

V!RUS

revista do nomads.usp
nomads.usp journal
ISSN 2175-974X
CC BY-NC

a cidade e os outros
the city and the others
SEM1 2013

SNAPSHOTS OF A POLITICAL SPACE: occupying the city

SONIA FLEURY

Sonia Fleury is a Doctor in Political Sciences, Master of Sciences in Sociology and has graduated in Psychology. Her recent research interests address the issue of citizenship and discrimination as criteria for public policies analysis. Her production was published in several languages and countries. She is Professor at the Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration (EBAPE) of the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV), whose Program for the Studies of the Public Sphere she coordinates.

How to quote this text: FLEURY, S., 2013. SNAPSHOTS OF A POLITICAL SPACE: OCCUPYING THE CITY. V!RUS, ENTREVISTA São Carlos, n. 9 [online]. Edition and Translation from Portuguese by VELOSO, P.L.A., TRAMONTANO, M., Available at: <http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/_virus09/secs/interview/virus_09_interview_1_en.pdf>. [Accessed: dd mm yyyy].

We talked with Sonia Fleury in the days in which thousands of people across Brazil took to the streets in demonstrations that were born in the internet social networks and overflowed into the concrete space of cities. Suddenly and unequivocally, public space merged with the virtual space of online communication reaffirming themselves as political space, endowed with a new sense of urbanity maybe. In her studies, Ms. Fleury sees the city from the point of view of its citizens, through the lens of citizenship and public policy. A crucial look at this moment in our country.

V!RUS9: Sonia, the theme of the current issue of V!RUS journal is The City and the Others, aiming at discussing and juxtaposing how different disciplinary areas and groups deal with the city. From the point of view of

your academic background, in which ways is the city a field or an object of study?

Sonia Fleury: I approached the subject of the city recently. I have always worked on the issue of citizenship, but as you know, citizenship is attached to the national level - it is bill of rights of the nation-state. In fact, I have been trying more and more to see the city as a place of citizens, ie, to think of rights in a local territory. In the welfare state, they are held in a particular geographic area, or they are not realized. So I started studying this particular phenomenon of the so-called pacification, the policy of appeasement in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, to see how their effective is this public policy. And also, from a social point of view, how it affects the citizens' sociability in that territory in order to build or not build bonds of citizenship and respect for their rights.

V!9: May we speak a little about the relationship between the virtual world and the city's concrete world? What relations do you see between the city and its many layers of representation, including the exercise of citizenship, and their representations in the virtual world, specifically in the internet?

SF: I think that Internet creates the possibility of fast connections with huge multiplier effect, which is even not limited to the city at all. It is a connection in which you see local, regional, national and global phenomena at the same time, because these networks do not have a localized configuration. People resituate themselves in that territory, they speak from them and through these layers. So I do not see much connection between the internet and the city. But I see that it connects people and actors in many levels creating the possibility of social action. Formerly, this social action had very specific channels, such as the party, the interest groups and so on. Now it takes a more generic form in various geographical, spatial and temporal contexts, with the possibility of a very fast connection involving thousands of actors at once. This really transcends tribes, spaces, geographical time, the territory and the sequence. For example, in my work in slums I see that a large part of the leaders, at least the young ones, are connected through Facebook, and they thus communicate with the slum and the non-slum, they are not restricted to one of them, on the contrary, they are globalized.

V!9: Now speaking about the recent street demonstrations, they occurred in geographically referenced places but were also organized via social networking. Do you perceive a kind of surprise from the various involved actors at the existence of another instance of city in the virtual space?

SF: It has been given great importance to the fact that people have connected through social networks, but I personally think that internet connection enables a will, and does not create a will. The will comes from the desire, the desire of individuals and groups. It comes from

dissatisfactions, wills and ruptures that have been made viable... It is clear that this medium is not neutral, because it multiplies, because it is visual, it puts images and sounds on Youtube, all at the same time. It has a very different dimension, for example, from the connection forms of traditional political action, which was the party, the meeting in which you work only rationally, where the issues of feeling, emotion, color, and the visual ego do not appear so much. It is clear that this medium is not neutral, it brings a number of inherent components. However, what is important in these demonstrations is the manifestation itself of the desire. What is the desire that binds such different things? It is not the internet connection, but the desire for a better democracy, because it is the quality of democracy that is at stake.

I read, for example, an interesting comment on a person's poster in which it was written "I want the two-prong outlet back." The commentator took this as a demonstration that the demands of the protesters were extremely individualized. I think it is nonsense, because when someone says "I want the two-prong outlet back", he or she is questioning who made that decision, how was taken the decision to change our everyday life, how much money was involved, who won with it, because the whole society paid the great cost of having to buy adaptors, to change outlets... So, this is not an individual demand, but a demand that says the following: in public policies, managers do not render accounts and it affects my life and the routine of thousands. This demand was so legitimate and collective as any others that were being presented there. They are written in individual posters because this is the way people express themselves. But they are collectivized because they all have a common background, which is the relationship with the public policy decision making: how decisions are made, why is no rendering of accounts, how are priorities established, whether or not there is corruption in this, why the population does not participate in the decision making, and only suffers from its effects. All of that was in common. I think this example of the electrical outlet is emblematic because it seems it has nothing to do, but it is all about that.

