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possibilidades  
contra-hegemônicas:  
reinventar a política é possível?  
counter-hegemonic possibilities: is  
it possible to reinvent  
politics?  
helena fonseca,  
raquel gonçalves

PT | EN

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#### Abstract:

The present work is connected to the debates about experiences of new ways of organization, mobilization, claim, and reinvention of politics. They arise at a time when formal democratic practices are losing their legitimacy, becoming discredited and emptied, especially in the spaces of popular participation. Starting from a critical discussion about the concepts of democracy, citizenship and popular participation, and understanding fissures and insurgencies as alternatives to the heteronomous model of participation, we search to discuss possible connections between direct and institutionalized actions. We present, as an example, a brief analysis of an experience of collective and collaborative construction of a so called open mandate. Thus, the ideas of participation and collaboration, directly connected with possibilities of joint work, are brought to the center of the discussion that we intend to carry out. The main objective of this ongoing research is to investigate possibilities of expanding popular participation, and the gains brought by a collective construction of politics, mostly related to the right to the city and its deployment in the use, planning and management of urban space in the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte, as well as the possibility of collective occupation of institutional spaces.

**Keywords:** Citizen mandates, Popular participation, Democracy, Citizenship, Insurgencies

## 1 Introduction

This work is connected to the debates about experiences of new ways of organization, mobilization, claim, and reinvention of politics. They arise at a time when formal democratic practices are losing legitimacy, becoming discredited and emptied, especially in spaces of popular participation. Some authors (Aalbers, 2013; Dardot and Laval, 2016; Restrepo, 2012; Santos, 2002) defend the idea that 21st century's representative democracy is weakened by the ongoing neoliberalism process, which reorders the socio-political-spatial reality, ultimately deepening inequalities in society.

According to Morado Nascimento and Freitas (2017, p.13, our translation), the neoliberal process is "particularized by globalized financial capital, the new Market-State class of power, the individualization of social relations, and the polarization between rich and poor", making aspects of daily life to be governed by economy, while guiding the behaviors, choices and practices of individuals (Dardot and Laval, 2016). The minimum State, which is remiss in its responsibility to guarantee social rights and to regulate the capital, gives place to the market sovereign action (Santos, 1994), and a strong State in the role of facilitator of the financial sector's profitability. The State becomes thus efficient in promoting social division, by implementing policies that insure more resources for rich than poor people (Aalbers, 2013).

Therefore, the richness accumulation is accomplished in the production of space and becomes an indispensable condition in the practice of the State as the producer of a territory with dominant and dominated residents (Carlos, 2015). From this perspective, the right to the city, which is defended by Harvey (2014) as a collective right and political ideal that advocates the surplus of urbanization to be democratically distributed, would lie nowadays in the hands of a small political, economic elite, which gathers conditions to shape the city according to its own preferences.

We emphasize that, within the social practices domain, the invitation by the State to institutionalized, consensual popular participation in the urban management is no longer enough, since popular participation is generally conducted, in a scenario of neoliberalism growth, as a staging in which real decisions have already been made (Carlos, 2014).

Nevertheless, new ways of doing politics and collective mandates go together with the search for democratization of decision-making processes with broad participation of people, for power decentralization and representativeness while occupying institutional spaces.

The collective, open and popular mandate proposed by city councilors Áurea Carolina and Cida Falabella, who were elected in 2016 in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, was built following the "Muitas pela Cidade que Queremos" movement<sup>1</sup>. The mandate proposes a democratic experimentation based on shared management, diversity of members in the representativeness, search for horizontality, depersonification<sup>2</sup> of political figure, direct participation, and collective occupation of institutions. In this way, it can be considered a fissure in the dominant system, an insurgency and a movement of resistance, with the proposal of participatory public policies that go against the ongoing neoliberal process.

Our study is a part of a research in progress. Its main objective is to investigate the possibilities of expanding popular participation and the gains brought by a collective construction of policies related, above all, to the right to the city and its deployment in the use, planning and management of Belo Horizonte urban space. It also focuses the possibility of collective occupation of institutional spaces.

