"From the "città ideale" to Gramsci's "città futura"

Glimmers or Utopias of radical democracy in Nouakchott and Paris"

Riccardo Ciavolella, Armelle Choplin*

(*) Riccardo Ciavolella, anthropologist, CNRS, Paris, riccardo.ciavolella@ehess.fr ;
Armelle Choplin, geographer, Université Paris-Est, armelle.choplin@univ-paris-est.fr

Introduction

We would like to participate to our common debate about contentious planning and insurgent and alternative forms of democracy with two case studies and one theoretical proposition. Our empirical cases are a World Bank participatory slum-upgrading program (PSUP) in Nouakchott, the capital city of Mauritania, and a real estate project in Paris. Despite their differences, both contexts surprisingly present a similar situation, where urban governance has strategically integrated rhetorical discourses and practical procedures of participative planning. In the authoritarian context of a poor African slum as much as in a Left wing popular and artistic neighbourhood of socio-democratic Paris, generally considered as a model of "démocratie de proximité" (as our colleague M-H Bacqué has noticed; Bacqué et al., 2005), we find a common post-political tendency. We all know this as a technical procedure of governance through consensus, which deprives real democracy of its constitutive conflictive essence, if we rely on Swyngedouw, Rancière, Zizek, Laclau and Mouffe or whoever else you like. As far as we are concerned, we like Gramsci. From Bayat (1997, 2004) to Chatterjee (2004), we all know that his theories on subalternity may be of inspiration for thinking of marginalized city-dwellers' practices and resistances (like piracy, contestations, informal activities and so on) as signs of the "insurgent polis" (Swynguedow, 2011) and new forms of mobilization (Benit-Gbaffou and Oldfield 2011; Harvey 2012; Miller and Nicholls 2013), counter-balancing the post-political city, as "quiet" alternative way to produce and transform the city and more broadly the entire society. But we think that Gramsci's ideas may help in pushing the debate a little further, or even beyond the vicious circle of institutional consensual governance and social insurgent resistance of the post-political view.

La *Città futura* or "The future city" is the title of a political fanzine, never translated entirely into English, that a 26-years-old Gramsci wrote in 1917 and which anticipated many of the ideas developed later in his fameous *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci's "Città Futura" links the issue of urbanity to that of political citizenship and engagement, both in a metaphorical and in a historicist way, playing with the different meanings attached to the Italian word *città*: the Roman *urbs*: a physical inhabited and structured space; the Roman *civitas:* the social ensemble of *citizens* – or *citizenry* - linked by juridical and

moral bonds of reciprocal rights and obligations; and the Greek *polis*: a social space of political engagement and active citizenship. Thus, in Gramsci, the *città* refers to both a *physical* and *socio-historical* space for politicization for subaltern masses to become actively involved in the making of their own society: in this sense, the *città* can also be an ideal metaphor of a concrete political project for the new society to build. Actually, Gramsci played with this polysemy of *cittadino* ("citizen"), in a way that the idea of *being urban*, or *cityness*, merges with that of *being political*, or even more so, of *becoming political*. Gramsci was very critical of two tendencies. The first was political planning and ideological utopism: for him "the future city" was to be built through historical practices guided by ideals of emancipation, but these ideals had not to transform into evasive utopias of a perfect society which actually defused the social and historical forces. The second was the bourgeois and liberal conception of democracy as the mere participation to the decision-making process through votes: in his revolutionary terms, the citizen was not only the recipient of pure rights, but a subject of historical transformation and collective emancipation. As a consequence, the "future city" was not a form, but a historical practice of political participation to the transformation of society.