V!9: Indeed, on the one hand there is a convergence, since all protesters want, in principle, to revisit the democratic dimension of the direction of the nation. But on the other hand, in São Paulo, for example, we have seen conflicts - even physical ones - in street demonstrations between different ideologies and political positions. There are right-wing extremists, the left-wing demonstrators, the staff of the Free Pass, the nonpartisan, the religious people and we often wonder if everyone there really agrees with the claims that are being made. These conflicts were also brought from online networks to the streets; they also exist in online networks. How do you analyze it?

SF: I believe that in the case of certain groups, such as Nazi or whatever, if they do not share the ethical and moral principles that lead to democracy, their participation in the democratic struggle has to be inhibited. Now, even though you may not believe in them such as political parties, social movements and so on, not accepting them is a form of non-acceptance of the basic principle of democracy, which is pluralism. This exclusion is bad for democracy and certainly the maturation of people and the mass movement itself will lead to greater acceptance of other participants.

I think there was a moment when people did not want anyone, no television, no group, no party who would take it as a property. Which is fair, because those instances were not the ones that mobilized the protests. Now, to prohibit the expression of institutions and democratic agglutinating instances, this is not good for democracy.

V!9: From our point of view, that is, from the standpoint of academic researchers, and after seeing in these manifestations certain changes in the forms of communication, the emergence of other ways of relating with each other and with the streets, these events would bring us the need to consider the city otherwise? Does this understanding somehow alter our view of the city? In other words, is the city now another, as an object of study?

SF: In my opinion, a big issue was the fact that all this discussion about how to integrate the city, thinking policies that seeks the integration of those who are excluded from citizenship and the city, happened in reverse. It happened in that way because, within the city, the police began to act with the middle class the same way it acts in slums and suburbs every day, with pepper spray, guns, bullets, beating and all. Then, strangely, the city became united that moment because different social groups felt the same weight of oppression. That moment was of great reconciliation in the city.

But, I'm not sure if this generates cohesion in a city that is not cohesive, but very fragmented. Although the same demonstrations that I saw in the slums, with staff yelling "shoot!, shoot!, shoot!" the police violence and aggression about people and their bodies came to be used generically, put on Youtube, posted on the Internet. These forms are very typical of those who are under the yoke of the police in the slums. So I think there was actually a moment of cohesion and the construction of a common imaginary: "we are all equal at the moment." That was a little the idea of how is to be excluded, and suddenly everyone felt somehow excluded and vulnerable to oppression. Then each one goes to his house, to his way of life, and the life of each is different from the lives of others.

This connection that occurred at that time, I do not know what social effect it will produce. But the fact that Rocinha and Vidigal were down to Leblon for the first time in a demonstration, is significant. They had come down sometimes, but only there on the edge of the slum, and it was always related to the dealers. The fact that they went down collectively to Rio de Janeiro's richest, trendy area is something very significant, an appropriation of public space that was once totally denied to this population. They met there with other people, from the middle class, who were also camped there, anyway.

I think this idea of something more cohesive begins to appear, and it gives fuel to various forms of organization. For example, today I received a schedule of demonstrations that will take place this weekend: a list of nearly two pages, with organizations that I have not seen for a long, long time. Previously, when there was no internet, we knew just about where our own tribe would meet. Now you receive information about the various tribes. This is new.

V!9: Do you think this kind of transformation would bring new data, in general, for the many disciplines who deal directly with the city as their object to consider that it has changed, or is it too early?

SF: I think that many things have changed. People started to think of claims that are not their own, because they are next to a person who is speaking of transportation, and another one who is speaking of health. One is telling his or her mother died of cancer because she was not received in the SUS, the other one has a demand against the homophobic Feliciano – but we are all together. This ethics of alterity is a form of encounter with the Other, so important to urban life, and it really expressed in street demonstrations. At the same time, the relationship of tension with the authoritarian and at times oppressive public power, who rarely hears demands, was also expressed.

V!9: A last question: does the future look promising for you?

SF: It depends on when it starts and when it ends (laughs). I think the experience we lived recently shows how it can be promising that society imposes on private interests, including the government's one. Just look at the decisions that were made: fares of public transport decreased and others demands were now considered. Things did not work in the Parliament, all progressive projects stood there for years. A senator from the PT- Workers' Party - said it looked like he died and woke up in heaven, because everything that did not work, suddenly started working. This is very promising.

But, is it necessary that the society be on the street all day long so that our institutions work? Or will we manage to institutionalize a way in which the rulers are accountable, they have to say "look, I'll do the bidding that way", "prices will rise for this reason" or "they will not rise", and will listen to the demands of the population? It is necessary that these achievements of future also indicate institutionalization, routinization. No one can live like mass all the time, even the mass studies show that. I mean, the mass is the idea that you are dissolved in the whole. But this idea is exactly the reason why mass cannot last a lifetime, because each is an individual, each has his or her commitments, has to work, to eat, to see family. We cannot stay in the square all the time to build democracy, to make the tram ride. It is necessary to find channels that somehow institutionalize this more intimate relationship between society and government.