

Cocreation of Political Spaces Among Diverse People: A Democratic Experiment in Porto Alegre

Cocriação de espaços políticos entre diferentes: uma experimentação democrática em porto alegre

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Abstract: In the midst of the democratic crisis that is plaguing our time, participatory experiences produced beyond the borders of institutionality indicate ways of strengthening local democracy, such as the experience of the Popular Congress of Education for Citizenship (CPEC), held in Porto Alegre since 2022 by collective citizens in peripheral communities. The objective of this article is to analyze the CPEC as a democratic experiment in the co-creation of political spaces between different people, questioning its potential and limits for the inclusion of peripheral voices in the democratization of the city. Ultimately, we aim to learn, from this and many other ongoing popular practices, how to contribute to the new participationist cycle in Brazil. The methodology comprised participant observation, individual and group interviews with organizers of the collectives involved and active in CPEC, as well as analysis of reports and audiovisual materials. In the dialogue between lived experience and theoretical references about integral and public experience, we conclude that CPEC produced mobilization, participation and belonging, personal and social transformation, representing an underground network of social bonds and sociopolitical capabilities that tend to form part of the basis of a new generation of democratic innovations in Porto Alegre.

Keywords: democracy; participation; democratic experimentalism; peripheral voices; integrative methodologies.

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Resumo: Em meio à crise democrática que assola o nosso tempo, experiências participativas produzidas para além das fronteiras da institucionalidade indicam formas de fortalecimento da democracia local, como a experiência do Congresso Popular de Educação para a Cidadania (CPEC), realizado em Porto Alegre desde 2022 por coletivos cidadãos em comunidades periféricas. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar o CPEC como experimentação democrática de cocriação de espaços políticos entre diferentes, indagando suas potências e limites para a inclusão de vozes periféricas na democratização da cidade. Em última instância, almejamos aprender, com esta e outras tantas práticas populares em curso, como contribuir com o novo ciclo participacionista no Brasil. A metodologia compreendeu a participação observante, entrevistas individuais e grupais com articuladores dos coletivos envolvidos e atuantes no CPEC, bem como análise de relatórios e materiais audiovisuais. No diálogo entre a experiência vivida e referenciais teóricos sobre experiência integral e pública, concluímos que o CPEC produziu mobilização, participação e pertencimentos, transformação pessoal e social, representando uma rede subterrânea de vínculos sociais e capacidades sociopolíticas que tendem a compor parte da base de uma nova geração de inovações democráticas em Porto Alegre.

Palavras-chave: democracia; participação; experimentalismo democrático; vozes periféricas; metodologias integrativas.

1. INTRODUCTION

The public and academic debate on democracy has intensified in recent years in the face of processes of progressive erosion of the democratic system, in the global North and South, described through concepts such as: death of democracy, democratic crisis, desdemocratization, democratic recession or post-democracy (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Santos, 2009). Latin America, despite being considered a cradle of political and social innovations, reveals the fragility of its democratic institutions amidst the strong patrimonialist, neo-clientelist and paternalistic tradition, as well as the persistence of abysmal inequalities and high poverty rates (Pleyers, 2010; Ferrarini, 2016; Hoffmam, 2020).

Brazil cannot be understood outside the Latin American context. Since the landmark of the 1988 Federal Constitution, the country has stood out internationally for its participatory experimentation. However, this model has shown significant limitations and an inability to capture the claims of vast

segments of a traditionally excluded population and to expand the democratic culture and popular participation in the country, leading us to question how representative participatory bodies are (Brasil, 2012; Giannella, 2020).

It is with a focus on the framework and practices of a high-intensity, inclusive, and participatory democracy that we will discuss the Popular Congress for Citizenship Education (CPEC), an ongoing democratic experiment led by two citizen collectives from Porto Alegre - Poa Inquieta and POntA Cidadania - since 2022 - through events held in peripheral communities with the aim of listening to peripheral voices and activating forgotten citizenship. Our objective in this text is to analyze the CPEC as a democratic experiment in creating spaces of interaction and coexistence among different groups, questioning its potential and limits for the inclusion of peripheral voices in the democratization of the city. Ultimately, we aim to learn from popular alternatives that can expand the new participatory cycle in Brazil. The methodology included observant participation (Wacquant, 2002), individual and group interviews with organizers of the collectives active in the CPEC, as well as analysis of reports and audiovisual materials.

