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DIREITO À CIDADE E HEGEMONIA: CAMINHOS PARA UMA PRÁXIS URBANA THE RIGHT TO THE CITY AND HEGEMONY: PATHWAYS TO AN URBAN PRAXIS

LIANA DE VIVEIROS E OLIVEIRA

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Liana Silvia de Viveiros e Oliveira is an Architect and Urbanist and Ph.D. in Architecture and Urbanism. She is a professor in the Architecture and Urbanism course and a collaborator in the Postgraduate Program in Territorial Planning and Social Development, both at the Catholic University of Salvador, Bahia. She coordinates the DCidade research group, where she conducts research on disputes over the right to the city, urban conflicts and public spaces. piuviveiros@gmail.com

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Abstract

A transformative perspective of the urban society, as proposed by Henri Lefebvre (1991, 1999), supposes long-term strategies for disputes regarding the attainment and exercise of the right to the city. At the same time, it involves a comprehension of reality that considers both the contingent and situated natures of urban processes. Here, we present and discuss a methodological proposal referenced in Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the right to the city and further examined by other authors. This proposal also takes account of Gramsci's (2012; 2014) concepts of hegemony and civil society. Taking these references together, we seek to comprehend the praxis of social agents in contemporary urban confrontations. These methodological contributions provide an opportunity to reflect on urban conflicts and attribute meanings to the concept of the right, the city, and the right to the city itself as interwoven dimensions of a hegemonic dispute for a transformed urban society. Furthermore, these reflections provide evidence of the strategic nature of the discussion and construction of a methodology for urban research praxis committed to the idea and political project of the right to the city.

Keywords: Right to the city, Hegemony, Praxis, Lefebvre, Gramsci

1 Introduction

Conflicting processes for the production of the city challenge urban research to reflect on methods that can capture the dynamics of their connections and contradictions. The central aim of this article is to present and discuss a methodological proposal based on the concept of the right to the city formulated by Lefebvre (1991) and further examined by other authors. This proposal also takes account of Gramsci's (2012; 2014) concepts

of hegemony and civil society to understand the praxis¹ of social agents in contemporary urban confrontations².

The right to the city occupies a central position in urban social struggles and has been referenced in countless studies in this field, notably in Brazil and other Latin American countries, which do not always incorporate Lefebvre's (1991) inaugural concept. Progresses in its problematization as a concept and in criticism about its validity for understanding current complex urban processes may be seen in studies by Busquet and Garnier (2011), Harvey (2008, 2009), Marcuse (2010), Purcell (2002, 2013) and others. For Harvey (2008, 2009) and Purcell (2002, 2013), the widespread restoration of the notion of the right to the city has involved controversies and a loss of substance given the potential of Lefebvre's (1991) experimental utopia. Merrifield (2011) ends up setting aside its relevance given the context of planetary urbanization, planned and organized by the financial market. However, efforts to revisit and construct new interpretations of Lefebvre's (1991) complex reflections have dominated and enhanced features to decipher the contemporary urban reality and sustain the political activity of social agents in cities.

As Lefebvre (1975) points out, a phenomenon of reality and a theory must be observed in their historical movements, in their relationship with totality and in the contradictions engendered in the real-concrete and in thought. The process of overcoming an idea involves a reenounter with the past, in the deepening and liberation of its limitations, and, mainly, in the examination of its contradictions in terms of the present, as well as its potential for practical and transformative action (Lefebvre, 1975). Given the current context of globalization and the expansion of neoliberal capitalism, the limitations identified in Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city include the dimensions of scale and its transitive interactions, as well as the diversity of agents and the multiplicity of agendas in dispute. In fact, as Purcell (2002) and Busquet and Garnier (2011) note, some ideas in Lefebvre's vast and profound theoretical productions reflect the preoccupations of his time, although many remain both valid and strategic for responding to complex contemporary issues. As Lefebvre asserts, the concept is constructed on a practical relationship with reality and returns to this reality as action. Thus, beyond operating as concepts of his fruitful repertoire, it is essential to construct a relationship between the production of knowledge and the transformation of reality, which means putting the thought at the service and as a dimension of political action to dispute hegemony through different conceptions of the world and the city. In addition, since this historical task has not been fulfilled, the right to the city remains, with the emphasis of Lefebvre (1991), as an appeal and a demand.