Nouakchott

Coming to our case study, in Nouakchott, we have analysed a World Bank upgrading project of an old slum near the city centre. In 2003, the project started in a slum where we had already carried out field research, so that we have been able to assess it form its implementation to its impacts, namely the displacement of 25.000 people but also the collective popular initiatives of contestation that emerged. This program aimed to legalize informal urban areas, relying on the ideas of Hernando de Soto (2000). These call for the granting of land property titles as a way to include slum-dwellers into society by entering the market economy, as long as these titles should serve as a start-up capital of new entrepreneurial citizens. But this privatization of land has also exposed people to dispossession. Only the richest slum-dwellers could obtain the property titles. Most marginal slum dwellers were firstly told that they were "*sans fiches sans photo*"

(no files, no photo) – that their census files had been lost and/or was incomplete (missing photo, incoherent initial plot number, etc.) – so that they could not obtain the title for the land they were actually occupying. Thus, in 2008, 25.000 have been evicted and resettled far away, in a waste land south of the city without any facilities nor services. Not without a certain tragic irony, displaced people called their new faraway neighborhood "*sans fiche sans photo*".

During our recent interviews in the resettled neighborhood, we have understood that, at the time of the upgrading program, civil servants and actors of development agencies had seized their files. They sold them for money, frequently to people of the upper social classes who saw an opportunity to get well-located plots.

In 2012, four years later, some international NGOs who had accompanied the displaced people gave them tools and voices to claim their needs, explained them how to interact with state bureaucracies and civil servants and encouraged them to engage into procedures of collective decision-making. Following this practice, displaced people wrote a letter to their prefect as a first act of contestation against their unjust situation. But contrary to all expectations, the letter did not denounce corruption, misuse of funds or other injustices that led to the displacement. They demanded to "improved daily living conditions in the present site" and, in particular electricity, a school, security. Some individuals requested not to get back their lands, but to have a definitive title of property of the plot they were occupying after the displacement. NGOs did not encourage them to claim citizenship neither a "right to the city", if we keep in mind the lefebvrian perspective. This is because the democratic quality of the initiatives they fostered was real only in terms of procedures of decision-making, but not radically democratic in terms of their contents: their procedures of participative democracy were standard, in accordance with the technocratic and consensual international urban governance. Participation was limited to the awairness-rising campaign and information about the consequences of the project that was already decided and an encouragement to participate, rather than to resist to, the project by assuming the role of urban entrepreneurs through self-help housing and microcredit: people were "invited" to take part to build their own house and pay back their loans.

Despite the great injustice suffered, mobilization remained weak. The protests were non political, short-lived, spontaneous and stay at the micro-level. People only mobilized to

get a legal property title, to get facilities to do business, to be more secure, while NGOs accompanied them in their efforts not to resist to the project, but to implement it at its best. In terms of subjectivation, the "cittadino" (inhabitants and citizens) who is taking shape is a far cry from Gramsci's ideas. He does not claim a right to the city but individual "rights through the (neoliberal) city" (Nicholls, Vermeulen, 2012).

If we keep our gaze on this project, we may argue that people's mobilization is very weak and that we are witnessing the post-politicization of urban transformation in Nouakchott. But if we enlarge our focal, we argue that these cases of injustice are indirectly feeding broader forms of politicization on a larger scale, with the formation of a political subject representing most of the marginalized urban and rural dwellers. This is especially the case for the *Haratin*, the descendant of former slaves, which represent the large, but often invisible majority, of the Mauritanian population and especially of the slums. Paradoxically, the urban outskirts have become spaces of freedom from their ancient masters living in other parts of the city. There, they are experimenting life with other poor people, and can acquire new autonomous practices and initiatives (such as women associations, links with NGO's projects, children's schooling…). Urban margins become laboratories for new shared identities and social solidarities and thus for the formation, maybe, of a new political subject. These local aspirations resonate with a new and strong national anti-slavery movement led by its Haratin leader, Biram Dah Abeid. Actually, occupying urban space has become a central strategy to make themselves heard and visible. Regularly, IRA Movement holds sit-ins in front of the ministries and organizes marches through cities and towns around the country. Nouakchott has recently become a backdrop for new and regular political protests. Even if the multiplication of these protests reveal of a lack of coordination between different subaltern groups, they could be harbingers of the increasing politicization of the (urban) Mauritanian society.