This work is the result of the dialogue between lived experience and theoretical references that allow us to illuminate crucial aspects of the first, such as the concept of public experience (Peres, 2020) and integral experience (Giannella & Martins, 2020; Giannella, 2023) from a pragmatist framework (Dewey, 2010). In this analytical and reflective work, we also consider the interconnection between mind and body, reason and emotion... (Ferrarini, 2016), the resulting singularity and plenitude and the possibility of exercising autonomy and self-management of ends and means, as the main motivators of individual and collective action. The text will discuss in the first section the context of the Brazilian democratic crisis and the search for the resumption of a participatory cycle, deepening the theoretical-epistemological discussion in the second section. The third section will present the experience and, in the fourth, an analysis of its advances, limits and lessons learned.

2. DEMOCRATIC CRISIS AND RESUMPTION OF THE PARTICIPATORY PROJECT

The years between 2016 and 2022 will be remembered in Brazil's political history for events such as the parliamentary coup and the election of a clearly antidemocratic president, which engendered a process of gradual dismantling of the participatory framework built in previous political seasons. The severity of the democratic crisis, perceived by an audience that went beyond the world of academia (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Diamond, 2015), led to seemingly simple but difficult-to-answer questions: what is democracy really? What is the basis of a so-called democratic society? Is democracy an end or a means? Can it be considered a value in itself? (Mignolo, 2014). And, considering societies in the global South: do we live in a democratic state? If so, what democracy are we talking about? The categories of “low intensity” and “high intensity” democracy (Santos, 2009) come to our aid here, the first corresponding to a liberal-elitist ideology in which democratic practice is merely formal and does not prevent the persistence of the phenomenon of radical exclusion, while the second refers to the idea of substantive democracy, capable of becoming a “way of life” (Dewey, 1927) that universalizes access to basic rights, self-determination, and voice.

Speaking from the city where institutionalized participatory experiences with impact beyond national borders rised, the current emergence of a set of experiences that are taking shape outside the institutional framework - such as CPEC - makes sense when we consider the limits of institutionalized participation. The analysis of these limits has been the subject of extensive literature (Avritzer, 2011; Cunha et al., 2011; BRASIL, 2012; Giannella, 2018, among many others) and many case studies. Along with Tatagiba (2003) and Dagnino (2004), we recognize that the concept and practices of institutionalized participation were object of dispute between competing political projects: the neoliberal and the progressive. Even in the period in which such practices were sustained by expectations, political investments and massive popular mobilization, they came up against structural limits imposed by complex elements, such as: a) deep-rooted patterns of relations between the

State and society, of a markedly elitist and patrimonialist nature; b) modes of functioning of the bureaucracy of a traditional type and tending to be self-referential; c) Brazilian political culture, marked by authoritarianism and paternalism; d) objective difficulties in including, in the participatory mechanisms, those social segments programmatically kept in conditions of marginalization and violation of fundamental rights.

The wealth of research accumulated over the last three decades, aimed at investigating and strengthening this fundamental movement of democratic innovation, recognized early on - and repeatedly - that “[...] patrimonial and authoritarian structures can coexist in a more or less ‘peaceful’ manner with the new dynamics introduced by participatory arrangements” (Tatagiba, 2003, p. 14). Entering into a microsociological description, Marcelo Silva highlighted, as early as 2001, that:

The clientelist relationship pattern and the pejorative conception of politics, as a result of an experience based on a long socio-historical trajectory, constitute a habitus that vigorously opposes the discourses and practices of organization, mobilization and political participation. And this is not due to a “lack of awareness” or “backwardness” of the population, as certain “elitist” approaches tend to maintain, but because this population has learned through its experience that “politics” is something negative (and, in fact, for them it generally has been) (ibid. p. 31).

Statements of this nature remain relevant and contribute to understanding the Brazilian democratic crisis. However, we are interested in understanding how this awareness can contribute to the task of making our democracy effective, which remains essential and urgent. Research and accumulated experiences on Participatory Institutions (PIs) describe them as important “public stages” in the fight for the radicalization of democracy, but they often reproduce exclusions and hierarchies typical of society as a whole. The forms of rationalization and relative bureaucratization of PIs easily alienate a wide range of subjects who do not recognize themselves in these formats, have difficulty or do not accept abandoning their own forms of action, languages, and the interweaving of political decision-making and culturalized and ritualized community practice. We recognize that, in these spaces, the gap

between powers, the dominance of technical expertise and the persistent predominance of instrumental rationalities turns misleading the appeal to deliberationist ideals, as based on the unverified hypothesis of the existence of equal power of speech and capacity to assert oneself in the struggle to impose “the best rational arguments”.

