

Activisms and the city

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The postulate that the city, its space, production and planning are neutral and objective has been contested by several authors. They highlight the political and ideological aspects of the city, and its use as reinforcement to certain dominances. This critical perspective focuses both in the city's role as a maintainer of the capitalist mode of production and class relations, and as a maintainer of other oppressions – such as gender, ethnic and religion – which also are strengthened in the city and by the city.

This article has as its main subject the propositions led by citizens which are alternatives for the hegemonic urban planning and management. With the city of Belo Horizonte as the main context, the goal is to investigate the impact of social movements, activisms, committees, collectives etc. who aim freedom, justice and equality for the cities they live in. These groups will be named as “urban activism *stricto sensu*”¹(free translation), as well as did Marcelo Lopes de Souza in 2006. For them, the struggles are not only for accessing urban resources, but also for putting in practice the “right to the city” in its broad sense: The right to participate and reclaim the decisions and transformations of the city.

Amongst all the urban activisms in Belo Horizonte, the ones addressed by this article are focused in space as a battle tool and also as the subject of material and symbolic disputes. That is because, as emphasized by Lefebvre (2006), since space is dialectically a product and a producer of social relations, it has an important role in social reproduction (Lefebvre, 2006). If space is central, isn't its subversive use possible? Lefebvre himself states in *The Production of Space* that a social transformation is only complete when it reaches spatial and temporal changes

¹ The original term “ativismos urbanos *stricto sensu*” was used by the author in his book *A prisão e a ágora: reflexões em torno da democratização do planejamento e da gestão das cidades*, 2006, p.280.

(Lefebvre, 2006). That means space and time produced by it do not reflect or reinforce those already fought dominances. Hence, space as a means of production, control and domination, carries the transformation potential which makes its use essential by those who aim alternative proposals of cities (Lefebvre, 2006).

Twenty four groups with different approaches and tactics were chosen, such as urban gardens, movements for the improvement of public transportation, squatters, and environmental movements. In order to understand the effects of these activisms on the hegemonic city it is hypothetically assumed that the only way is to analyze their actions all together. It is not presumed, indeed, that these groups share the same precepts, goals or means of action. However, each of them fights against different forms of dominance that are aspects from the same hegemonic city. The purpose is, therefore, to understand in which way those actions are complementary or not.

The connections between these activisms are aspects that enhance this complementarity. Castells (2013) highlights these networks as fundamental features of the new forms of collective actions. They become important due to the social fragmentation which is a result of the emergency of new struggles and their cultural emphasis. The networks` role is to protect the social movements from their opponents, since they amplify the number of actors reached by the information about struggles and bring greater visibility and stronger public impact in key moments of mobilization.

However, more than understanding the relations established between those groups, it is interesting to comprehend whether their means of action and accomplishments can complement each other or end up creating obstacles to other existing activisms.

Through the analysis of different groups` actions related to public transportation issues in Belo Horizonte it is possible, for instance, to notice these sorts of influence. Part of the groups have been engaged to institutional acting, occupying Councils and channels of participation, gathering signatures for a popular initiative Bill² which proposes free public transportation services. Others have been performing a more direct struggle by means of protesting and occupying public spaces. Regardless of

² The Brazilian Constitution allows citizens to present a Bill since they gather 5% of the municipality`s electorate signatures.

their different means of action, these activisms have been complementary, leading, for example, to the suspension of the bus fare increase.

Otherwise, that does not occur in social housing movements` context in Belo Horizonte. These groups are clearly polarized between those who are involved with institutional acting and those who occupy vacant properties, as squatters. The ones who act from an institutional approach do not always agree with squatting as a legitimate fight, sometimes supporting truculent actions from the State against these others groups.

In order to clarify the diversity of interferences in the context of urban activisms in Belo Horizonte, several interviews with members of the addressed groups were conducted, as a central source of information. Other important sources will be the groups` own inventories and information material produced by themselves, their web pages, as well as academic productions about the theme.

The main concern behind this research is therefore to answer the following question: to what extend the means of activisms have been able to counteract the hegemonic urban planning and management and reverse – or at least turn difficult – its use as a tool of reproduction of dominances? Seeking, with this approach, to contribute with the current discussion on the subject, which is still very incipient, about the city produced beyond and despite the State`s actuation, and yet to contribute to the self-evaluation of the urban activisms, given that it could reveals points of convergence and divergence between different struggles in the city.

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