Therefore, we present, as an example, a brief analysis about the experience of collective and collaborative construction of a so called open mandate. We seek to bring to the center of the discussion possibilities of connecting the ideas of participation and collaboration beyond an institutionally voluntary participation. Such experience points towards an expanded participation that establishes an important dialogue with options of joint work or collaborative forms of action.

Partial data collected so far have been obtained through participating observation, while attending the biweekly meeting of the "Muitas" from March 2017 on, and also in promotional material published by the aforementioned councilors at the Belo Horizonte City Hall.

The article is structured as follows: the first part introduces the context of popular participation from 1988 on, emphasizing its importance for citizenship construction, and also as a political strategy for democracy advancement. The second part discusses the concepts of fissures and insurgencies as alternatives to rethink issues posed by the neoliberal city. The third and fourth parts of the text connecting the theoretical framework with the assumption that there is a gap between institutional politics and the direct action of social

movements, arguing that occupying power spaces by exploring counter-hegemonic possibilities can broaden the experimentation of democracy through new practices.

## **2 About democracy, citizenship and popular participation**

According to Teixeira (2013, p.6, our translation), the participatory conceptions in the 1970s "confirmed the importance of using participatory space as a form of society organization and as a form of education for citizenship". Since 1988, with the enactment of the Brazilian Federal Constitution, and with the approval of the City Statute in 2001, which regulated and defined instruments to legitimize civil society participation in the city management, a new legal framework has been institutionally improved with reference to the right to the city, and about the juridical strengthening of the notion of the social functions of urban property, although the concept and the disputes around this issue remain unclear.

The conditions established by the Federal Government present the idealized forms of participation, such as councils, public enquiries, assemblies and conferences, to legitimize the process of elaboration, approval and implementation of an urban planning. However, these instruments, in addition to being mainly related to a quantitative criteria, do not consider the social inequality and different political powers that each social class has in the context of public policies, making the participatory processes happen only to accomplish formal goals. Thus, after almost three decades of experimentation of institutional participation in urban planning, there have been few advances, which have not reached a significant transformation in the quality of democracy or in the framework of social exclusion.

The incorporation of social conflicts and contradictions in the participatory spaces would allow the construction of a popular participation that considers different social interests and, thus, would allow the advance of democratic debates, going beyond the discursive consensus on the virtues of a mediated and controlled participation for the elaboration of urban plans, which is currently the case.

Nevertheless, the neoliberalism as a process of generalized commercialization of social relations, creates a universe of competition and does not give rise to contradictions, weakening democracy and leading to a process of de-democratization, "which consists in emptying democracy from its substance without formally extinguishing it"<sup>3</sup> (Dardot and Laval, 2016, p.20, our translation).

It is worth to mention that a democratic construction is directly related to citizenship as a political strategy, covering interests that can be considered collective and transformed into rights.

However, in the current neoliberalism, a political project based on the expansion of citizenship and participation suffers an inflection characterized by institutional insertion of social movements and by the dialogue between neoliberal projects and participatory projects in new instances of participation (Dagnino, 2004). The redefinition of citizenship, from a neoliberal approach, places the market as the only possible solution for development, reducing the space of politics and democracy and deepening the exclusion of social actors from participatory spaces. Hence, there is a re-signification of participation, which now dispenses the public debate and does not reflect the effective sharing of power between State and civil society.

Thereby, participatory methodologies that do not consider citizenship construction do not contribute to change decision-making processes in politics. Moreover, proliferating discussion instances does not necessarily mean an improvement in democratic constructions (Gonçalves, 2008). Examining the quality and effectiveness of these spaces in providing political and social transformation becomes necessary, considering that urban spaces, besides being socially built are also an instance of economic and ideological domination (Maricato, 2009). At the same time, because they are a social creation, these spaces hold an enormous emancipatory potential.

## **3 About fissures and insurgencies**

The concepts of fissures and insurgencies are related to ruptures and alternatives that rethink the challenges of a contemporary neoliberal city toward more humane future and organization. They mean, therefore, to find breaches in the institutional system that enable an expansion of the democratic experience.