Such arguments have been debated since the beginning and throughout the so-called progressive participatory period. Now, in face of the systematic dismantling of participatory mechanisms and instances we were forced to observe, in addition to the brave attempts at resistance and defense of the participatory model, the amount of action that existed outside of institutionality. We refer to the action of a multiplicity of collectives (Pleyers, 2010; Hoffmam, 2020; Gaiger, 2020; Ferrarini, 2022), networks, (Giannella, 2018; Lima, 2022; Ferreira, 2021) and laboratories (Giannella & Martins, 2020; Moraes & Parra, 2020), active in both urban and rural contexts. It is noteworthy how such experiences criticize (explicitly or implicitly) the limitations of the results of the PIs, the survival of authoritarian forms of political decision-making, and the persistence of large sections of the population without access to basic rights. What these social subjects claim is that they are unaware of and do not enjoy the democracy whose strengthening we invoke, and that the State is, for them, often an enemy against which they must protect themselves. Because of this,

[...] speaking of collectives in this work [...] necessarily implies thinking about new ways of constituting the subject in the present day and, with this, presenting new subjectivities that do not take place in the political and social arena within the structures, forms, and practices engendered by Law, the State, or society up until now. (Hoffman, 2020, p. 17).

However, recognizing the otherness of these subjects in relation to more consolidated analytical categories does not mean that they systematically refuse the possibility of relating to the State. They deny the State as the necessary center of political action, which allows for the declination of actions “against” the State, “beyond” the State and – eventually – “with” the State (Souza, 2010; Oliveira, 2021). In other words, they seek to take advantage of possible gaps in action between the State and the market and, if necessary,

cooperate with both without losing their critical stance and autonomy (Souza, 2010; Oliveira, 2021).

Even though we are aware of the current challenge of a government with a very broad coalition, we must resume analyses of the limits of institutionalized participation and embrace the vast field of democratic experiments led by subjects situated on the margins of these institutions. The question of “how representative are participatory institutions” raises the problem of encompassing what was left outside the borders, without naturalizing them. If, as suggested by Perez (2010), PIs can be understood as extra-parliamentary arenas of representation, we need to face the task of going beyond their limits, in the same way we did with respect to the limits of parliamentary representation, avoiding and reversing the waste of public experiences that occur outside their reach.

We welcome the challenge of rethinking the consolidated model of participation and recognizing other public experiences in which subjects are not only invited – and therefore obliged to accept the rules set by the “house owners” – but can create spaces governed by themselves (Miraftab, 2016). In these spaces, bodies, emotions, experiences, rituals, cultures, worldviews and languages do not need to be sterilized and contained, and practices of self-management and production of commons can be tested under more radical and inclusive forms of democracy. We allude to this when we revive the concept of democratic experimentalism that returned to the debate, after having been launched in 2011/2012 in a political phase very different from the current one.

3. EXPERIMENTALISM OR DEMOCRATIC “EXPERIENTIALISM”

Democratic experimentalism has an undeniable appeal, possibly due to the level of dissatisfaction aroused by “real democracy” (Giannella, 2023), highlighting the discrepancy between its promises and what it can deliver. It is worth noting that the notion of democratic experimentalism has been defined in different ways and with different nuances; due to space limitations, we summarize them here by recognizing a strand that interprets experimentalism in relation to the institutional dimension of democracy and the prospects for

reforming the constitutional structure of politics and the State (Dorf & Sabel, 1998; Unger, 2011; Gasparido, 2018); problem-solving practices in the field of public affairs and democratic governance show us another aspect, not entirely separate from the first, associated with the multiple and sometimes contradictory theoretical approaches that support problem-solving itself: from rational choice to pragmatism or relational approaches (Schön, 1984; Dorf & Sabel, 1998; Ansell, 2011).