Paris

Our second example is taken from Paris, and more precisely from Belleville, a popular neighbourhood well known for its insurgent history. In the last year, we have been analysing a recent current mobilization against a huge real estate project in Rue

Dénoyez, some meters away from where the first assembly of the Commune took place and where its last barricade fell down. This is now a semi-pedestrian small colourful street, internationally known for its *plein air* art gallery where graffitis covered the walls of the last small *début du siècle* workers housing architectures.

Here, a real estate project of the municipality, governed by a far left party, plans to destroy them in order to build a new brand building with crèche and subsidised housing. The apparent left wing orientation of the project has convinced many people of its progressive nature, while local institutions claim to lead urban governance through a local participative democracy approach (Bacqué, Sintomer, 2010; Nez, 2015). Nevertheless, a collective of artists, inhabitants and traders of the street has recently tried to oppose to the project. Last October, they showed the banner *'Sauvons la rue Dénoyez'* – "Let's save rue Dénoyez", starting a visible and mediatic mobilisation.

The collective did not contest the nature and the good intentions of the project. It rather asked to preserve the typical ambiance of the street, and especially the links with artists, cosmopolitan aspects, and the proximity. It wanted to be part of the project, to discuss with the municipality, urban planners and the architects in a co-productive approach. But, the town municipality was afraid to see another long-term mobilization after the flop of another project in a neighbouring street (36 rue de Belleville). To avoid confrontation, the municipality delayed the public meeting and left the committee with no news about the project. Nevertheless, the contestation got a lot of support with 4000 signatures for its petition and a great visibility on medias, like *Le Monde* newspaper.

The municipality then decided to organize a "reunion publique de presentation du projet". The objective was not to discuss or to concert with the collective and the inhabitants but to show the final project, with no room for modification and debate. The mayor and the local government considered that the project had already been discussed and collectively approved with the inhabitants of the neighbourhood in the 1990s. The project was planned for other sites, but it has always been stopped by mobilizations. Twenty years later, Rue Dénoyez is for the municipality the last chance to implement the project. The mayor also insisted that there were disagreements between the artists themselves and that the committee was contesting against a "socially" required project. The town hall called the collective as "NIMBY" and gentrifiers.

We argue that there is no will of domination or exclusion by politicians and institutions,

but that there is rather a problem of different regimes of justification, in the Boltanski's sense (Boltanski, Thevenot, 1991), between the municipality and the inhabitants, so that this case reveals the difficulty to dialogue and implement local democratic participation in these conditions, with the ideals of participative democracy to reduce to simple rhetoric for justification. The collective get the impression it cannot get reach the decision makers. The frustration is all the more amplified by the fact that the local democracy is promoted by a left-wing party at the head of the town hall, who insist on progressive values of social inclusion, cosmopolitianism and popular culture.

Since then, a second mobilization is currently occurring rue Ramponeau, the cross street. The "Collectif Ramponeau" fights against a public-private partnership for building a youth hostel instead of the last artisanal metal workshop of Paris which employs 7 people. In this case, the mobilization is more organized: it is supported by the artists and artisans, but also by the former association "La Bellevilloise" which struggled against urban regeneration in the 70's, members of the comité de quartier, local associations, some scholars such as "Eric Hazan", an internationally known intellectual writing about the Paris Commune and its current legacy, and even some municipal officials opposing to their own party and mayor. In comparison to the first, his mobilization shows how important to understand the participative rules, to federate sporadic urban protests, even in small areas, to generate a citizen knowledge (*competences et savoir citoyens*) in participatory town planning (Deboulet, Nez, 2013).

Conclusion

Coming to our conclusion, our case studies are certainly very different. In Nouakchott, in a context of slum clearance, we have seen that any collective initiatives do exist are picked up by the NGOs, which mediate through "participative democracy" between the urban governance project and the displaced people in order to make them fit into the expectations of a neoliberal and individualistic society. In Paris, supposed to be an example of participatory democracy, we have seen the difficulty of communication between (even) far left-wing politicians and inhabitants willing to be involved into the planning process, although spaces for discussion and debate are in principle provided (*Comité de quartier*), by what Parisian civil servants like to think as a "democratie de

proximité". If we go back to the Gramsci's idea of a Future city, it is surprising to see that the Mauritanian case is more likely to see those experiences of slum dwellers, even if depoliticized as regards the slum upgrading project, could converge into a process of political subjectivation and collective action of the marginalized; while in Paris, mobilizations remain confined to the limits of the local, the "local trap" (Purcell, 2006).

