not met, reinforcing the perception that citizen participation is ineffective and merely symbolic.

A clear example of this dynamic can be found in large-scale event projects, such as the preparation of Brazilian cities for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. In both cases, public hearings were held to discuss the impacts of these mega-events on host cities, but key decisions—such as the relocation of communities and the prioritization of investments in tourism and commercial infrastructure—had already been made. The affected communities, especially those forcibly removed, experienced the disillusionment of seeing their concerns marginalized or ignored. This recurring pattern of exclusion and disillusionment not only weakens trust in institutions but also results in political alienation, a concept developed by Marx (2015). Alienation occurs when citizens disconnect from political processes, feeling they have no real control or influence over the decisions that shape their lives. In manipulated participatory processes, this alienation is exacerbated by the perception that citizens are merely being used to legitimize decisions already established by elites, with no genuine intention of including their voices in a meaningful way. The repetition of this cycle of frustrated participation reinforces a sense of powerlessness and distances citizens from the public sphere.

The idea of "participation as a facade," described by Gramsci (1999), helps explain how disillusionment materializes. According to Gramsci, elites maintain their power not only through coercion but also through the passive consent of the masses, who accept power structures as natural. In participatory processes, the democratic facade serves to legitimize the hegemony of elites, while the interests of the majority are systematically ignored. Thus, rather than being a space for transformation, citizen participation becomes a hegemonic tool in which the appearance of inclusion masks the perpetuation of inequalities.

The disillusionment generated by this symbolic participation has profound consequences for democracy. Young (2002) warns that when participatory processes fail to deliver concrete results, civic engagement weakens, and political apathy increases. This creates a vicious cycle in which democratic participation is restricted to elites and privileged groups, while the majority of the population, disillusioned, withdraws from decision-making spheres. The weakening of citizen participation poses a direct threat to participatory democracy, as it undermines the legitimacy of democratic institutions and perpetuates a system where decisions are made without meaningful involvement from civil society.

In response to this scenario, it is urgent that participatory processes be restructured to ensure genuine and effective citizen participation. To achieve this, it is essential to grant citizens an active voice from the conception of public policies, incorporating the demands of vulnerable populations as central elements rather than mere appendages of projects. As Mouffe (2000) argues, true democracy must embrace conflict and antagonism as essential elements of public debate. Only when participatory processes are transformed to equitably include the diverse voices of society will it be possible to restore trust in institutions and overcome the disillusionment that characterizes citizen participation in Brazil.

Nevertheless, social movements and civil organizations have resisted this exclusionary logic, demanding the full right to the city. A prominent example is the role of the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST) in São Paulo, which has fought for the construction of affordable housing in central urban areas, challenging public policies that perpetuate socio-spatial exclusion. Another notable case is the People's Committee for the World Cup and the Olympics, which emerged as a coalition of social movements and academics to monitor, denounce, and resist the negative impacts of mega-events. These groups not only exposed forced evictions and the resulting gentrification but also presented alternative proposals that prioritized inclusion and social justice.

In an international context, the experience of Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre is frequently cited as an example of citizen participation that granted local communities an active voice, directly influencing public investment priorities. Although this practice has faced challenges over time, it has demonstrated the transformative potential of participatory processes when structured to equitably include the various segments of society.

Between conformation and transformation

Democratic participation in urban planning processes in Brazil, as discussed, is often marked by dichotomies that restrict its transformative potential. On the one hand, there is the promise of inclusion and democratization, but on the other, participatory practices often reinforce conformation and maintain structural inequalities. Habermas (1997) argues that ideal democratic participation should involve rational and inclusive deliberation. However, in practice, the absence of fair and equitable conditions results in symbolic participation that merely legitimizes decisions predetermined by elites.

Harvey (2012) and Habermas (1997) emphasize that urban planning, under the capitalist logic, predominantly serves dominant economic interests, limiting the transformative potential of participatory processes. The materiality of urban space reflects these inequalities, where conformation prevails over transformation. Thus, a deeper critical reflection on the real role of citizen participation is necessary, especially regarding its use to challenge rather than reinforce existing power structures.

Overcoming these dichotomies requires structural changes in democratic participation processes. As Santos (2006) argues, it is crucial to develop new models of participatory democracy that are genuinely inclusive and

transformative. These models should focus on addressing the needs of marginalized and underrepresented populations, ensuring that their voices are effectively incorporated and valued in decision-making processes.

To contextualize these proposals, it is essential to revisit examples of both positive and negative initiatives in Brazil and worldwide, contrasting systemic failures with experiences that illustrate the transformative potential of citizen participation. This approach not only helps justify final proposals but also demonstrates how they can be practically and critically implemented.