However, our interest lies in approaching socio-centered insurgent practices, in their great variety and different grammars, considering them as investigative and learning processes with the potential to expand the canons of democratic participation. What we call socio-centered practices or “public experiences” (Peres, 2020; Giannella, 2020; 2023) escape and/or expand the boundaries of institutionalized action, as well as surpassing (without denying) the primarily instrumental purpose of problem-solving practices. “Individual and collective insurgent practices are a biological and existential fact, before being political; for us, they are the elementary manifestation of the right to life and to the city of its poorest and most disadvantaged inhabitants” (Paba et al., 2002, p. 5, our translation). We recognize in these practices what Dewey (2010) advocated about democracy as a “way of life”, to be practiced and nurtured (so that it can be strengthened and overcome its crises) in any and all collective contexts, from the family, school, neighborhood associations, etc. They encompass ways of performing political action, such as: “Occupy”, “indignant mobilizations”, anti-colonialist marches of women and traditional peoples/communities, collectives and groups that, regardless of how visible they are, continue to weave capillary and essential actions in their territories. Despite their relative volatility and the difficulty in defining their boundaries, these practices produce, on a daily basis, access to historically denied rights, autonomous experiences of commons management and, in general, an effective expansion of real citizenship. This highlights the autonomous mobilization of subjects willing to commit themselves to dealing with something considered a problem, seeking to collectively advance towards its reconfiguration (Dewey, 1927).

Based on this, by creating a link between macro and micro reflection (from the limits of our low-intensity democratic model to how, concretely, these democratic practices manage to expand the limits of the former), we propose the concept of “integral and public experience” as capable of illuminating and interpreting striking and transversal characteristics that we observe, not only in the case presented here, but in many experiences, in urban and rural contexts (Giannella, 2018; Peres, 2020; Lima, 2022). To deepen this concept, we begin by differentiating “experiment” and “experience” (Giannella, 2023). The experiment, with its claim to reproduce a given phenomenon, replicability and control over predetermined factors, paradigmatically illustrates striking characteristics of the positivist science model (Ansell, 2011). The notion of experience (Bondía, 2002) is based on its uniqueness and subjectivity; it does not refer to something that happens, but rather something that happens to us and affects us. Even when faced with the same “fact”, the experience is unique for each subject. The reconstruction of the various experiences of the same fact can contribute to the knowledge of this in its multidimensionality (Bondía, 2002).

Reflection on experience has been vast and varied, especially in Latin America, seeking to reintegrate dichotomies separated by positivist science: body-mind, emotion-reason, matter- spirituality... (Fals Borda, 2012; Escobar, 2014, among others). The idea of reconnecting what was long considered separate and antagonistic (feeling and thinking) is pertinent to the construction of alternative and inclusive foundations of the multiplicity and differences of subjects, in their complexity woven by embodied experiences, cultures and worldviews (often subordinated or made invisible). The concept of experience also refers us to a pragmatist approach, namely that of John Dewey, who makes experience the core of a vision in which democracy is intertwined with education. In particular, in the book “Art as Experience” (2010 [1934]), Dewey brings us an understanding of the “artistic experience” as that in which the subject experiences a total integration between the perceptible, the mental and the emotional dimensions. He speaks of the “aesthetic quality of experience”, which does not refer to the fact that it is conventionally linked to the world of arts. Aesthetics is that experience in which integrality is verified. “In this

situation in which means and end – self-determined and self- managed – are not separated and where knowledge passes through the body and emotions, according to Dewey, the singular and full experience occurs, which reaches its original aesthetic dimension” (Giannella, 2023, p. 8). What in “integrative methodologies” (Giannella et al., 2011) is defined as integrative, Dewey calls aesthetic.

When we research insurgent practices of collectives and networks, the aesthetic – or integrative – dimension proves crucial in fueling the motivation for public experience. Here it is worth emphasizing that qualifying the concept of experience as public implies that, even recognizing the inescapability of its psychological dimension, this is not the lens (that of psychology) that we use to read and interpret it. What interests us is that, in a phase of renewed hope in the potential for regeneration and innovation of contemporary participation, we can produce an inquiry into its possible grammars in which we recognize the founding role of experience, that is, of the integral presence of subjects (with their bodies, colors, sexual tendencies, spiritualities, cultures, rationalities, interests, etc.), without intending to neutralize and sterilize them. The importance of this possibility of integrality of the presence and action of subjects goes hand in hand with the affirmation of their autonomy in the self-management of ends and means as striking matrices of the cases observed and, hypothetically, as characteristic marks of the innovative democratic experiences that we observe (Giannella, 2023).