The question of scale, its specificities, interactions, and contradictions have received special attention in recent revisions of reflections about the right to the city. For Purcell (2002), the interaction between scales has, among other things, implications for the agents legitimated to demand the right to the city. In the relationship between civil society and the state, questions of scale are also considered relevant in a post-Westphalian world (Purcell, 2002) by placing constraints on democratic political functions (Fraser, 2007). However, as transnational activism for the right to the city demonstrates, at the same time as producing obstacles to social and political processes, closer interactions between scales may represent an opening up for future alternative thoughts anchored on the principles of solidarity and cooperation (Viveiros, 2018).

Issues have been raised about the repercussions of new processes and the means of organization and struggle of social agents mobilized by the right to the city and relativization of the historical role of the proletariat as the leader of urban transformations (Purcell, 2002). In effect, the neoliberal global restructuring and its correlate processes, such as the speed of changes on technologies of information and communication, transformations in the world of work, state reform, restrictions to democracy, extensive urbanization, privatizations, and others, have reconfigured and re-sized conflicts and social struggles. The entanglement between public and private agents in the so-called urban governance engenders complex legal, financial, and political operations in the production of space, in urban projects founded on the conversion of the public into the private and the promotion of dispossessions. Recurring conflicts inherent in this logic of the production of space create tensions and, when these emerge, enable the access to "threads" that allows to enter the content and reveal the meanings of social struggles.

The increasing knowledge about the social, political, and cultural context within which the right to the city is defended and disputed seems to provide the means to examine this as a concept and reference for political action. As Lefebvre (1991, p. 115, our translation) warns, when disconnected from praxis, this discussion dissolves into the "mists of rhetoric". In this sense, it explores a theoretical field that involves the relationship between the right to the city – as a social construction, a territory for possibilities to affirm and transform urban society – and the dispute for hegemony. Understanding this process as a sphere of a dispute of principles and practices, the theoretical and methodological approach is guided by the ethical and political dimensions, bringing in other spheres of dispute, such as the legal and cultural fields, through the Gramscian concept of hegemony. Lefebvre (1991) provides founding contributions for understanding the city as an open work, the expression of an encounter between culture and politics. Gramsci (2012; 2014) stands out, principally, with the concepts of hegemony and civil society, to support reflections about the processes and the

relations of power in disputes for the right to the city. These concepts, therefore, provide the “alloy” that builds, theoretically and practically, the possibility of understanding the dimensions, forms, and meanings of these disputes and of identifying emerging processes, in the sense put forward by Williams (1977).

The methodology referenced above and presented here was developed to address this theoretical approach and penetrated the universe of the praxis of social agents in urban policy, in Brazil and internationally, in its dynamics of interaction, reciprocity, conflict, and contradictions regarding the right to the city. This praxis takes place in complex arenas, where heterogeneous agents take place in different profiles and interests, and with varied access to and insertion on public and institutional spaces of dispute. Besides the connections between the agents and forms of dispute, it also provides evidence of the principles, practices, instruments, and meanings attributed to the right to the city observed in two movements: from Brazil to the international sphere and from the international sphere to Brazil, thereby constituting transnational activism with reciprocal implications (Viveiros, 2018). Com esta abordagem teórica, o estudo para o qual foi desenvolvida a metodologia aqui apresentada, antes referenciado, adentrou o universo da práxis de agentes sociais no campo da política urbana, no Brasil, e, na esfera internacional, nas suas dinâmicas de interação, reciprocidade, conflito e contradições na afirmação do direito à cidade. São arenas complexas, onde comparecem agentes heterogêneos nos perfis e interesses e com acessos e inserções diferenciadas nos espaços públicos e institucionais de disputa. Evidencia, além das articulações entre os agentes e formas de disputa, os princípios, práticas, instrumentos e sentidos atribuídos ao direito à cidade observados em dois movimentos: do Brasil para a esfera internacional e da esfera internacional para o Brasil, constituindo nessa dinâmica um ativismo transnacional com implicações recíprocas (VIVEIROS, 2018).

