

## Participative Budgeting as a urban culture of dialogue

by Giovanni Allegretti

Capital of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre – 1.3 million inhabitants in the heart of the Economic Community of Mercosul – today is the symbol of a strong network of ‘reformistic and educational’ cities: a model experiment that has succeeded in renewing the relationship between citizens and institutions, and is universally admired by very different perspectives of interpretation. Thus, today, it is not only a ‘best practice’ of the UN in the sector of city management, or the ideal see chosen by the World Bank for the 1999 summit meeting on Participatory Democracy; but it has become the symbol chosen by the so-called ‘Seattle People’ to signal the passage from the moment of protest to that of proposals for ‘a possible new world’.

Since the elections in 1989, in fact, Porto Alegre has had its budget directly managed by its citizens, by means of a complex mechanism of general assemblies in which more than 40,000 people participate. The local democratisation process has led to an inversion in priorities in all the sectorial municipal policies, rebuilt with actually participatory criteria starting from their role as potential instruments for bringing about a re-equilibrium in the city’s social inequalities. Passing through the territories of everyday occurrences, the method has succeeded in bringing discussion away from local egoisms and towards a construction of strategic objectives and shared viewpoints for the city as a whole.

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*‘Happiness is not a safe port; it is a way of navigating’*. This saying is often repeated in Porto Alegre, the city that ever since the beginning of the century (and even more so during the past decade) has succeeded in putting itself forward as a critical and much-praised version of Brazil, and has ended up by becoming today one of the spokesmen of that great substrate of civilisation that thrives amid postcard-type beauties and the abyss of the *favelas* representing its pictorial counter-melody. And it is a valid saying - in both a prescriptive and a descriptive sense - for application to the system of ‘Orçamento Participativo’ (O.P.) that Arch. Rebecca Abers describes in *‘Plurimondi/PluralWorlds’*, n° 2 – 1999 and in other international magazines.

By analysing any aspect whatsoever of Porto Alegre during the past 11 years of its evolution, is not possible to exclude a study of the O.P. and its effects on the city’s transformation, many of which appear today to be consolidated (such as the massive interventions for readmitting the informal city, by making it a lawful city), whereas others are now beginning to be affirmed or to give rise to their first stirrings. Among the texts of the many Brazilian and foreign researchers who have stopped to study Porto Alegre, one of the most anomalous and interesting is definitely that of Elisete Menegat (1995), who travels back by stages over the birth of the ‘Orçamento Participativo’ by means of a jump in time which displays its roots. The little-known text of this researcher develops and documents the hypothesis that the history of managing the city of Porto Alegre is that of a progressive ‘refilling of meaning’ of a series of democratic institutions, often created as an empty façade by technocratic or dictatorial regimes, and taken with time on a substantive importance until the creation of the O.P. In this process, the qualifying element for the ‘jump in quality’ that the O.P. undoubtedly represents would not be depicted so much as a ‘top-down empowerment’ promoted by the coalition that won the municipal elections in 1988, as rather on the basis of the devisings of the civic urban movements, which in 1983 found the strength to gather themselves in the UAMPA (Union of the Inhabitants Associations of Porto Alegre). This does not diminish the role of the so-called ‘Popular Front’, that had already been reconfirmed twice at the head of the city. It simply rehabilitate the other ‘half’ of those fighting for a transparent and shared-in management of power, until then remained in the shade. Above all, it re-evaluated the propositional and organisational capacities of the urban movements, often disregarded by an uneven criticism in praising the decisive role of the Workers’ Party (PT) and its allies in rebuilding the modes of urban politics. The latter cannot be denied, however, above all because it has created ‘courage’ out of what is usually ‘cowardice’: i.e. it has made it clear that the shared-in and democratic management

procedures (highly praised internationally by institutions such as UNCHS or the World Bank) are not necessarily modes for unloading responsibility, but often require an increase in commitment and a high continuity of the level of 'critical attention' on the part of the Administration that promotes them. The proof of this is the commitment demonstrated by Mayor Dutra (1989-1992) for improving first the financial system and then the city-planning system and giving 'substantiality' to the process of democratising politics. Another proof is the decision not to formalise the O.P. in a law, but to leave it as an open and flexible structure, capable of evolving parallel with the progressive growth of its citizens in the two-way pedagogical process that it structures.