From the perspective of emerging or insurgent participatory practices, public experiences demonstrate some transversal characteristics we point out here: (1) they are radically sociocentric, composed of a set of actors in movement, in which the “self” experiences the “other”; (2) they focus on exploring alternatives to dominant forms of coexistence, identifying problems and possible solutions through the creation of situated and collaborative sociotechnical arrangements (Moraes & Parra, 2020; Giannella & Martins 2020); (3) they affirm the non-separativity and interconnection between body and mind, theory and practice, utopian project and political practice of the present; 4) they deny the State as the necessary center of political action.

It is from the contributions of democratic experimentalism enriched by reflection on public experiences that we have deconstructed and reconstructed understandings and definitions around democratic experiments. Our epistemic lens comes from decolonial and postcolonial perspectives, which are essential for cognitive justice in understanding practices in the global South, but also includes authors from the geographic North who contribute to conceptual deconstructions or who even make up the epistemic South. In this approach, we start from a distinction between experiment canonically understood under Cartesian-positivist principles and experience, described as something absolutely subjective and singular, scientifically unknowable (Bondía, 2002). How can we semantically pluralize and resignify such concepts so that they encompass other realities and can be enriched by new meanings and interpretations? We are interested in delving deeper into how democratic experiments are qualified by public experiences, integrating and redefining concepts that were once antagonistic in a positivist approach: public experience – as experience and enjoyment, simultaneously individual and collective and capable of externalizing its subjective and objective contents – with social experimentation that acquires, in a pragmatist approach, attributes of being “provisional, probative, creative and jointly constructed” (Ansell, 2011, p. 13). We understand that public experience becomes democratic experimentation when the desire to “live it again” arises, to understand how it occurred and to systematize it with a view to its reapplication – never replication – based on the characteristics of each context and subjects, enabling evaluations and improvements in its continuity and even constituting content or prototypes for public policies. Based on this set of considerations, reflections and propositions, we will now present a reflective description of CPEC as a democratic experiment, seeking to understand its motivations, dynamics and legacy learnings.

4. POPULAR CONGRESS FOR CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION (CPEC)

CPEC cannot be understood outside the context in which it emerged. Porto Alegre was a world reference in democratic public innovations at the turn

of the century, although after this period years of neglect of the city, economic stagnation and a dizzying increase in violence followed. In 2016, the city was among the 50 with the highest number of homicides in the world. This last decade has also marked an activation of citizenship through the emergence of numerous collectives, a phenomenon present in various parts of the world (Pleyers, 2010, 2018; Hoffmam, 2020; Gaiger, 2020). Previous research (Ferrarini, Pereira & Müller, 2020; Ferrarini, 2022) revealed that collectives in Porto Alegre are not an isolated phenomenon, but they form more or less structured networks that provide broad processes of connections, actions and learning.

CPEC was an initiative of two citizen collectives from Porto Alegre. The first is “Poa Inquieta”, created in 2017 and currently composed of around 1,000 people (activists, professionals, public servants and managers, academics, entrepreneurs, etc.) who are connected through WhatsApp groups on various topics (sustainability, education, politics, social innovation, and diversity, etc.) and face-to-face discussion groups. Its purpose is to “promote the articulation of people, resources, and initiatives for local transformation based on principles of inclusion, diversity, creativity, and sustainability” (Ferrarini, Freitas & Paz, 2022). Its concept of social transformation by reduction of inequalities led to the targeting of actions to peripheral territories, the milestone of which was a discussion group held in 2019 in the Alameda community, which resulted in a collective action to restore an abandoned square. The joint work and the bonds of trust created led the residents involved to mobilize to create an association that they called “Alameda Inquieta”. The second action was to inspire and promote the creation of POntA Cidadania, a collective formed by more than 50 peripheral organizations and people who want to cooperate for a more inclusive and fair Porto Alegre through exchanges and mutual aid to strengthen these entities. “POntA” was the collective that co-created CPEC. From the beginning, CPEC was proposed as a congress, appropriating the concept normally restricted to the academic or corporate environment and re-meaning it based on the adjective popular, in the direction of a collective construction of practices and multiple knowledge about the city. Education for citizenship, on

the other hand, affirmed the centrality of education as a process of critical reflection and social/local protagonism. The first version of CPEC started with a set of themes to think about the city. However, CPEC has become a living laboratory (Magalhães; Andion & Alperstedt, 2020; Moraes & Parra, 2020) and was entirely co-created in its purpose, themes and methodology. To monitor the dynamics of this living laboratory, we conducted individual and group semi-structured interviews with twelve organizers, identified here by fictitious names (collective members, five of whom were from peripheral communities). The interviews were conducted between September and November 2023 after co-creation activities or, in the case of peripheral participants who were not part of the working group, going to the communities. This was an intentional sample, which stood out for its diversity of engagement and positions. Other data sources included: documentary analysis of reports, assessments and audiovisual records. Finally, we used sensory and written records from observant participation (Wacquant, 2002).

