

Building senses of “community”

Social Memory, Popular Movements and Political Participation

Ruth Cardoso

Abstract

This lecture followed by a debate concerns popular movements, in particular those which the author describes as libertarian, emerging in the city of São Paulo in the late 1970s and early 80s. It focuses on the building of memory, its relevance in creating a sense of identity and of community, and the issue of political participation. The latter was one of the mottos during the democratization of relations between society and the State in Brazil, following the years of military rule, as well as being a major challenge to the creation and development of cultural policies in the country and, among them, those relating to cultural heritage.

Keywords: social movements, community, political participation, memory, urban anthropology.

Resumo

Esta palestra seguida de debate se refere aos movimentos populares, em especial aos que a autora qualifica de libertários, emergentes na cidade de em São Paulo no final dos anos 1970 e início dos 80. São focalizadas a construção da memória, sua importância para a formação de sentidos de identidade e de comunidade e a questão da participação política. Esta última foi uma das principais palavras de ordem na democratização das relações entre a sociedade e o estado no Brasil após o regime militar, e um desafio importante à criação e desenvolvimento de políticas culturais no país e, entre elas, as relativas ao patrimônio cultural.

Palavras-chave: movimentos sociais, comunidade, participação política, memória, antropologia urbana.

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Ruth Cardoso

When reflecting on the demands that social movements have been making towards the preservation of cultural heritage, it is very important to consider that these movements have become so widespread and embedded, that nearly everyone feels the need to create a memory for themselves.

In political science literature, a sense of “novelty” stands out. There’s talk of new political players; that social movements compete with the parties even wanting to them. The participants in the movements disagree of course. This very new aspect of movements is always highlighted when analyzing their political role. It obviously it exists and is relevant. But when we come into contact with people who participate in social movements, neighborhood groups or any type of localized movement, what we observe is a search for history, a past, a memory and often the fabrication of that past. This seems to be a phenomenon of fundamental importance. This is curious, since these people don’t necessarily identify themselves as participating in something new in society, but always in something which has its roots far in the past and which has reached the present after confronting many difficulties. They do this to justify their actions, and to establish a common ground and identity among themselves.

It is exactly this characteristic that I find interesting to discuss. But, prior to that, I feel the need to explain what I refer to as “social movements”. Social

1 This lecture was performed during a seminar held by the experts of CONDEPHAAT – Council for the Preservation of Historic, Artistic, Archaeological and Touristic Heritage of the State of São Paulo, on June 28, 1983. Document available at CONDEPHAAT’s Documentation Center, transcribed from audio recording by Mada Penteado in 1983, edited for this publication by Claudia Cavalcanti and revised by Antonio A. Arantes.

movements are not organized; they do not have specific rules and a rigorous structure. Exactly for those reasons, they are known as “movements”. Social movements can refer to a great number of things, so I agree to use that denomination in its broadest sense.²

They began appearing in association with the movements of the 1960s, which were quite innovative in their forms of political participation and were not directed necessarily against the State; they identified the powers against which they fought elsewhere in society, not exactly in the State, and brought together people who shared a common experience of discrimination. Here I refer to the feminist movement, the black movement, the hippie movement, the ecological movement, born at different times, yet all of them, to a certain degree, arising from the political transformation that occurred in society, especially in the capitalist world, in the 1960s.

I believe that these movements had at least two common features which allow them to be known as such: a certain spontaneity (they were at least perceived as movements that were born spontaneously, created by or appearing from a decision of the people, due to a perception of discrimination, be it against women, against blacks, etc.) and, at the same time – this being their main feature –, they were egalitarian movements, that avoided organizational structures and hierarchical distinctions; all their members participated equally, all decisions were made collectively. Indeed, their main objective was to combat hierarchy.

This is exactly why these and other social movements emerged as an outlet for a new way of doing politics, avoiding the political parties that are tiered, structured organizations with clearly defined paths of representation. It is impossible to imagine a political party that doesn't use some sort of representative mechanism, such as the election of delegates, delegates who elect other delegates, and so forth.

One of the main topics of discussion in these movements then was to question hierarchical mechanisms of representation and to establish egalitarian participation. Even if they didn't do so explicitly, they did it in practice. They created operational methods which were considered communitarian. In fact, this word was, and still is, of great importance. I believe that, in a

² R. Cardoso's essays on the formation of political communities and popular movements were republished in Caldeira, 2011.

distant future, when someone decides to write about the political history of this period, they will be impressed with how often the word “community” is mentioned, with various different meanings. But certainly this word became so widespread exactly because it represented something very important. It went on to be used as a counterpoint to any form of organization which based itself on representation, thus sustaining a hierarchy. It represented a vision that, at last, egalitarian participation was possible.