Holloway (2013) considers fissures as an experience that starts from a known reality and proposes another practice to the capitalist system, seeking autonomy and self-organization beyond the State. In this sense, these fissures represent a denial of pre-established conditions and, thus, must be supported by other actions, and may represent a way of acting in the city in the search for a structural transformation of processes.

The idea of an Enterprise-State is a dominant feature in the neoliberal process and in the financialization of the city. Its complete disruption through revolution is a distant path. Therefore, considering fissures as an alternative practice within the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, opposing individualist values and prioritizing the processes instead of immediate results (Morado Nascimento, 2016), creates opportunities to face the current domination logics and construct "another policy", in which subjects are actors and not objects (Dussel, 2014).

According to Miraftab (2016), insurgent planning practices arise through the recognition of citizenly practices that validate direct and collective actions of citizens and consider participatory democracy rather than representative democracy.

Developing radical politics, which directly confronts and challenges the current capitalist development and the neoliberal postmodernism, is fundamental, pursuing a citizen control in a local power dimension that enables: transparency, re-appropriation of policies for the community, democratization of decision-making processes (Soja, 2000) and the advance of direct citizen participation.

Insurgent planning, thus, defies the rules of the Liberal Democratic State and suggests the design of a new consciousness that examines these rules in order to induce a rupture and create something new that foresees the future as a field of fight for justice, which contests hegemonic assumptions.

#### **4 About counter-hegemonic possibilities and practices**

Based on the previous considerations, some issues become intriguing, such as: how to find breaches within the current legal and political system to expand democratic experiences? Is it possible to create, in practice, fissures within the institutional system for an expansion of democracy?

Considering this situation, we initially observed the emergence of new actors and new forms of collective actions in Belo Horizonte<sup>4</sup>, especially after the insurgencies in 2013, which can be related to the emptying of institutionalized participation and the strengthening of neoliberal orientation in the way of treating urban issues (Brasil, et al., 2017).

In sequence, we tried to specifically focus on the movement called "Muitas pela Cidade que Queremos" ("Many for the City we Wish"), which emerged in March 2015 after a meeting held on a Saturday afternoon in the Municipal Park of Belo Horizonte that brought together activists and social movements in the city. From this, we aimed at understanding this movement and some of its consequences, as follows.

"Muitas pela Cidade que Queremos" arose from the desire to discuss municipal politics, believing in the possibility of envisioning other dynamics for political actions and public participation, heading to an insurgent citizenship<sup>5</sup>, an action against hegemonic processes.

The practical thinking and discussions of "Muitas" are based on controversy and on the battle for a collective action outside institutional channels, seeking horizontality, through self-thinking and continuous inquiring, in order not to reproduce the dominant praxis, which is based on heteronomous processes. This search for active participation, direct democracy and respect for all those involved in the movement is guided by the words: comradeship, dignity, love, solidarity, fraternity, friendship and ethics.

The collective perception that there was an abyss between institutional politics and the politics of the streets and of the social movements, led to the discussion that the citizens should not accept to be dependent once again on candidacies imposed by elite parties disconnected from the city reality (Andrés, 2017).

The conception of "Muitas" was inspired in the Spanish experiences of *Ahora Madrid* and *Barcelona en Comú*, which believe in municipalism as a "way of bringing politics closer to people, to street, of doing proximity politics [...] in which everyone can equally participate" (Taveira, 2017, p.11, our translation). Another inspiration for the candidacy of "Muitas" to the legislature in Belo Horizonte for 2016 elections was the "Wikipolitica" movement in Mexico, which advocated the recovery of politics through popular participation with the theme "ocupemos la ciudad, habitemos la política"<sup>6</sup>, which independently elected (after a political reform in 2014 that approved independent candidacies) a district deputy for the province of Jalisco in Guadalajara.

According to Andrés (2017), in a two-year period (2015-2016), various moments happened in five work phases that guided "Muitas" from a meeting on a Saturday afternoon to the electoral victory. These phases are shown in figure 1.

