

The right to the city as a unifier of diverse urban social mobilizations: the case of the Brazilian recent grassroots protests

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It is not an overstatement to say that, despite its different theoretical and political approaches, the recent literature on the right to the city shares a common diagnosis: that the term has been used by many different social actors and in variegated senses, which sometimes even conflict with each other. This plurality of meanings assigned to the right to the city is interpreted as a lack of conceptual precision: the term would have turned into “an empty signifier” (HARVEY, 2013,p.xv), a vague concept that “lacks specificity, both in terms of what is included in that right and what is meant by the city” (FAINSTEIN, 2009,p.27), a conceptual “umbrella for all types of political and social demands” (SCHMID, 2012,p.42), a “vortex” (KUYMULU, 2013, p.923) or “something of a catchphrase” (PURCELL, 2002,p.100). For some authors the absence of a precise content is also interpreted as the main cause for the loss of the concept’s critical potential (MAYER, 2012;SOUZA, 2010).

Taking the recent grassroots protests in Brazil into account, this article intends to contribute to the ongoing debate on the right to the city. In June 2013, protests against the raise in the bus and subway fares in several Brazilian cities have turned into one of the biggest street demonstrations the country has seen since its democratization. As the protests erupted with more than a million on the streets, the right to transportation has turned into one of several different demands addressed by the highly diverse social actors that have taken part in the demonstrations. Demands for the right to housing and against evictions, against the hosting of the World Cup in 2014 and in defense of public spaces such as harbors and parks have shared the same urban arenas, in a very loose coalition. Even though the demand for the right to the city is part of the housing movements’ repertoire at least since the constitutional convention in 1988, the term gained a broader social projection with the demonstrations.

The hypothesis defended here is that the right to the city works as an overarching concept that unites heterogeneous groups with different demands and enables loose coalitions between social groups that used to fight for their claims in separated venues. But the diagnosis assumed here is slightly different. The variety of meanings addressed to the concept is not interpreted as a lack of any sort – of content, specificity or critique –, but rather as the strength of the term. While the autonomist groups against the hike in transport fares could easily appeal to the right to transportation, the more traditional left-winged housing movements could simply demand the right to housing, and groups that fight for the maintenance of public parks and even street movie theaters could also turn to specific rights, they demand for the right to the city. Recurring to the grassroots movement’s discourses and to the theoretical debate, the paper intends to show how the demand for the right to the city combines both the social and the artistic critiques, to use Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005) terms.

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