The O.P. is a legal mechanism, because the same Federal Constitution and the Statute of the municipality of Porto Alegre generically provide for a direct participation in the management of the State according to the competencies of the different institutional levels; for the rest, however, it remains an 'informal' process, because it is not regulated by a law, but is self-regulated by means of simple internal statutes that change almost every year by the citizens' action. This aspect of 'informality' constitutes a new, and perhaps not yet sufficiently investigated, side of the O.P. of Porto Alegre. The idea is that the guarantee of continuity and a broadening of experience is based on the strength of the popular movement that supports it, and can - indeed, must - exercise its critical spirit. But informality is a two-edged sword. If on the one hand, in fact, it opens up the possibility of a continuous improvement in the democratic contents of the O.P., and makes it impossible for it to stagnate or remain entangled in the meshes of bureaucracy, on the other it makes it subject to the political will of the moment, not guaranteeing it in theory against the possible decision of a future Executive to do away with it from the public scene. The ambiguity is greatly felt, but the institutionalisation of the O.P. is experienced like an unavoidable 'beginning of the end' for a process the inauguration of which is a guarantee of not ageing. This is why, in May 1999, Municipal Councillor Isaac Anhiorn's bill was opposed by the citizens of Porto Alegre, and seems to have disappeared like other similar threats of the past.

Flexibility and informality are a danger and a challenge. If up until now the danger has always been exorcised, the challenge is always under way. Until now, the best solutions to its growth arrived from the internal adjustments undergone by the O.P.: for example, the self-delimitation of the 16 civic regions in relation to the cultural identities and sense of belonging of their inhabitants and of pre-existing urban movements; the variation in the distribution criteria of the fundings for an equal dispersion of the public initiatives over the entire urban territory; but above all, the birth of the Thematic Assemblies in 1994. By supplementing those on a regional basis, these have made it possible to leave the framework of localised discussion, in order to widen the population's horizons of interpretation to the city as a whole. In this way, the O.P. showed its potential for multiplying the dialogue at different levels, and has been able to extend its power of control - and of direction - to new entries in the balance sheet, such as fixed costs for management and personnel. Above all, however, it triggered off a lively debate on the city that is capable of involving new classes of the population, and through the Assemblies of the Constituting City and City Congresses (to the preparation of which was entirely dedicated one of the three turns of the plenary assemblies of the Orçamento Participativo of 1993) has led to the drawing up of a new town-planning scheme, precisely while the city was rising to international notoriety and was linked to a network of exchanges of progressivist experiences in the various fields of urban management. Today, the challenge of informality finds itself at a cross-roads: if the possibility of the O.P.'s being 'contagious' elsewhere is a reality, having been verified in 70 other cities in the world, there is the chance of an internal 'contagion' represented by a scale enlargement of the process in a governmental sphere, and by the town-planning scheme at present in the phase of being approved.

In January 1999, the State of the Rio Grande do Sul in which Porto Alegre is located was also 'conquered' by the same coalition that governs the capital. The first measure experimented in these nine months has been the creation of the State O.P. (O.P./RS): a process that is still muddled and without a soul of its own, but which - with more than 2500 assemblies - has shown the potentials of participatory democracy to 190,000 persons of the city, interior, and countryside (in

2001 they arrive to be 500.000). That is, it restored a voice to the suburbs. The O.P./RS did not have an easy time of it, because of many interruptions that witnessed political oppositions forming a coalition and a justice that constitutes the most backward power in Brazil. But till now it survived, demonstrating a strong potential for complementarity with the cities that already possessed a municipal O.P. And it gambled its future on the capacities for growth and critical adjustment of the principles that move it: that is, on the opening up of its structure to self-regulation from the bottom. On the other great challenge, that of the town-planning scheme, there have been some steps forward. In a city that has experienced more than 50 years of technocratic planning, one of the challenges that the O.P. is slowly winning is that of de-bureaucratising the planning system. The inversion of priorities that was realised through years of investments in the poor suburbs was the first act; but the O.P. has also attacked bureaucracy at its roots, introducing the logic of agglomeration and of co-ordination that clashes with that of monadic isolation and of the separation of functions that is characteristic of bureaucracy (Pessin and Mainieri Paulon, 1994). It has also encouraged the birth of new institutional protagonists and 'in-fighting' practices among technicians and citizens in localities where daily life takes place; and it is helping to replace the logic of residing with that of living in places. It is not by chance that today, in the plans of the Administration of Porto Alegre, that territory that was consciously set aside for years is re-emerging in its local specificities.