Summary of the collective construction of "Muitas" from 2015 to 2016	
<b>First Phase</b> (from March to September 2015)	Time to build trust between groups and weave the network. This period was marked by 6 months of open meetings and popular cultural spaces, in which the decision to launch the candidacies was growing little by little.
<b>Second Phase</b> (from September to December 2015)	Time to systematize and organize the participation, to broaden the debate and to generate the synthesis that culminated in the first public manifesto that indicated the path of the movement, which allowed to define the field of action and also to create a base that was used as a reference for politic extension and identification.
<b>Third Phase</b> (from January to May 2016)	Construction of confluence and party affiliation, because under Brazilian law it is not possible to launch independent candidacies. This was considered the most difficult phase due to the difficulty of convincing people to join political parties, since these are among the institutions in which Brazilians have less confidence. After debates and articulation with the existing parties, the PSOL - Socialism and Freedom Party, was chosen for the filiation of the candidacies (MUITAS, 2017).
<b>Fourth Phase</b> (from June to September 2016)	Time to establish common pacts, commitment of applications and campaign methods. The banner raised by "Muitas" that "other politics are possible" defended four main axes of action for popular and citizen applications: radicalization of democracy, megalphoneization of social struggles, representation of political minorities and fight against privileges.
<b>Fifth Phase</b> (from September to October 2016)	Collective electoral campaign, which was collaborative, with few resources, through occupation of streets and voluntary work methods.

**Fig. 1:** Summary of the collective construction the actions of "Muitas" from 2015 to 2016. Source: Fonseca, Gonçalves, 2017.

The candidacy affiliations of "Muitas" to PSOL (a political party, whose acronym stands for "Socialism and Freedom Party") was distributed in the territory of Belo Horizonte city, encompassing its nine regions, which created a wide movement with the presence of the peripheries. From the 60 affiliations, 12 candidacies were for the legislative position, among activists, ordinary people who had never been candidates and representatives of social movements. This group was mostly formed by women, by the first transsexual candidate and by the first indigenous candidate in Belo Horizonte. The launching of the collective campaign used the slogan: "If you have voted in one, you've voted in all", which is unusual in Brazil, since they ran for the same position.

The principles of the candidacies that were built in open meetings were: collective construction of proposals and programs carried out through debates and progressive consensus; expansion of the participation of the city in the decisions of the parties, so that they give up being exclusive protagonists, inaugurating of a process of previews; open and shared mandates, with periodic meetings and accountability in public spaces and by electronic means; candidacies that bring to stage the social fighters, the entities that express diversity of gender, race, sexual orientation and territories, seeking parity; are not compromised with private interests and are critical to the millionaire campaign system in Brazil, candidacies that do not use corporate financing and are committed with the reduction of the wages of the elected representatives and with the end of privileges, among others.

The financial resources for the campaign came from individual donations and an auction of artworks donated by more than 60 artists. A total of R\$ 107.244,48 was collected, which resulted in an average of R\$ 8.928,70 per candidacy, a very low value when compared to the onerous campaigns of traditional politicians in Brazil.

On the Election Day, the result was a surprising, expressive and decentralized vote in all regions of the city. The 12 candidates of "Muitas" won 35.615 votes and PSOL-PCB coalition obtained 46.000 votes, being the 8th most voted party, five times more than in the last election. Áurea Carolina and Cida Falabella were elected, and Áurea was elected as the city's most voted councilor, becoming the woman with the highest number of votes in the history of Belo Horizonte.

Throughout 2017 and in the beginning of 2018, dozens of meetings and several "Programmatic Explosions" were held - a series of public debates with guests talking about various topics: urban mobility, democracy, municipal confluences, creative tactics, culture and peripheries, decent housing, feminism and representativeness - all over the city.

## **5 About "Gabinetona": a collective occupation of political power spaces at the Belo Horizonte City Hall**

"Gabinetona" was the name given by Áurea Carolina, Cida Falabella and their team to the physical and political space occupied by them in the City Hall of Belo Horizonte. "Gabinetona" began to be built and occupied on January 1, 2017. The idea of uniting two offices of the councilors and creating a shared work space, gave rise to a territory capable of hosting a single team working in partnership with the citizens, in a space without partitions, which defends and practices a horizontal and joint work. In addition, a female noun was used because the mandate is avowedly feminist and advocates women valorization in urban struggles.