This also unchained the discussion on participation. And what is political participation? It is this fight against hierarchy, based on the principle that where there are hierarchical mechanisms there are also mechanisms that exclude the people from participation; and where people hold equal positions, all issues can be discussed by everyone so as to produce an opinion created by a group as a whole— the so-called community. In other words, representative mechanisms were being criticized by this ideology which was basically started in the 1960s, and which was basic to these social movements.

The implicit question, therefore, was how to establish truly democratic relations between society and the State? How can this relationship be forged? “Participation” is simply a word to describe this: the relationship between society and the State; and there are different ways of participation, according to the different channels through which this relationship may organize itself. It was this relationship that was being called into question, in the search for a more democratic mechanism for this communication among society as a whole, which at this point was already extremely segmented and extremely complex and featured very intricate communication mechanisms.

In the face of all this complexity, held together by the mass media alone, society suddenly struggled to find its identity. Discussion began on the heterogeneity of society and possible relations with the state. That was when this theme of a greater democracy emerged, based on the concept of equal participation by all members of a movement and the perception of a common experience. And here we also see a telling difference when compared to traditional channels of participation. I cite the parties as an example, but it could be trade unions, and it could be all institutionalized channels, which are based on mechanisms of representation.

The idea of a political party, for example, is that people agree on some key elements of their viewpoint on society that, generally, are expressed through a platform. The parties’ platforms are not always the same; the way they

carry out these platforms is not the same. Therefore, a party expresses a vision of society and people agree or disagree. The party doesn't care who they are, whether they are white or yellow, young or old, women or men. These segments are not included in this definition, at least not when related to affiliation to a party, or a trade union, or a professional organization.... If I'm a lawyer, I can belong to the Bar Association, and the Bar Association can represent me before the state, regardless of any other characteristics I may have. I am there merely as a lawyer or as a unionized worker, and so on.

In social movements, it doesn't work that way. People are there as people, in their full capacity, as participants of these movements. The very idea of the movement is that there is a common experience that must be shared. Thus, a women's movement is a movement that brings women together. It may include a few men who are sympathetic but, the truth is that no matter how much a man can contribute and fully support the feminist movement, his participation in this movement will never be equal to that of women. Why? Because they have experienced a type of discrimination that is exalted due to the fact that they lived through it firsthand. It is not an experience which can be fully understood by those who have not lived through it. Supposedly, men can rationally understand that women are discriminated against, but the movement's ideology is based on the experience of this discrimination, rather than the rational acceptance of it.

The same is true with the black movement. Although there are whites who support the black movements, they are nonetheless discriminated by this movement. They will always be supporting elements, and at some point they will be reminded that they did not live through the definitive experiences which would cause someone to "buy into" the movement entirely.

I mentioned the two most obvious examples, women and blacks, which are based on visible biological and physical characteristics and, therefore, are easier to identify. But, when there are not such clear markers of difference, these movements create elements that imply and celebrate a common experience. That is why they are alternative. They always assume that they have a life experience that is of another nature, and that one must, in fact, have to go through this rite of passage, to have certain experiences in order to be regarded as a true member of these movements.

Take, for example, the hippie movement in the United States, and we'll see that the mix between the hippie movement and drug use created the

possibility of a highly celebrated and shared experience. This created a great political sense of direction, joining together different groups and distinct forms of activity. Of course, not all hippies were necessarily have to be users of the same drugs, but the shared experience of illegality, of the drug “buzz”, etc., was celebrated and considered a key element, since they were at the basis of society’s rejection,.

When we think of current-day Brazil, what comes to mind are not these movements, although they also exist. Here, when we talk about social movements – or at least in the opinion of sociologists and political scientists who discuss social movements –, we are referring more to the neighborhood groups, which make direct claims on the State.

I always like to draw a parallel between two things, which are sometimes artificially separated: movements which demand some type of action are seen as essentially political and positive, since they belong to the lower classes, and those other movements to which I referred, which are interpreted as interclass movements, a “middle-class thing”, something that we should be wary of.

I think it’s time for us to start looking at what similarities, if any, these movements present, and find the relevant aspects of these similarities, which I believe exist. I don’t mean that they are the same thing, but I think there are several similarities, which in their organizational modes, in the concept of basic equality for all its members. They share the spontaneity arising not from top down decision-making but from the bottom up. The language we use frequently suggests such ideas are born spontaneously, when people suddenly realize that they share certain experiences and situations.