Proposals to overcome dichotomies

The following proposals aim to address the dichotomies between conformation and transformation in democratic processes, highlighting the need for practices that promote inclusion, equity, and effective citizen participation. In a context marked by socioeconomic inequalities and institutional challenges, these initiatives seek to enhance the democratic structure, ensuring that public decisions reflect the diverse demands of society.

Through approaches such as decentralization, civic education, equity assurance, monitoring and evaluation tools, and the incorporation of conflict and plurality, this set of proposals aims to strengthen participation mechanisms, making them more accessible, transparent, and transformative. Each of these dimensions will be explored based on practical experiences and theoretical reflections, providing a critical and well-founded framework for building a more inclusive and sustainable democracy.

Decentralization and direct participation

The decentralization of decision-making processes is an essential strategy for promoting citizen inclusion and ensuring that different social groups have direct influence over public decisions. A pioneering and emblematic example of this practice is the Participatory Budgeting of Porto Alegre, implemented in 1989 during the administration of the Workers' Party (PT). This innovative model allowed citizens to actively participate in defining priorities for the allocation of public resources, particularly in areas such as infrastructure, health, and education. Regional and thematic assemblies brought together residents, community leaders, and local representatives to discuss and elect priority demands, which were consolidated by a municipal council and integrated into the city's annual budget.

In its early years, Participatory Budgeting was widely recognized as a transformative experience that promoted social justice, redistributed resources to historically marginalized areas, and strengthened transparency in public processes (Abers, 1998; Fedozzi, 1998; Santos, 1998). This model gained international attention and was cited as an example of deliberative and redistributive democracy. However, challenges began to emerge over time. Factors such as reduced financial resources due to economic crises and the interference of local political interests compromised the autonomy of community councils, limiting the model's initial potential (Fedozzi, 2007; Marquetti, Schonerwald da Silva, and Campbell, 2012).

From an international perspective, Participatory Budgeting NYC, launched in 2011, offers a contemporary example of

decentralization linked to social inclusion. The project enabled residents to decide how to invest part of the municipal budget in local projects such as improvements in schools, parks, and public transportation. To ensure equity in participation, innovative strategies were adopted, including translating documents into multiple languages, providing free transportation to meetings, and holding events in widely accessible locations. Additionally, outreach campaigns were targeted at engaging vulnerable communities, such as immigrants and people with low literacy levels, promoting diversity in deliberative processes (Lerner, 2014).

These examples illustrate how decentralization can be an effective tool for democratization, but they also highlight that its success depends on complementary strategies. In Porto Alegre, the initial model was transformative but faced structural challenges that limited its long-term sustainability. In New York, the use of inclusive strategies enhanced the effectiveness and equity of the process. Both cases demonstrate that decentralization is only effective when accompanied by institutional mechanisms that ensure accessibility, transparency, and the implementation of decisions made.

Therefore, decentralization requires more than just the deconcentration of power. It is necessary to implement policies that promote the inclusion of vulnerable communities and protect participatory processes from external influences. Thus, initiatives such as the Participatory Budgeting of Porto Alegre and Participatory Budgeting NYC provide important lessons for building a more equitable and efficient participatory democracy.

Civic education and access to information

The lack of access to information represents a significant barrier to effective citizen participation, especially in contexts of socioeconomic inequality. The Decidim Barcelona platform, created in 2016 by the Barcelona City Council, is an innovative example of how to overcome this limitation by integrating digital citizen participation tools with community engagement strategies (Decidim Barcelona, 2016). This initiative allowed citizens to access detailed information on urban plans, including infrastructure projects, mobility policies, and sustainability strategies, while also directly influencing decisions through public consultations and digital voting. To broaden its reach, the city government carried out outreach campaigns across various media and adopted strategies to include vulnerable sectors, such as translating materials into multiple languages and simplifying the language of technical documents.

However, despite these advances, digital tools face limitations, as they can exclude populations without reliable internet access or with low levels of digital literacy. In Barcelona, this challenge led to the need for complementary initiatives, such as in-person meetings and technology training workshops, to ensure that all voices were heard. This approach highlights the importance of combining technological solutions with in-person efforts to reduce barriers to participation.

In Brazil, social movements such as the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto (MTST, Homeless Workers' Movement) are significant examples of how popular education and community organization can empower

marginalized populations to claim their rights. Founded in 1997, MTST operates in various Brazilian states, focusing on the fight for dignified housing and the occupation of idle urban land (Santos & Goulart, 2016). The movement uses political education strategies, such as community assemblies, courses on social rights, and public mobilizations, to educate and raise awareness among communities about their role in decision-making processes.

Furthermore, MTST combines local actions with institutional advocacy. Movement leaders frequently participate in public hearings and negotiations with municipal and state authorities to push for public policies that benefit occupied communities. This activism demonstrates that popular mobilization, combined with institutional action, is essential to driving structural changes in the right to housing.