The research revealed that CPEC did not begin with the elaboration of the project, but with the construction of bonds of affection and trust, essential so that the "popular" character did not refer only to the place where the congress took place but to the fact that it was carried out with the people who lived there. The idea was launched in 2021, but for community leader José, "the Popular Congress began in 2019 in Alameda, when Poa Inquieta entered a school in the community. The bubble-bursting didn't start now. In Alameda we spoke the same language. The Congress is just a way to maximize what we did in that room."

The co-creation took place in 2022 over six months through three pre-congresses (March, May and August), which brought together around 200 people (community leaders, public school students, academics, public managers and entrepreneurs), in a dialogue of knowledge mediated by conversation circles. In a reflective and vigilant way, care was always taken to ensure that voices that are usually silenced could speak. "It is not enough to sit in a circle, assuming that our equal physical position will eliminate inequalities" (Ferrarini, 2023). Therefore, the body and emotion were mobilized in all

meetings through meditation and artistic activities (drawings, music, etc.), which made it possible to create an affective atmosphere, of active listening and conducive to exchange. Self-censorship and possible judgments about who knows and who does not, who can speak and who does not have this power, were reduced. In this process, the objective of the CPEC was defined as follows: “to be a space for collaborative construction for the (trans)formation of active citizens and an inclusive, democratic and sustainable society”. Complementary objectives were: to listen to the voices of the outskirts; to articulate a network of cooperation between the whole of society; to encourage the participation of community representatives in decision-making spaces and to initiate a process of citizen (trans)formation.

Listening to the voices of the outskirts was possible through 25 discussion groups and the aforementioned techniques, which involved around 700 participants and an artistic program in three outlying communities of Porto Alegre during the three days of the Congress (August 26, 27 and 28, 2022) in Vila Planetário, Morro da Cruz and Bom Jesus. Transportation, meals and a mug of the event were provided. The groups were possible through the work of approximately 70 mediators and rapporteurs from the academic world and the communities, working together. The event was the result of entirely voluntary work by around 30 people (the most active) divided into teams responsible for the areas of management, communication, fundraising and methodology. The funding came from scratch, having been raised through donations from universities, companies and individuals, in addition to crowdfunding. The peripheral artists were paid, as were local artisans who exhibited at the Congress fair.

The activities were organized so that people could choose the themes for the rounds, covering four thematic axes: social inclusion, environmental education, work, culture and art. The methodology used three questions to mobilize the rounds, applied to each axis: 1) What city (territory or community) do we have? 2) What city do we want? 3) How do we get there? After the rounds, the participants stamped a Citizen Passport with the color of the axis

they participated in, thus symbolizing their crossing of the various themes and the reflections made aiming at a more integral and active citizenship.

After the end of the 1st CPEC, the activist organizers did not know if there would be a second one, but it happened, maintaining the protagonism of the diversity of integral subjects in dialogue and converging towards the common goal of pioneering innovative and inclusive educational experiences for the construction of a fuller citizenship in Porto Alegre. In 2023, six events were held (four pre-congresses, the congress itself and one post-congress), totaling 10 events in two years, which involved another five peripheral communities and around 2,000 people. In 2023, the methodology included holding a “big circle”, with the presence of public managers and intellectuals, together with local leaders of the collectives and communities involved. In one of these, we had the presence of the Governor of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, Eduardo Leite, as well as municipal and state secretaries. In addition, taking advantage of the “Fronteiras do Pensamento” (Borders of thinking) event in the city, the North-American philosopher Michael Sanders and the British archaeologist David Wengrow were present at the big circles. These changes caused discomfort within the group, not because of the change itself, but because they were the result of a single personal and voluntarist initiative, without internal discussion. Another change was the monthly remuneration of two community leaders to dedicate themselves partially to organizing the CPEC. In addition, a partnership was established with the Municipal Department of Education, which provided some resources, in addition to guaranteeing other donations for the year 2024. Both the conflicts in the voluntary work of a member and the challenges inherent in resource management led to the need to create a CPEC Council for democratic governance.