At Gabinetona, in addition to the city councilors who directly acted in movements as hip hop, theater and culture, other members directly participated in social movements, such as the Popular Brigades, "Tarifa Zero"<sup>7</sup>, MLB<sup>8</sup>, the youth movement, indigenous cause and LGBTQIA+<sup>9</sup>, demonstrating that the confluence between direct action and institutional spaces is possible and necessary for the construction of a direct dialogue with society.

The preparation for a new way of institutional occupation was made through immersions and workshops, in 2016, to share expectations, celebrate victories, report on campaigns and discuss electoral processes and the team composition process. The principles of collective mandates were consolidated, as well as the idea of "coverança"<sup>10</sup>, with the presence and active participation of Bella Gonçalves, the substitute of Cida Falabella, the third most voted councilwoman in the collective campaign, militant of the Popular Brigades and activist of the right to the city and the struggle for housing (verbal information)<sup>11</sup>.

Thus, Gabinetona involves 41 people, of whom 25 are women, 24 are black people, one is an indigenous, 15 are LGBTQIA+ and 4 are residents of an urban occupation<sup>12</sup>, reinforcing the search for the city's struggle bodies in the mandate and also consolidating the formation of the team by the confluence of organizations directly involved in the electoral process: groups and movements, activists and the Socialist Front of BH, which contains the Socialist and Freedom Party (PSOL) the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), the Popular Brigades and Popular Unity for Socialism (verbal information)<sup>13</sup>. The other eight vacancies were filled through a public call to hold the following positions: three vacancies for communication, two vacancies for citizenship agents/drivers, two vacancies for the juridical position and a vacancy for the legislative theater.

A total of 4,113 applications were received and the process counted with collaborators and external collaborators who, together with the team, analyzed the subscriptions considering the following criteria: the "curriculum of struggles"<sup>14</sup>, professional experience and representativeness, guaranteeing gender and ethnic / racial parity (verbal information)<sup>15</sup>.

The construction of "The city council we wish", proposed by the team, was structured around three main lines of action that corresponded to the main guidelines of the city's campaign: 1 - Human rights, aiming at confronting black population genocide, empowering women and improving LGBT citizenship; 2 - Culture, acting in culture throughout the city and treating culture as an education process; and 3 - Right to the city, as an integral dimension of human rights in the territory, acting in housing issues and zero eviction, human rights at work and in the fight for the sanitization of public spaces, in confrontation with the "Enterprise-City". The right to the city should be understood herein as a revolutionary concept of citizenship, an active, individual and collective right, to make the city different, understanding that race and gender are also related to the uncut experience of the space.

Regarding the city experimentation and direct participation in the construction of the mandate, four projects are highlighted here: Popular Law Laboratories - "LabPops"<sup>16</sup>, which "are thematic summons convened by the mandate to discuss the incidence of Law Projects" ; the Strengthening Groups - "GêFortes"<sup>17</sup>, which are "thematic reference groups, mandated to discuss urgent issues or reflect on parliamentary actions"; the Megaphonic Zones (political-cultural meetings to broaden and give visibility to social struggles) and Confluence Zones (cross-cutting dialogues to strengthen popular resistance). These projects aim at contributing to "a parliamentary performance that is porous to social struggles in the city, stimulating resistance in territories and creating a network of communication, political articulation and consistent social mobilization" (verbal information, our translation)<sup>18</sup>.

Therefore, building ruptures and reviewing paradigms through insurgent and imaginative practices, that produce new directions in opposition to the neoliberal model of urban space production and the conduct of politics, is a real challenge.

Thus, the importance of a dialectical movement among direct action manifestations (invented spaces) and institutional struggle (invited spaces) towards the occupation of the political space is noteworthy (Mirafab, 2016). The attempt to implement an exercise of democratic radicalization with all its limitations leads to the

valorization of the process of struggle and to the abandonment of the idea that real changes only happen after final results, considering that every fight constitutes a fissure and can therefore represent a change in the relations of power (Holloway, 2013).