The MTST experience shows that overcoming barriers to access to information requires coordinated efforts that combine inclusive technologies with grassroots practices. While digital tools expand access to citizen participation, they must be complemented by local initiatives that include vulnerable populations. In both global and local contexts, it is crucial to adopt an integrated approach that promotes equity in participation, ensuring that all sectors of society have the tools and knowledge necessary to influence decisions that impact their lives.

Equity in democratic participation

Equity in democratic participation requires conditions that enable the effective involvement of all social groups, especially the most vulnerable. In Brazil, the People's Committee for the World Cup and Olympics, created in 2010, played a fundamental role in monitoring the social and urban impacts of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. Composed of social organizations, academics, unions, and directly affected communities, the committee operated in various host cities, including Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Porto Alegre, documenting the consequences of urban interventions, forced evictions, and social exclusions linked to these mega-events (Ancop, 2014; People's Committee for the World Cup and Olympics, 2015).

In Rio de Janeiro, urban evictions were among the most significant impacts of these events. According to the People's Committee for the World Cup and Olympics (2015), approximately 77,000 people were displaced in the city between 2009 and 2015, often under questionable justifications such as environmental risks or urban planning requirements. A striking example was Vila Autódromo, a community near the Olympic Park that faced intense pressure and evictions. With support from universities and human rights organizations, residents developed the Vila Autódromo Popular Plan, proving that it was possible to urbanize the area without displacing its residents. Despite this, municipal authorities prioritized the interests of construction companies and corporate sponsors, ignoring the community's proposed alternatives (ibid.).

The public hearings organized to discuss the evictions and construction projects related to the mega-events were marked by structural limitations. According to the committee's report (2015), these consultations often took place at inconvenient times and in hard-

-to-reach locations, restricting the effective participation of affected communities. This lack of accessibility and transparency reinforced pre-existing inequalities and hindered dialogue between authorities and directly impacted residents.

Beyond national denunciations, the committee brought cases of human rights violations to international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), emphasizing that mega-events intensified socio-spatial inequalities and denied the right to the city to displaced populations (Ancop, 2014). These urban interventions, characterized by the removal of entire communities from highly valued areas, prioritized private economic interests over vulnerable populations.

The actions of the People's Committee for the World Cup and Olympics demonstrate the importance of resistance initiatives and advocacy to confront exclusionary practices. However, structural challenges remain significant. This experience highlights the urgent need to create more inclusive, transparent, and accessible participatory mechanisms from the early stages of planning, especially for projects that directly impact vulnerable communities.

Monitoring and evaluation tools

Transparency and accountability are fundamental to ensuring that participatory processes are not captured by elitist interests. A relevant example is the Budget Participatif de Paris, implemented in 2014 by the Paris City Council. Developed as an initiative of the Department of Citizen Participation, the platform is a digital tool that allows citizens to monitor the implementation of projects chosen through popular voting in real time (Budget Participatif Paris, 2014). These projects include improvements to public spaces, sustainability initiatives, and investments in community infrastructure, funded by up to 5% of the city's annual budget.

In addition to providing detailed reports and constant updates on project progress, the platform fosters engagement by allowing citizens to suggest ideas and actively participate in deliberations. To increase accessibility, the system is integrated with outreach campaigns and in-person neighborhood meetings, expanding the initiative's reach to include populations less familiar with digital tools. This approach combines digital technologies with in-person participation to ensure greater diversity in the deliberative process.

However, it is essential to recognize that transparency alone does not resolve structural inequalities. While the platform has successfully increased trust in democratic processes, the lack of robust mechanisms for reviewing and incorporating the demands of the most vulnerable communities still limits its transformative impact. The Paris experience underscores the importance of combining transparency with inclusive deliberative strategies that ensure the voices of the most affected communities are effectively integrated into decision-making and public policies.

Incorporating conflict and plurality

Mouffe (2000) argues that conflict is essential to democracy, as it exposes structural tensions and encourages transformative debates. Democracy should be a space for productive confrontation, where different perspectives collide, generating inclusive solutions. An example of this approach is the World Social Forums (WSF), initiated in Porto Alegre in 2001, which challenged neoliberalism and proposed alternatives based on social justice and sustainability (World Social Forum, 2001). Bringing together thousands of participants from 117 countries, the WSFs connected social movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community leaders in discussions on issues such as housing, environmental justice, and economic exclusion.

Although innovative, the WSFs faced challenges in including marginalized communities, which often lacked the resources to participate fully. Despite this, the forums demonstrated that conflict, when well-managed, can strengthen democracy by integrating diverse voices and fostering the construction of collective solutions. Incorporating conflict and plurality into participatory processes is essential to transforming democracy into a dynamic and inclusive space capable of addressing the complexities of structural inequalities.