These developments raise questions about the path to institutionalization: will it reduce the participatory drive? Is there a risk of hampering spontaneous participation, which is sometimes chaotic but passionate and efficient? Or will it become an indispensable tool for internal democracy?

5. TRANSFORMATIONS, LEARNINGS, AND CHALLENGES

Considering the lived experience and the theoretical lenses used here, what can the CPEC teach us about the limits and strengths of socio-centered democratic experiments? And what clues can it leave for this new cycle of democratic participation in Brazil?

The first aspect that draws our attention is that the CPEC, together with so many other initiatives in Porto Alegre, was born outside the institutions as a resumption of a democratic cycle in the city. This path of action “beyond” the State claims the chance for democratic deepening or radicalization of democracy (Brancaleone & Mello, 2017; Pleyers, 2018 apud Oliveira, 2021) and it has received little attention from scholars of social movements, participation, and democracy in recent years (Oliveira, 2021, 2022; Souza, 2010). In our view, this depends on a deep-rooted view that attributes the monopoly of political action to the State and, consequently, recognizes relevance and prominence to social movements, preferably when they interact with it (Zibechi, 2007; Oliveira, Ferrarini & Dowbor, 2023). This finding leads to the first aspect highlighted in the analysis of the CPEC, which identifies the relative invisibility of this practice, that is, the lack of recognition of its value and its theoretical-practical commitments when it does not assume the traditional format of the State-society relationship.

Isn't it time to change our way of looking at things and focus all our attention on these invisibilities that escape academic conceptualization, but that are showing their potential when it comes to changing the world? (Zibechi, 2007, p. 52).

The recovery of the substantive and expanded dimension of politics allows us to recognize and perceive the wealth of public experiences and socio-centered democratic experiments in peripheral contexts, contributing to the reinvigoration of democracy especially in the global South, where state regulation has always revealed inadequacies and even violations of rights. In the CPEC events the collective and voluntary process of planning and managing without scripts or hierarchies, promoted this political action in everyday life.

The alternative [substantive] organization emerges as a kind of theater where each person lives with others affective relationships and where each person, through the collective, is in search of his or her personal identity (...) The individual does not engage only at the level of his or her professional skills but also of his or her human skills (Outrequin, 1985, p. 38 apud Serva, 1996, p. 201).

The activation of co-creation repertoires occurs through affections, dreams and disagreements, requiring the invention of another ethic to deal with conflicts, which brings us to the second aspect of the analysis, that is democratic participation, as a dimension tested internally, in the Congress. From the external public feedbacks, we identified a general assessment of the participants feeling listened to. Several reports collected highlighted the importance of being able to speak openly about the difficulties experienced in the periphery (Vera, community leader), or the value of being able to hear what people think directly from their own voices (Ana, retired teacher who coordinated discussion groups).

In part, the dimension of wholeness of the experience - the third aspect highlighted in the analysis - contributed to this listening. “Real-life” politics - which prefigures and practices new futures in everyday life - is sustained by integral subjects in search of an alternative to the standardization and bureaucratization of procedures and repertoires that end up reproducing logics, dynamics and discourses, as well as inhibiting the ability to produce new perceptions, affections and thoughts.

The wholeness of the experience, together with the democratic space of the discussion groups, revealed the last aspect analyzed, personal transformation. Under the banners of universality and determinisms present in the emancipatory projects of modernity, the subject – namely the subject of the Anthropocene – remained “hidden”. How the construction of new paths for the political action of peripheral populations and their participation in the decisions of the city in which they live could be something external to the subject? This is the case reported by Áurea (retired teacher), who was beginning to suffer from depression: “during the pre- congress, when I heard the women of [community] Restinga speaking, it gave me energy. I felt like a warrior woman. And when I

coordinated the group, it gave me the strength to be that woman who helps people discover themselves... And I went back to studying”.

It is people who transform contexts, as they transform themselves, in an iterative dynamic. “We may not execute as we wanted (...), but even imperfectly, in the immaterial dimension, it has a huge force” (Carlos, coordinator of the collectives). These immaterial effects are often disregarded, partly because of the difficulty in measuring them.

Regarding the concrete effects, they are numerous, although, again, difficult to identify, given the widespread connections in the communities; we bring an example reported by José and João (members of the collectives and peripheral leaders). Together with professors from a university that participated in the CPEC, they created the Academy of Social Leaders, as a third mission academic training eventually providing a university degree; this was built “with” and “for” the residents of peripheral communities, based on the recognition of the practices and knowledge that they possess. José reported that many women were embarrassed to introduce themselves in the conversation circle simply as housewives. This certification meant a lot to the residents of the communities.

