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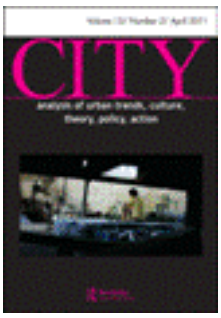

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Urban movements and NGOs: So near, so far

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Urban movements and NGOs

So near, so far

Yves Cabannes

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I would like to propose five ideas for feeding the debate:

(1) The growing divide between NGOs and social movements

Yes, indeed, there is a growing gap between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and urban social movements, even when they share a common struggle for social justice, 'living well' or the Right to the City ideals as radically developed by H. Lefebvre in the late 1960s. Despite mutual calls for unity and positive intentions, the divide is growing.

As far as land and housing or habitat-related issues are concerned, organized voices from Civil Society, essentially from NGOs, decided in Vancouver (1976), in parallel to the first Habitat Conference, to create HIC, the Habitat International Coalition. As social movements gradually joined HIC as a potential forum to have their voices heard, from the late 1980s onwards divergences started to appear, which continued all through the 1990s and gave birth to different international social movement-led networks, forums and alliances. Twenty years down the line, Shack Dwellers International (SDI), the International Alliance of Inhabitants (IAI) and No Vox (primarily expressing itself in French) are active internationally and have in common their distance from NGOs and the 'professional' world.

At national level, in countries such as Brazil, where both NGOs and movements are vibrant, the end of dictatorship brought on the one hand the creation of an association of NGOs (ABONG) and on the other hand the birth of 'Central dos Movimentos Populares' (CMP), inadequately translated as People's Movement Forum, aimed at linking up the various social movements active in Brazil. This will be briefly described later. Various housing movements that were numerically the most active and present joined CMP. However, after a couple of years, the National Movement for Housing Struggle (MNLM) quit and left a prominent role to UMM (union of housing movements [união nacional dos movimentos de moradia]), another fairly broad national housing movement more organically linked to the mainstream Workers' Party.

(2) Two key issues for divergence: (i) who speaks for whom and (ii) logic of process vs. logic of project

The reasons for divergence, good or bad, are multiple and varied through time. However, two seem relatively clear and constant. I name them as (i) the voice or who speaks and (ii) a logic of transformative process vs. a logic of project.

To clarify these issues we discussed at length with historic leaders from a few key movements: CMP and MNLM in Brazil, and IAI at the international level. Two key points led the discussion: their perception of NGOs on the one hand and the evolution of the relations of their own movement with key actors through time. Each one of these three movements shares in common a willingness of autonomy as a people-centred and people-led movement, radicalism and transformative perspective.

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Figure 1 Banner and demonstrators from CMP (*Central dos Movimentos Populares*) and Brazilian urban movements at the National March for Urban Reform and for the Right to the City, Brasilia, September 2005
(Source: © MNLM archive)

- CMP (Central dos Movimentos Populares), or the 'Coordinating Council of Grassroots Movements', results from a historic movement of resistance, primarily from social struggles in the 1980s, during and after dictatorship. It was founded in October 1993 during a gathering (*encontro*) of 950 people from 22 Brazilian states, representing various movements such as black, prostitutes, women, youth and teenagers, gays, homeless, prime nations, movement for defence of transport, housing, health, sanitation and human rights, clearly demonstrating the breadth and diversity represented (figure 1). CMP's central aim is public policies with people's participation as an instrument of 'articulation' of popular movements (author's translation and adaptation of CMP website).
- The National Movement for Housing Struggle[1] (MNLM) was created on 1 July 1990, during the first National Gathering of Housing Movements from around the country, with representatives from 13 states. It emerged after the large-scale occupations of areas and housing developments in urban centres, primarily during the 1980s. Among the various entities that backed the movement were the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB), Caritas and CMP. At present the movement works in partnership with the United Workers' Federation of Brazil (CUT) and is linked to the Landless Workers' Movement (MST). The main objective of the MNLM is to foster solidarity within urban space, in a struggle that goes well beyond just land, but is

Figure 2 Delegation from MNLM, Brazilian Movement for Housing Struggle, at the National March for Urban Reform and for the Right to the City, Brasilia, September 2005
(Source: © MNLM archive)

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also a struggle for lots, housing, sanitation and other needs of the population. The movement is organized in 15 states (MNLM website, accessed 3 January 2012).