## **6 Conclusions: finalizing or initializing new reflections**

Recovering democracy and at the same time transforming it, considering that the social struggle of the streets is not antagonistic to the social struggle in institutionalism, means assuming that a reencounter with politics is necessary.

Therefore, despite the importance of institutions, it is understood that the creation of institutionalized participatory channels is insufficient. The space of politics as a place where it is possible to contest requires institutions. But do not just create them! Direct actions and social struggles within the institutional framework can be complementary and citizenship construction must be understood as a daily and constant struggle. In the streets and in institutions! In this sense, the idea of citizenship as a form of conflict is reaffirmed. "The right only happens when there is conflict" (Oliveira, 2000, p.10, our translation).

It is important to mention that daily efforts must be directed towards the understanding of the right to the city closely related to the idea of citizenship, considering that the right to the city implies nothing less than a revolutionary concept of citizenship (Lefebvre, 2014).

If there is a discredited institutional discourse and an institutional vacuum that opposes urban struggles, especially about the right to the city, there are, on the other hand, possibilities to expand democratic experimentalism through new practices that cause direct actions to penetrate in formal and institutionalized environments. These practices indicate a path that combines participation, collaboration and solidarity in the place of individualism and competitiveness. It is thus established that the format of social participation can be recreated and reinvented from innovative experiences that consider the emancipatory power of what is socially produced.

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**1** Movement formed in 2015 by groups of activists, social, festive and environmental movements of the city and by people who believe in the possibility of creating other dynamics, routines and expedients for political action.

**2** The mandate association to a community and not to a single public figure, even if the Brazilian law requires a legal representative.

**3** Concept of Wendy Brown (2006), which represents the loss of normativity of liberal democracy through the process of deactivating the foundations of equality, universality, secularism, political autonomy, citizenship and civil liberties.



**4** Movements in defense of the urban environment (Fica Ficus, SOS Mangabeiras Park, housing movements and popular brigades) and other movements for the right to the city (Praia da Estação, Salve Santa Tereza, Tarifa Zero BH, Viaduto Santa Tereza Ocupado).

**5** It is a new urban citizenship, defined by a process characterized as counter-politics, in which there is no imposition of top-down decisions (Holston, 2013).

**6** "Let's occupy the city, let's inhabit politics".

**7** Movement of struggle for transportation as a social right.

**8** Movement of struggle in the Neighborhoods, Villages and Favelas.

**9** Acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex, queers (people who do not follow a pattern of heterosexuality or gender binarism), asexuals and more.

**10** Joint and shared action among city council members.

**11** Information taken from the accountability event of the seven-month collective mandate that occurred on 09/23/2017 at The Municipal Park of Belo Horizonte.

**12** The sum does not correspond to the total value because a person can have more than one representation. For example: a black female resident from an urban settlement or an LGBTQIA+ black female or an LGBTQIA+ white male.

**13** Information taken from the accountability event of the seven-month collective mandate that occurred on 09/23/2017 at The Municipal Park of Belo Horizonte.

**14** People who have already participated in social movements or activism.

**15** Information taken from the accountability event of the seven-month collective mandate that occurred on 09/23/2017 at The Municipal Park of Belo Horizonte.

**16** Some channels have already been triggered on an experimental basis, such as homeless, Indigenous Cause, Traditional Peoples and Communities, Street Workers, LGBTIQ, Health, Education and Mobility.

**17** Some of the experiments carried out included the collective analysis of 1,400 projects of the previous legislature, amendments to Women's Statute, overthrow of the subway veto with the objective of expanding its operation until midnight, incidence on urban graphics projects, discussion on the cultural agenda and the promotion of racial equality in the Administrative Reform of the City Hall, focus on urban policy projects and formation of thematic groups to discuss about the Law of Budgetary Guidelines of 2018.

**18** Information taken from the accountability event of the seven-month collective mandate that occurred on 09/23/2017 at The Municipal Park of Belo Horizonte.