Other concrete results were repercussions on public policy through the participation of public managers and by being part of an action of the Educating City Program. In our understanding, however, the potential of the methodology we used and the mobilization strategy generated by the CPEC for democratizing the city is much greater. The mobilization of community leaders, the use of public-school spaces on weekends to invite students and their families, and the discussion groups guided by the three questions and supported by integrative methodologies make up an accessible device that can be a prototype for participatory diagnostics and planning of public policies.

Like so many other socio-centered democratic experiments emerging in contemporary times, CPEC, as a living laboratory, inspires social innovations to expand political action and citizen participation for the democratization of public policies in this new participatory cycle in Brazil. This inspiration can clearly occur both through the methodological construction and through the content to

be systematized and delivered to the executive and legislative branches, companies and organizations, and to the communities themselves, indicating paths for public policies and investments that contemplate the city as a whole.

6. FINAL REFLECTIONS

This work moved from the observation of the democratic crisis that plagues our time and focused the Brazilian context at a time of renewed hope for the resumption of a democratizing and participatory project, embracing the commitment to the search for effective strategies for its implementation and expansion. In Brazil, since the end of the dictatorship until the present, the main strategy for expanding democratic canons has been the construction of PIs, which has had important results, but also evident limits. We have concluded that perhaps the time has come to recognize the structural nature of these limits, and how much of the potentially democratizing social experience remains beyond their reach.

In this sense, the analysis of the CPEC revealed that the construction of a web of affections and belongings and the involvement of integral subjects, recognized in their differences and autonomy, were crucial to the success of the initiative. The dialogue with the concept of integral and public experience seemed to us capable of illuminating and contributing to an interpretation that was not merely accessory to these dimensions, which, on the contrary, seem to be at the heart of the action of a form of doing politics that is very specific to the present moment. Adherence and commitment to it (politics) occur based on the possible inclusion of each subject in their entirety, alluding to the multiple and inseparable dimensions traditionally separated by Western and colonialist culture. They are those of body and mind, emotion and reason, nature and culture, materiality and spirituality, all of which are permeated by the biopolitical marks of race, gender, disability, etc., as well as by social markers that interconnect the relations between these dimensions. Such integral and public experiences seem to us to qualify the notion of “democratic experimentalism” as a movement for new ways to overcome the democratic crisis, which gives centrality to the dimension of individual and collective experience, rejecting the

idea that they should be purified and sterilized of everything that escapes instrumental and technical rationality in order to access the public space. Finally, this effort to analyze the CPEC proved to be complex due to the novelty of the phenomenon and the impossibility of understanding it outside of a network of innovative experiments that generate connections and encounters between subjects and social groups, giving rise to new collective actions, based on affinities. Emerging forms of public experience require sensitive and careful analyses, attentive to the specificities of the contexts, making extrapolations and simplistic comparisons difficult, and requiring caution in the application of categories of analysis, both traditional and contemporary. Our analysis leads us to propose that the CPEC is a democratic experiment produced through citizen participation beyond the boundaries of institutionality, which is currently facing a still uncertain process of self-institutionalization and which can represent a prototype for future processes of territorial listening and local involvement in socio-centered processes of public policy construction.

We recognize the challenge involved in trying to materialize a space for relationships and exchange between parts of the city that hardly interact or, if they do, it is based on prejudices and stigmas that are difficult to denaturalize. We recognize the enormous difficulty of establishing an effective complementarity of knowledge, academic-scientific and popular, traditional, rooted in ancestral and cultural links that are often resistant and re-existent to the processes of uprooting resulting from urbanization. Finally, within the limits of these notes, we recognize the question regarding the relationship between material and immaterial products of this experience: is it enough that it has enabled the full presence and active listening of so many different people, including many subjects who are traditionally silenced and made invisible in urban dynamics? What are the effective deliveries of this process in relation to the most pressing areas of public policy, precisely for these actors and their places of life? Certainly, the immaterial achievements were significant although, for now, the material deliveries, that is, the direct impact on the reformulation of public policies, are not what draws the most attention from this initiative. Our bet is that the underground network of social ties and sociopolitical capabilities

that were built in CPEC will be the basis of a generation of democratic innovations in Porto Alegre towards making democracy an individual and collective experience of every day.

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