The chosen pathway for the presentation and substantiation of the methodological proposal begins with a theoretical perspective related to the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1991) and the dispute for hegemony (Gramsci, 2012; 2014). We then address two dimensions considered central to an understanding of disputes for the right to the city: 1) the problematization of societal and political interactions at local (national) and international levels, situating relationships and interactions between scales, and 2) the relationship between civil society and the state. Based on these, we propose categories for analysis and discuss potential interferences with disputes and urban conflicts. Finally, in the light of the methodology, we put forward a reflection/provocation regarding the ethical and political commitment of urban research to radical and transformative praxis.

2 Hegemonic dispute for the right to the city

With indisputable power, Lefebvre’s repertoire has underpinned studies dedicated to understanding the process of the production of space and represents an important theoretical and practical instrument for current urban struggles. As a concept under dispute, the right to the city is appropriated and claimed through various meanings and senses about the praxis of social agents (Viveiros, 2018). It does not, therefore, seem reasonable, as Merrifield (2011) suggests, to cede to the enemy a concept that, in its contradictions, guides the political activity of organizations and social movements in conflictual processes and institutional advocacy, and demonstrates substantial vitality in contemporary urban research. On the contrary, the immersion in the social and political practices that restore the concept and attribute meanings and senses capable of sustaining counter-hegemonic approaches is an irrefutable political task (Harvey et al., 2012).

Just as with the right to the city, there are different means of understanding, appropriating, and even practicing the concept of hegemony, whether aligned to the Gramscian concept or not. In common sense, and even in authors who hold to the concept, the reductive interpretation of hegemony merely as domination is representative. In Gramsci (2012; 2014), hegemony is a necessarily contradictory process for the construction of moral and intellectual direction and includes political, legal, cultural, and other dimensions. It involves the direction and domination of a group or social class over other groups or social classes, as Fontana (2003) explains. It comprises a series of forces that constitute the superstructure in a permanent relationship with the structure of the system, in regulating and constructing the objective conditions for its reproduction (Gramsci, 2012; 2014). Williams’ (1977) contributions are especially enlightening for understanding this relationship, in reference to the notion of the determination of the structure in relation to the superstructure in Marxism. For the author, this determination occurs in setting limits and in the existence, always tense and contradictory, of pressure.

Certainly, to analyze any social, cultural, and political process, it is reasonable to identify and observe the practices of incorporation that function to accommodate the new to the dominant, and obliterate truly emerging processes, as Williams (1977) warns. For example, people who move towards reducing the right to the city to the legal and judicial sphere or to the material guarantee of existence. Without disregarding the dimensions and interpretations understood as important requirements for the right to the city, it is necessary to understand them as part of the dispute for capitalist cultural hegemony. However, as Williams (1977, p. 113) notes, “[...] the reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by

definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive". There will always be significant alternative and oppositional forces to hegemony that have to be distinguished in any political and cultural analysis.

Placing the right to the city in constant tension, both as a disputed concept and a practice for the construction of hegemony, requires an approximation to the object in its motion, without involving generalizations or crystallizations. On the contrary, focusing on providing evidence of contradictions and conflicts is seen to be both promising and absolutely indispensable. In this sense, the encounter between the right to the city and the tensions involved in the construction of a counter-hegemonic project (Williams, 1977) function as an anchor to respond questions related to disputes for the right to the city (Viveiros, 2018). How do social agents that are engaged in the struggle for the right to the city develop and dispute concepts of the city and underlying concepts about the world, and what are the means used for this dispute? Who are the agents, how do they organize themselves and what do they defend? In which arenas do these disputes take place? What forces do they confront?

Through dialectical logic, the prospect of openness to dialogue with the object, in its motion and its contradictions, is constructed and to some extent demarcates a theoretical and methodological field capable of sustaining reflections about the right to the city, as reference and meaning for political action, in other words, as the praxis of social agents. Lefebvre and Gramsci are particularly referenced because of their formulations, which, beyond the theoretical, include an ethical and political approach. The right to the city is revisited due to the open and contingent perspective provided by Lefebvre (1991) and explored as a concept and political, social, and cultural praxis in the face of current urban processes. In connection with this, the Gramscian concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 2014; 2012) is employed to indicate pathways for the identification of dialectic nexuses between direction and domination; conflict and consensus; need and freedom; and objectivity and subjectivity.