In 1989, the idea of the Popular Front was to concentrate all efforts in rebuilding citizens as men and as political subjects. Only in this way could it have given plausibility to the transformations of the territory and a duration due to the comprehension of and adhesion to those transformations. The ways in which the O.P. had to change face and organisation in the different parts of a morphologically and socially complex city such as Porto Alegre were the proof that, if there existed 'resistances' in the local populace, there also existed 'energies' that were progressively utilisable to the good of the whole city. However, it was necessary to wait for the citizens - particularly the great mass of the 'excluded' - to accept topics such as environmental protection or historic monuments valorisation not as a luxury, a superfluous privilege for rich people, but as positive measures for their own quality of life. Now that the nucleuses of environmental educators work full time in the *favelas* to introduce the inhabitants to an overall notion of environment that courageously also includes the turning to account of the abundant efforts by the poorest people to build their huts and their neomedieval road typologies, the moment for the big step seems to be arrived.

The new Urban (and this time also Environmental) Master Plan is the instrument that has been built, together with the population, for this change in quality. Certainly, it is still not known what modifications will be brought to it in the course of its being approved, but for now it appears mature, equitable, realistic, far-sighted and humble. Mature, because it has waited for at least 15 years to verify the effects of its predecessor without hastening the solution to it, and correcting its defects; but also because it has been grafted on the system of micro-regionalisation by trying to make credible a multiple and unitary interpretation of the city, starting from several broken-in and tried management instruments, such as the O.P. Equitable - and democratic - for the way in which it has been drawn up, because it is aligned with the regulations of the municipal Statutes (unanimously recognised as the most progressive in Brazil), and because it corrects an unjust structure and form that permitted only to initiate the most convenient application of the town-planning instrument (Müzell, 1998). Realistic, because it does not claim to continue to superimpose regulations from on high, while refusing to recognise what is really happening in a territory due to polycentric propensity. And for this reason, it begins from a careful study of the informal city, with all its abundant contradictions, recognising that 'everything is city' (the motto of the Constituent Assemblies in which the drawing up of the plan was discussed with the citizenry). For this reason, it reconfirms several projects experimented in those years as a variation of the old Master Plan, such as 'district centres' and 'corridors of centrality' that, among their various functions, do not forget that of social habitation (Menegassi, 1998), and introduce new qualitative indicators as 'the animation' of the districts (Albano, 1998). Lastly, the new Town-Planning Scheme is far-sighted

because of its characteristic of plan-procedure in continuous compilation, structured around several clear ideas such as polycentrism, exploitation of the relationship between city and lake that has structured the urban history of Porto Alegre, but above all the 'active' environmental valorisation of the system of waters and native vegetation that covers the 40 'morros' that break up the built-up civic space. The latter moves from one series of partnerships already experimented in these years with the schools and above all with the inhabitants of the consolidated *favelas*, who since 1993 have organised the first nucleuses of vigilance for preserving the areas protected from speculators, as from the occupations of other homeless people.

As for the humility that the Plan lets come to light, it is evident in its open structure, which does not claim to impose too many rules, but at most explains them - opening up to the possibility of a discussion of individual points or of sectorial politics that are more easily understandable by the population than are its aggregate or its details. In addition, the 2<sup>nd</sup> PDDUA is a plan that 'wants to grow': for this reason, it emulates the open and flexible structure of the O.P. It moves forward in the politics of informing and making people aware, and it opens up to dialogue, discussion, negotiation on individual projects and prospects, even though in respect for several fundamental mainstays. In brief, a 'dialogical' Plan: that is, the opposite of the old town-planning schemes that had made the urban history of Porto Alegre up until now. Once again, it lacks a guarantee against future manipulations; but there is a challenge to grow with the population that must live and operate within its rules. So it's another of the Popular Administration's steps towards informality, not as a synonym of illegality or anarchy, but as a culture of self-determination, of dialogue and reciprocal education in experimentation. Something following the lesson of Paolo Freire and the Experimental Workshop on the Theory of Organisation created by Clodomir Santos de Moraes, this time transposed on the territory and in the organisation of civic politics, to dissolve and amalgamate the different private interests in the elaboration of a public project that is permanently open, democratic and transformatory. So that which, indeed, in Porto Alegre is felt to be summarised in the saying, '*Happiness is not a safe port; it is a way of navigating*'.