The MNLM, since its inception, has defended the housing rights of more than 1 million Brazilians in various states across Brazil.[2] One of the unifying mottos of the MNLM is 'occupy, resist, live' (figure 2). It makes a distinction between the concepts of occupying and invading:

> 'The MNLM occupies, it does not invade: there is a big difference between the two [...] an invasion is when one enters a site that is being used. Occupation, on the other hand, occurs when the site is not fulfilling its social function as set out in the Constitution, or in other words, is abandoned or not in use.'[3]

- IAI, International Alliance of Inhabitants, was created in 2003, in the aftermath of the First World Assembly of Pobladores (low-income dwellers?) called by HIC. IAI founding members felt that they did not have enough space and power as grass-roots organizations, and that there was not enough interest in transformative radical options. Today IAI claims representing a network of approximately 350 organizations primarily housing co-op movements, association of inhabitants, movements against evictions, networks, tenants' unions or social centres—in the sense used in Spain—and 50 NGOs from 45 countries of the global North and South. Among its major commitments are the right to housing and the campaign against market-driven and forced evictions (figure 3).

(i) *Who speaks for whom?*

'We do not want NGOs to speak in the name of inhabitants, citizens or movements.' This statement by Cesare Ottolini, coordinator

Figure 3 Launch of zero eviction campaign in September 2011, *Korogocho*, Nairobi (Source: © IAI archive)

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of IAI, echoes others' positions as well, and is probably a central line of divide that results from interviews and direct observations. According to the movements, who should voice and decide on people's positions should be the people themselves, and not professionals or technicians from NGOs.

This does not mean, however, that these urban social movements, among others, are not interested in debating with NGOs or support groups. On the contrary! They usually look for advice, counterpoints of views and broadening of horizons, but the final decision for the road to take, for the struggle to kick off, how and when, needs clearly to remain in their hands. MNLM invites advisers for specific and quite specialized tasks, generally quite challenging and highly qualified, but the National Executive, apex body for political decisions, is exclusively composed of elected people who live in low-income neighbourhoods, occupied land and *favelas* and who are fighting for improving their own living conditions along with those of their neighbours. At the same time, if a member of the National, State or local MNLM Executive is elected or takes a decision-making position within the government, he or she needs to resign from their position within the Executive, and usually will continue to struggle and be active as a normal MNLM member.

The small group of professionals and academics that form the Technical Support Committee at IAI have their voices heard within internal debates, but have no voting powers. Their proposals and advice are taken into consideration, but will not necessarily be included in the final decisions, or better said, the objectives and directions

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taken generally coincide but the pace and tactics decided by the movements is generally slower, more carefully built and probably more adapted to the changing reality on the ground. The perception of timing and phasing is quite different from each side, and my experience suggests that people's capacity to plan is largely equivalent to those of trained urban planners.

(ii) *Logic of process vs. logic of project*

A second divide between NGOs and movements is precisely as the name says, they are in the 'movement', and involved in processes that are far from being linear, cartesian, logical or smooth. The capacity of adaptation to changing factors to have a new policy voted on, a piece of occupied land legalized or an eviction stopped will be a key factor of success, and a key factor for the expansion and consolidation of the movement itself.

Conversely, most NGOs depend on financial resources earmarked for specific projects with a beginning and an end within a pre-established timeframe and objectives. Even if such projects can be co-formulated in a participatory way and with great care on the side of NGOs, they might or might not correspond when they start with what the movement needs at that precise moment.

Reconciliation of project-driven logics and process-driven ones is a complex question that very few movements and NGOs have solved satisfactorily. It seems necessary to clarify this point again and again because, as Edymar Cintra, historic leader of MNLM, states, 'Strong movements need good advisors and support group.' Raimundo from CMP sheds some light on these relations when he comments about USINA, a well-known support group of most of the social movements of the São Paulo region: 'This is not an NGO. They are ethical professionals, with a focused advisory role. This is perfect.' Interestingly, USINA (Centro de Trabalhos Para o Ambiente Habitado [Working Centre on Living Environment]) has never relied upon international aid since its creation in the late 1980s at a time when most prominent urban NGOs were dependent on it.

(3) The divergences are deeper within urban social movements

The distance between NGOs and urban social movements, however important (and relevant to the current forum), remains a secondary issue in relation to the growing divide, fragmentation and lack of communication among urban movements at international, national or city level. Building unity locally and internationally seems essential to reach a point when radical transformation will be possible. As an example, MNLM quit CMP among others 'because CMP coordinators were speaking in name of the movements', a similar point of tension to the one identified between NGOs and movements.

The perspective of the Habitat III Forum in Istanbul in 2016, where probably the major urban movements such as SDI, IAI or No Vox, along with NGO networks such as HIC will be present at a significant scale, constitutes a common time horizon. It might be an opportunity to start seriously sharing practices and visions and commit upon a minimum common agenda that would make it a powerful tool for change. Habitat I, in Vancouver in 1976, was instrumental to set up the conditions for the creation of an organized coalition from Civil Society that played an important historical role. What could be the shape of a similar organization for the 20 years to come and what would be its aim?