The power and political content in Lefebvre's (1991) thoughts about the right to the city and Gramsci's hegemony (2014; 2012) emphasize the historical link between theory and practice, and, in the studied field, the political commitment to support efforts of bringing to the surface a concept of the urban space not recognized by Lefebvre (1991, 1999) in capitalism. However, this perspective is not provided a priori, nor is it even possible to assume it as an inexorable pathway. As Purcell (2002) notes, the right to the city in Lefebvre (1991) does not provide a complete and self-sufficient alternative to urban emancipation. Lefebvre imagines and defends a new, entirely contingent, urban policy with desirable or undesirable results for the city's social and spatial structure. Knowledge of the relations of power and meanings of urban struggles puts pressure on the hegemonic dispute for the right to the city, both conceptually and in the concrete dimension of reality.

3 Motion of thought and motion of the object: categories to analyze the hegemonic disputes for the right to the city

The methodology described here expands a theoretical foundation supported by the concept of hegemony in relation to the right to the city. It does this through analytical categories defined by their close relationship with the object and traversed by two major mobilizing axes of the connections and contradictions in disputes for the right to the city: 1) The Right to the City in the Interaction between Scales and 2) The Right to the City in the Mutual Constitution of Civil Society and the State. These axes are tensioning devices for thinking about the motion of forces in action, in efforts towards knowledge about the praxis of social agents in defending the right to the city.

We seek to observe and examine connections and contradictions within the transit of principles and practices based on Brazilian social agents in their local and transnational praxis for the right to the city. To this end, interpretations between scales and the relationships established between social agents and the state mobilize thinking in line with the observed active processes. Thus, agents and their national and international coalitions, with their objectives, strategies, tactics, and instruments, guide the search for an understanding of the object in the different scales of hegemonic dispute for the right to the city. In the research, the movement of looking from Brazil to the international arena and from the international arena to Brazil, in its dynamics and specificities, provided evidence of transnational activism with reciprocal implications (Viveiros, 2018) given the inherently relational nature of scales (Mcfarlane, 2006).

From another perspective, but in an entirely enmeshed and contradictory way (given the limits and pressures in interactions between scales), researches conducted with social movements, organizations, and local and international networks confirm the power of inter-scale coordination of social agents engaged in struggles for the right to the city. This occurs through the aggregation of powers, expansion of repertoires and meanings for disputes, and assembling of distinct understandings about the right to the city. In the inter-scale transit, the reconfiguration of the arrangements of powers implicates in alterations of strategies and tactics, the shape and content of arguments, and the instruments used (Viveiros, 2018). An urban conflict related to the struggle for the right to the city, in a specific city, for example, acquires a new configuration when

transnational organizations and networks are invited and allows reaching international bodies. But such transnational activism may strengthen the proposals and expand the achievements of the agents in dispute, just as it discourages their radicalness and accommodates conflict by incorporating it into the dominant order (Williams, 1977). There are many nuances and contradictions in the complex processes involved in the dispute for hegemony, which may only be understood by observing their historical movement.

For proper methodological coherence, we assume that scales suppose connection and conflict in the dialectical relationship. They cannot, therefore, be observed in either a watertight or static way. They exceed their own logic, are active, and, according to Vainer (1986), are not receptacles for social and urban processes. Processes are involved in scales just as scales are involved in processes. They help to understand and implement the action upon processes, which are in themselves heterogeneous, conflictual and contested, and impose limits and pressures on them. Positioned on the relevant planes, with their agents, objects, and relationships, processes are, as a rule, transitive, dynamic, and observable in and between different scales. In economic, political, cultural, and social relationships, scales constitute operational instruments linked to these dynamics at the same time they substantially interfere in these relationships.

Just as with scales, the relationship between civil society and the political system in the proposed methodology is positioned as a transversal and structuring axis, particularly the state. This is a recurring issue in the theoretical conflicts of researches about social movements and in political and social action, which requires theoretical examination. Studies that conceive these spheres as separate dimensions (Cohen, 2007) and approaches that highlight the interrelationships and mutual influence between these dimensions are placed in opposition to each other (Dagnino, 2004; Dagnino, Olvera and Panfichi, 2006; Carlos, 2015; Lavalle and Szwako, 2015; Tatagiba, 2010). From this perspective, the impossibility of theoretically and empirically sustaining the separation between the two spheres is affirmed.