Reflective analysis of the proposals

These examples demonstrate that proposals for reforming participatory processes are not mere theoretical abstractions but concrete responses to problems identified both in Brazil and in international contexts. The creation of community councils, for example, is not an isolated idea but is inspired by decentralized models that have yielded positive results, such as the Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre, implemented in 1989, and Participatory Budgeting NYC, launched in 2011. In Porto Alegre, regional and thematic assemblies gave voice to marginalized communities, promoting the allocation of resources to historically neglected areas, while in New York, strategies such as document translation, free transportation, and meetings in accessible locations enhanced inclusion and diversity in decision-making processes.

Similarly, civic education and access to information are essential components for strengthening democratic participation. Initiatives like Decidim Barcelona, launched in 2016, illustrate how technological tools combined with outreach campaigns can facilitate access to information and enable citizens to influence urban planning directly. However, these examples also highlight the importance of combining digital solutions with

in-person actions to ensure that vulnerable populations, such as those without internet access, are adequately included.

Overcoming the dichotomies that permeate democratic participation processes requires not only institutional reforms but also a strengthened commitment to plurality, social justice, and the redistribution of power. As Gramsci (1999) emphasizes, building a counter-hegemony is essential to challenging dominant narratives and reconfiguring power structures that perpetuate inequalities. Plurality, in this sense, should not only be tolerated but actively encouraged, allowing different voices and perspectives to contribute to fairer and more inclusive decisions.

To make this a reality, a combination of institutional efforts and social mobilization is fundamental. Reforms that include decentralizing power, expanding access to information, and creating deliberative spaces for the confrontation of ideas are essential steps. Only through this articulation will it be possible to transform citizen participation into an effective instrument of social change, ensuring that it moves beyond a symbolic mechanism and becomes a transformative practice that promotes social justice, equity, and true democratization of urban space.

Final considerations

This study reveals the profound complexity and contradictions of democratic participation in Brazilian urban planning. Although legal frameworks such as the 1988 Federal Constitution (Brasil, 1988) and the City Statute (Brasil, 2001) represent significant advancements in the institutionalization of citizen participation, practice reveals a reality marked by exclusion and the manipulation of participatory processes. These mechanisms, often promoted as instruments of inclusion, actually function as tools to legitimize decisions already aligned with the interests of economic and political elites, perpetuating socio-spatial inequalities and fostering disillusionment among vulnerable populations.

The analyzed cases, such as the Porto Maravilha Project (2010) and the Minha Casa Minha Vida Program (2009), illustrate how potentially transformative policies have often been co-opted by real estate speculation and capital accumulation dynamics. This capture not only displaces low-income populations but also reinforces the cycle of social exclusion, shifting the social function of the city in favor of private profit. In this sense, neoliberal urbanism

emerges as a central agent in shaping urban spaces that neglect the demands and rights of the most vulnerable populations.

On the other hand, international and national experiences such as Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre (1989) and Participatory Budgeting NYC (2011) demonstrate that decentralizing decision-making processes and strengthening equity can have significant impacts on the redistribution of power and resources. However, even these practices face critical challenges, such as the risk of political co-optation and the difficulty of ensuring the financial and institutional sustainability of participatory mechanisms. This context highlights the need to build models that not only decentralize power but also ensure accessibility, transparency, and the effective implementation of decisions.

The study also points out that, despite the rhetoric of inclusion, participatory processes often marginalize the most vulnerable populations, revealing the exclusionary nature of formal democracy in its current configuration. As Chantal Mouffe (2000) suggests, incorporating antagonism as an inherent part of democracy may be a path toward transforming participatory spaces into true arenas of dispute and social transformation. This implies recognizing that the plurality of interests and the management of conflict are essential for building fairer and more inclusive cities.

Beyond the proposals for decentralization and civic education, this work emphasizes the importance of strengthening social mobilization and constructing a counter--hegemony, as argued by Antonio Gramsci (1999). Only through the articulation between social movements, urban planning professionals, and public institutions will it be possible to confront hegemonic structures that perpetuate inequalities and consolidate a democratic participation model that effectively redistributes power and promotes social justice.

It is concluded that transforming democratic participation into a real instrument of social change requires not only institutional reforms but also an ethical and political commitment to inclusion, equity, and plurality. Without critically addressing the hegemonic dynamics that shape urban spaces, participatory processes will continue to reinforce existing inequalities, perpetuating the exclusion of vulnerable populations. Only through profound structural changes will it be possible to guarantee the right to the city as a collective right capable of reflecting the interests and aspirations of society as a whole.

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