(4) These tensions are primarily the result of a growing lack of active commitment from universities with transformative struggles

The double divergence, between NGOs and movements on the one hand and within

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movements on the other, reflects primarily the incapacity and lack of willingness of most universities and research centres to engage in transformative actions, alongside the movements and Civil Society organizations, in order to challenge the prevailing system. This absence is felt badly by most leaders interviewed: 'universities are important for our movement, and its mission is to generate a critical mass of *thinking*' (Edymar Cintra, MNLM). Her views, as an organic intellectual in Gramsci meaning echo deeply his concept of 'counter hegemony' that would result precisely from intellectuals originated from the masses and still organically linked to them. Edymar complements at which level the lack of commitment is higher: 'Field courses' that are a central part of the public university system—called *curso de extensão* in Brazilian Portuguese—allow students to spend long months within social movements, understand them and act with them, but 'are reducing in numbers or there is no willingness from universities to connect with society transformative forces *(forças vivas)*'.

The CMP coordinator insists upon the growing deficit of universities from the 1990s on, in relation to progressive and radical ideas where social movements and their organic intellectuals could naturally play their role, be empowered, define strategies or link up theory and practice: 'universities came to a standstill, or walked to the right along with the Workers Party. Most of them are quite moderate [...] many of them are private, and the public ones are dominated by private interests and logics' (Raimundo Bomfim, CMP).

This distance between social movements and universities is not only growing in countries such as Brazil and in the global South, but even more in the North. Raising fees to astronomical levels, primarily in countries such as the UK or USA, makes it virtually impossible for English or American low-income earners or grassroots leaders to study, or for a Brazilian or Indian social movement leader or organic intellectual to come to London or to New York in case he or she would like to be exposed to global thinking and practices. In effect, the overseas student would have to pay around £15,000, plus the cost of living in the country, nearly twice as much as his colleague from the UK sitting by his side would pay (£9000): a simple and hard way to understand what social justice is about.

In the face of a growing exclusion of the poor and social movement intellectuals from universities, the strategic line of action from IAI to develop an Urban Popular University (UPU) or from the World Social Forum to establish a University of Social Movements is quite appealing even if still a mere substitute to an unfair situation that needs to change: 'Universities need to go back to their roots and be the expression of classes that want to take power. UPU is a blueprint of what universities could become in the future' (Cesare Ottolini, IAI).

(5) When Gramsci meets Bourdieu and Sartre. Generate an intellectual debate between 'organic intellectual' and 'committed intellectual' as a way to solve divergences among movements and between movements and NGOs

The idea of interviewing historic leaders came from an outstanding presentation that Raimundo Bomfim, coordinator of CMP, gave on current urban challenges and potential answers at São José do Rio Preto University in April 2012, along with another Brazilian leader and old colleague from past housing struggles, Antonio Silvestre. Twenty years ago, they were activists, community leaders heavily engaged in political and social changes. Over the years, and very slowly and gradually they were able to graduate. Dr Bomfim became a lawyer and Silvestre a specialist in local development. None of them cut their roots with the movements where they grew and on the contrary continue more than ever to play a transformative role. They exemplify, and cases are not that

few in movements I know, what Gramsci would have called organic intellectuals, but with two important shifts: the first one is from the *factory* to the *neighbourhood*, or in Marxist sense from the sphere of production, the only one where revolution could kick off, to the sphere of consumption or day-to-day life; and the second from organic intellectual being part of the *proletariat* (primarily *factory worker*) to the one of *informal workers* depending on odd jobs to make their livelihoods and keep their commitments with the social movements they belong too.

We argue here that to reduce divergences between NGOs and social movements, and among social movements, and in order to generate a counter hegemony and a critical mass of transformative and united thinking there is a need, first of all, for public universities to democratize and open their doors to those currently excluded. At the same time, these universities must be a place where organic intellectuals rooted in ongoing struggle are able to meet with 'committed intellectuals' (intellectuels engagés) as exemplified in quite different ways by Pierre Bourdieu or Jean Paul Sartre, in order to discuss, among many different issues, the potential roles of NGOs, of ethical professionals and the conditions for them to play a positive role with the movements to transform our unfair society into a good place to live.

Notes

1 Yves Cabannes, Silvia Guimarães Yafai, and Cassidy Johnson, eds, *How People Face Evictions*, 125 (London: BHSF, DPU, 2010).
2 From the workshop on the history of the MNLM held in Campo Grande in 2003.
3 Leda Velloso Buenfiglio (2007), 'Recuperation of the Centre of Porto Alegre: The Struggle of the Homeless for the Right to Housing.' Master's thesis.

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