And what are these shared situations for the popular movements that demand action from the State here in Brazil? The fact is that they have been deprived of something: neighborhoods on the outskirts of São Paulo are not connected to the citywater and sewer system, they lack schools, and their population is systematically discriminated against. And so, it’s exactly this language, which talks about these neighborhoods in a uniform way that creates this kind of “community”, fruit of the creation of ideological mechanisms. Here, I don’t mean to use “ideological” in a critical way, nor do I mean to say that it mystifies anything. There is no mystification. It results from this form of organization, a set of ideas that guide action without mystifying anything; on the contrary, they contribute to social action.

This ideology, forged as such, promotes equality between people, even when this equality is not effectively present. When we look at a neighborhood association, we often find people of quite different social and economic backgrounds, a much more diverse mix than we could probably find within a trade union, for instance. However, this diversity is often overlooked. It is systematically forgotten. Let us contemplate this ideology, which considers everyone to be equal. Although one is the owner of the bakery and the other is from a family living on minimum wage – it is clear that the level of income and consumption are quite different –, in fact they are equals because they are both residents of a low-income neighborhood, where everyone experiences the hardship of dealing with inadequate transportation, schooling, etc.

Of course they face quite different realities within that experience, but the fact that they face the very same challenges in their daily routines is greatly emphasized. This fact overshadows the differences, not because the differences cease to exist – obviously, the difference between minimum wage and five times the minimum wages is real and will continue to exist forever. But there is a way to work around this issue: emphasizing the common element of their life experiences. And that is why one can build a political player – neighborhood associations, church groups or whatever shape this organization takes – which can act as one. A common real experience, something that people have actually lived through is not an abstract identity. It is an identity that is always forged out of a specific discrimination and something that is considered to be an injustice; it brings people together and leaves aside the elements would normally drive them apart.

I believe that these features are common among the libertarian movements, interclass movements – such as women’s and afro-descendant movements – and the popular movements that we see in the outskirts of our cities. These are the common features which authenticate a sense of community. All these people always speak on behalf of the community, always feel like a community and prevent, in many ways, the establishment of hierarchical distinctions. I’m not saying that their structure lacks authority, or that these groups don’t have effective leaders guiding and/or shaping opinion. Of course that can still happen, but the shaping of opinions can happen in a variety of ways. It can happen within the hierarchical systems as well as with the egalitarian and democratic ones. It is possible to be very authoritative when working as a community, and this is what sometimes happens.

But that is not the issue. What I'm trying to do here is to highlight the fact that everyone is in the same boat, sharing a common experience, and therefore, everyone gives their opinion, and the group decides on how to act by consensus (there is always the need to create a consensus). And this is not always easy. This is exactly why in all these groups, both in the movements that I call libertarian (the black movement, against racism; the women's movement, against women's discrimination, etc.), as in the popular movements, the frequency of breakaway groups, splits and the emergence of new groups is quite high. If they reproduce through fission resulting in a multiplication of groups that at times compete against each other, only to join forces again later... Such schisms usually occur as a result of a breakdown of consensus and competition for leadership. Rupture usually takes place when one of the parties is excluded and when part of the group stops going to meetings, does not show up, or forms another group. It seems to me that this is a structural mechanism behind the expansion of all of these types of social movements. And that's why I think that comparing the actions of these movements with the actions of political parties and trade unions, is such a difficult task, since they are structured in different ways, and perform distinct roles within the political system. One could probably never replace the other. The idea of joining both is also extremely complicated, since the operating rules on either side are different and incompatible. In my opinion, they will feed on each other, but remain relatively isolated.

I'd like to expand a little on what I call community when I talk of social movements. It is based on the concept of shared experience. This is a basic element of all definitions of community: that people feel a part of it and share a sense of community, of being equals, giving and taking. It also implies collective action. People who have this sense of participation in the community are those who can make things happen, and they make it happen together. Without this, there is no community. So community does not only exist in people's minds. In fact, it's about action, whether demanding change in policy, denouncing discrimination, or simply enjoying doing things together, whether they be meetings of leisure activities,

It seems to me that the feeling of belonging together with purposeful activities is exactly what we refer to as its identity. These communities create a particular identity for their members and, as they begin to act as a group, they acquire a significant need to create mechanisms which strengthen that

identity and provide the evidence on which to anchor the idea of an identity that until recently did not exist.