References

Bacqué M.H., Rey H. & Sintomer Y. (dir.) (2005), *Gestion de proximité et démocratie participative*, Paris, La Découverte « Recherches ».

Bacqué M.H., Sintomer Y., Flamand A. & Nez H. (dir.) (2010), *La Démocratie participative inachevée*, Paris, Adels/Yves Michel « Société civile ».

Bayat A (1997) Un-civil society: the politics of informal people. *Third World Quarterly* 18 (1): 53–72.

Benit-Gbaffou C and Oldfield S (2011) Accessing the state: Everyday practices and politics in cities of the south. *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 46(5): 445–452.

Boltanski L. & Thévenot L. (1991), *De la justification*, Paris, Gallimard.

Chatterjee P (2004) *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Political Society in Most of the World*, Columbia University Press, New York, 173 p.

Choplin A., 2014, "Post-politics and subaltern (de)mobilization in an African city. Nouakchott (Mauritania).", *Journal of Asian and African studies*, 49 (5),

Ciavolella R, Choplin A (Forthcoming, 2015) *Gramsci and the Città future. Insights on urban subalterns and their political initiative*. In Fouquet T., Georg O. (ed.), Karthala.

De Soto H (2000) *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else*. New York: Basic Books.

Deboulet A., Nez H. (dir.), Savoirs citoyens et démocratie urbaine. Pur, 2013, 138 p.

Ekers M, Hart G, Kipfer S and Loftus A (2013) *Gramsci, space, nature and politics*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 362 p.

Gramsci A (2007) *Quaderni del carcere*. Einaudi, Torino

Harvey D (2001) *Spaces of Capital. Towards a Critical Geography*. New York: Routledge.

Harvey D (2012), *Rebel Cities*. New York: Verso. 206p.

Miller B and Nicholls W (2013) Social movements in urban society: the city as a space of politicization, *Urban Geography, 34* (4), 452-473.

Myers G., 2011, *African Cities. Alternative Visions of Urban Theory and Practice*. London, Zed Books

Nez H., *Urbanisme : la parole citoyenne*, Lormont, Le Bord de l'eau, 2015

Nicholls W., Vermeulen, (2012) "Rights *through* the City: The Role of the City for Immigrant Rights Movements", in Michael Peter Smith and Michael McQuarrie (eds.) *Remaking Urban Citizenship: Organizations, Institutions, and the Right to the City*. New Brunswick: Transactions Publishers.

Pieterse E (2010) Cityness and African Urban Development. *Urban Forum* 21(3): 205-219

Purcell M (2012) Gramsci Is Not Dead: For a 'Both/And' Approach to Radical Geography. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 11(3): 512-524

Purcell M. (2006), « Urban Democracy and the Local Trap », Urban Studies, vol. 43, n◦ 11, p. 1921-1941.

Rancière J (1998) *Aux Bords Du Politique*. Paris: La fabrique.

Robinson J (2002) Global and world cities: a view from off the map. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 26(3): 531–54.

Robinson J (2006) *Ordinary cities: between modernity and development*. London: Routledge.

Roy A (2011) Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35(2): 223-238.

Roy A and Ong A. (2011) *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*. John Wiley & Sons.

Scott J C (1985) *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale University Press.

Simone A (2004) *For the city yet to come: Changing African life in four cities*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Swyngedouw E (2010) City or Polis? Profitable Politics or … The End of The Political. In

Buijs, S., Tan, W., Tunas, D, editor(s). *Megacities: Exploring a Sustainable Future.* Rotterdam: 010 Publishers: 214-233.

Swyngedouw E (2011) *Designing the Post-Political City and the Insurgent Polis. Civic City Cahier 5*. London: Bedford Press.