It is therefore essential to understand civil society and the state as interwoven dimensions in constant interaction and influence in the hegemonic dispute for the right to the city. This relationship is more complex because of the multifaceted nature of both civil society and the state, above all in international arenas, making it necessary to "suppose the heterogeneous nature of civil and state actors [and undoing] the artificiality of the opposition between the state and civil society, giving way to the transverse modes and purposes through which authorities and civil actors are strategically linked". (Lavalle and Szwako, 2015, p. 174, our translation). According to Dagnino (2006), differences in the scope of civil society may be seen in agents, forms of collective action, the teleology of action, the construction of identity, and political projects. This is even more heterogeneous and complex when viewed as transnational civil society³, either due to differences in political culture⁴ or propositions in action. At the national state level, heterogeneity manifests itself in internal political arrangements, the institutional and bureaucratic apparatus, the practical authority reserved for government bodies, the composition of forces in governance equations, and other aspects.

Taking into account the relationships between social agents and their processes to construct hegemony and strengthen organic capacity on a correlate plane, civil society's relationship with the state – understanding civil society as an ethical dimension of the state and a privileged arena to construct hegemony, and political society as a sphere of coercion (Gramsci, 2012; 2014) – is positioned as a central movement in strategies for analysis. The construction of alliances, alignments, identities, organizational efforts, strategies, tactics, and other processes reveal the dynamics of conflict in the sphere of civil society, placed in a dialectical relationship with political society. Proposing an "interactionist agenda" of research, Lavalle and Szwako (2015, p. 174, our translation) contribute to the discussion by emphasizing forms, bodies, and levels of interconnection; the institutional conditions that shape interactions and the political reach of social agents; changes to the normative, institutional and programmatic frameworks; and strategic inflections and tactics. Any rigorous analysis must also include the asymmetries of access and permeability of bodies/agents in interaction (Viveiros, 2018).

Taking these two axes of analysis as transversal in studies about the praxis of social agents in disputes for the right to the city, four broad categories of analysis are particularly relevant: i. Creation and Interaction of Social Agents; b) construction of Ethical and Political Principles and the Formation of Collective Identities; iii. Arenas and Agendas of Dispute, and iv. Dispute for the Urban Policy Lexicon. Each category opens up a vast field of analytical possibilities about the praxis of social movements, organizations, and networks to defend emancipatory agendas for the assertion and construction of rights, including for research outside urban studies, even if conceived in relation to activism for the right to the city.

The category *Creation and Interaction of Social Agents*, therefore, guides analysis about the process of training of social agents engaged in the struggle for the right to the city in Brazil and how these connect through networks. The emphasis of the analysis is on models for political training, including the identification and analysis of forces for aggregation and corporate engagement itself. Through this, light is shed on elements capable of explaining the formation of a political culture of urban policy in Brazil, which, starting with

the struggle for housing in the territories, or “self-constructed rights” (Lima, 2019, p. 258-261, our translation), enters the sphere of dispute for and within the city, or the right to the city, in training for insurgent citizenship (Holston, 2009). In transnational activism, this category is particularly promising for reflections about the processes of coordination and militant engagement, in other words, for understanding why social agents with such diverse origins, training, and agendas share the cause of the right to the city.

By analyzing the *Construction of Ethical and Political Principles and the Formation of Collective Identities* it is possible to discover the foundation of principles inherited from the historical and cultural formation of social agents engaged in the struggle for the right to the city in Brazil, and evidence the dynamics, always conflictual, of identity alignment, which is understood here as “a relational and interactive process, whose result is constantly negotiated, assessed, and reframed”, according to Silva and Ruskowski (2016, p. 217, our translation). In the international sphere, this category enables a comparison between the ethical and political principles defended in transnational activism for the right to the city, and the principles defended by Brazilian social agents, as well as the identification of the motivations for militant engagement.