And therein lies our question, as in nearly all cases groups construct stories that are often imaginary, mythical.

Nearly all social movements are such as those in the outskirts of São Paulo, where small groups end up demonstrating a keen interest in local history, in everything that surrounds the history of their neighborhood, celebrating the common experience of living in a particular place. When talking to them, they often tell us: “This was a jungle when I first came here”. They claim that it was they would bring civilization to these places. They tell the tale of moving to this jungle, and how there was nothing there – just animals, snakes; they had to walk three hours to cross the river to catch a bus; and all of a sudden, these things were improving, partly due to their own doing, through their domesticating the environment.

In point of fact, these memories are largely inventions. But I believe that we shouldn't worry so much about that; instead we should try to understand why there is a need for such inventions. Certainly they are based on some facts, but the facts don't really matter, because we don't even know if the documented history is real. This element is the least relevant of all. The most important thing is to understand that memory creates identity, and that memory is essential to these forms of organization. But this process is not limited to the local level. For other movements, which are the movements that join people of different social classes, there is also a very similar process of trying to rescue the past. It's worth remembering, for example, that a large part of what was written during the feminist movement was the recovery of a history seen from the point of view of women, placing a greater value on women's role. Little-known heroines are re-discovered, taken to new heights, placed in a different context – sometimes in contexts which are widely questionable – women who actually played more masculine than feminine roles in order to gain past notoriety, are rediscovered as examples, as female role models. It would be practically useless, in my opinion, to discuss whether a supposedly 19th-century heroine does or doesn't show the qualities the feminist movement wishes to exalt – and the same could be applied to rediscovering the past from the point of view of the slaves or blacks, and so on. The important thing is this need to rediscover this past. The important thing is the ability to organize some facts which are more or less unrelated, and which depend on

how we connect them; how we build something to substantiate our identity.

It is this need to express this identity that seems relevant to me. One of the most entertaining accounts of this process was reported by [Manuel] Castells. While working in Spain with local urban social movements, he noticed that a housing project built by the local BNV on the outskirts of Madrid had been built over an ancient Spanish village, which apparently had disappeared around the 18th century, giving way to an industrial area, among other things. A residents' movement grew to demand a number of urban improvements. What happened, all of a sudden, was that people started to develop their identity mechanisms. They obviously had nothing to do with each other; they had been chosen for this housing project through their social characteristics as defined by governmental data. In their effort build their identity as a movement, they decided that there should be some type of festive activity and that it should have something to do with the place. They accordingly went to the public library in Madrid to research the type of festivities that took place in the ancient village over which the project was built. And they recovered and recreated these festivities, of course with modern aspects, since explicit documentation of the ancient festivities no longer existed. That is, they invented a new folklore and to this day they continue to celebrate their festivals.

We see this happening in São Paulo. The younger generation doesn't realize that many of the festivals celebrated today were not celebrated ten years ago and even less so when you go back twenty years. The newspapers talk about the San Genaro festival, Our Lady of Achiropita festival, and so on. I'm not saying those festivals didn't exist; they existed in the past, ceased to exist a long time ago and are today part of a memory that is being rediscovered from a distant past. I think this is a process that we should watch very closely. It would be quite interesting to think a little more about this process, and to do so not by focusing on whether such festivities they are accurate from a historical point of view, but learning more about their current meaning.

That, of course, does not mean that we should not take into consideration where the movement's members come from and how they organize. But that is not fundamental in defining them. The key is that these processes are a form of identity creation and that, with these fairs, festivals and even with the preservation of certain folk dances and so forth; they are creating a political identity, which is based on a common experience and which increases the

likelihood of collective action. In addition to the experience of being poor, having inadequate transportation and education services, they can also refer to other levels of experience, such as leisure, documenting history, or the preservation of some elements of the space where the community is settled. It is clear that this provides much greater material evidence of this sense of community, and I believe that this is a basic idea for the development of all these forms of organization.

What I'm trying to say with all this is that, when I mention the word community as a basic element in the definition of these social movements, I am not using the scientific concept of community (which certainly does not apply), but the idea that the people who participate in the movements want to express. In other words, I mean the idea that they all share a common experience that is the basis for collective action, which is political in nature. This political action is not in lieu of other forms of political action which take place in society; I believe that it is an important complement. Therefore, everything that we can identify as elements that consolidate and materialize the idea of community, and of something shared by all, is essential for maintaining the necessary conditions for organization and political efficacy.

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