Arenas and Agendas of Dispute indicate, respectively, an understanding of the arenas of dispute, and statements potentially or effectively formative of a transformative policy program for urban and grassroots society to construct strategies. Regarding the arenas, it is possible to explore and understand the structures and organization, criteria, and hierarchies of access, decision-making arenas, and other factors that shape the inclusion of social agents, their strategies and tactics, and are, to some extent, shaped. From this perspective, it is feasible to understand and examine how, given the structural and conjunctural conditions of the arenas in which they are included, social agents construct and align strategies and tactics to constitute and assert a political agenda⁵. In this sense, one can see how social agents construct their agendas and, more than this, how they create the conditions to enable the recognition and legitimization of their ideas within the arenas in which they carry out practices of contestation or advocacy.

Just as with the agenda dispute, the *Dispute for the Lexicon* is central to the dispute for hegemony in a globalized world. According to Arjun Appadurai (1990, p. 10), given the “differential diaspora” of keywords around the world, political narratives that guide hegemonic communication involve problems of a semantic (a demand for translation from context to context within their global movements) and pragmatic (where the use is subject to different sets of contextual conventions that mediate translation into public policy) nature. This category enables approximation to the debate about the attribution of meanings and words and the development of concepts associated with the city, the right, and the right to the city in their relationships with agents and arenas of dispute. Semantic variations shaped within different national and transnational contexts create “new terminological kaleidoscopes” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 301), which scramble perception and meanings and contribute to the triumph of what Dagnino (2004, p. 95, our translation) calls the “perverse confluence” between distinct projects for society and the city.

4 Conclusions: urban research as political praxis

As historical, active, and contingent processes, disputes for the right to the city position the imperatives of urban research as the discovery of the relationships and contradictions involved and as prospecting for truly emergent processes (Williams, 1977). The Gramscian repertoire provides a storehouse of concepts and analytical resources to interpret contemporary reality and explore the universe of contradictions of our time. Since, in the Lefebvrian sense, the right to the city is not realized within the frameworks of capitalism, it may only be recognized in counter-hegemonic processes, or even in attempts to incorporate into a dominant order. Research about conflicts in territories and relationships with other scales may provide content for the theoretical formulation of the right to the city and reflections about the praxis of social agents in the city’s everyday trenches.

The methodology proposed here assumes a close relationship between subject and object and is supported by the capacity to challenge the object, reveal the contradictions in the processes involved and produce knowledge that may return to this reality as a practical and transformative realization. In this sense, the choice to enter the universe of the praxis of social agents in defense of the right to the city assumes the position and agency of a subject-researcher contributing, based on the knowledge produced, to the transformation of a reality in which this right is configured as a counter-hegemonic idea and action.

This reciprocal implication places the production of knowledge in a dialectical relationship between the motion of thought and motion on the real plane. In the methodology, the transverse axes and the categories for analysis incorporate strategic dimensions for a praxis of dispute for the right to the city and, since they are observable in reality, enable thought to penetrate its motion and reveal contradictions as a pathway to knowledge and critical consciousness. Knowledge of the process of hegemonic dispute for the right to the city and the meanings attributed to this right constitute a mobilizing research agenda for transformative political

action. The choice of method is therefore positioned as a strategic dimension for urban research engaged in an effort to construct a political praxis to feed the idea and political project of the right to the city.

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1 Praxis is here understood as the unity between theory and practice, which produces an awareness of contradictions, knowledge, and transformative action (Gramsci, 2014).

2 The methodology was developed for the author's doctoral research entitled "The praxis of urban policy in Brazil: movements and national and international coalitions in the construction of the right to the city" defended at the Post-graduate Programme in Architecture and Urbanism of the Federal University of Bahia, in 2018. This methodology has been adopted for recent research about urban conflicts related to the right to the city.

3 There is controversy about the use of the concept of civil society to analyze transnational movements and networks, but a vast literature on this topic attests to the suitability of this concept for this sphere (Dagnino, Olvera and Panfichi, 2006; Escobar, 2008; McFarlane, 2006; Fraser, 2007).

4 Political culture as a "domain of practices and institutions, removed from the totality of social reality" (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar, 2001, p. 25, our translation), historically considered to be truly political.

5 A production perspective is suggested by Kingdon (2011), for whom the public recognition of the problem (legitimacy), the construction of alternatives and the policy are determinants that enable an idea to gain public attention and constitute a political agenda.