

## Five scenes and a story: deepening democracy in the city of consensus

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*The educational movement whose social manifestation burst in 2011 has made the city its main scenario. The street, and with it the entire city. The fact that the street is its scenario, however, is not enough for it to be a subject of interest; why is it relevant to speak of construction of a city in the light of what has happened in Chile in the last two years? Because of the practical and political possibility that the authorities have insinuated of designing the public space as an instrument of control? For a pictorial desire to photograph it as a backdrop? No. This reflection falls on the role of the public space and the city in processes of social transformation guided and led by the people, like the one Chile is living at present; and therefore, on the role of city construction in processes of social transformation, in particular in processes of democratic deepening.*

*What the demonstrations of the last two years have opened is basically a dialogue. Chile seems to be ad portas of a process of deepening democracy emerged from the citizens, in which the city may have a role both making space for this dialogue as facing a process of transformation itself. This reflection is organized in five scenes to build a bridge between the beginning of the dialogue in the city and the metropolis as part of a process of transformation and*

*democratic deepening. First, discussing the city as a conversation space, as the main phenomenon that shows social movement. This conversation space, however, cannot be understood as something neutral, free from the asymmetries that shape it through various spaces of power. In turn, these asymmetries and differences give way to conflict, understood not only as the violent clash of ideas, but as the only possible space for the construction of a true democracy, and as a synonym of the same. Finally, there is an analysis of how the city that embraces a society resistant to dissent becomes part of the social transformation implied by the deepening of democracy.*

### **SCENE 1. "WE TOOK THE STREETS TO AVOID BEING SILENCED": THE IDEAL OF THE CITY AS A CONVERSATION SPACE**

*The idea of "urban conversation" may be defined as a privilege every inhabitant of a city has a right to (Sandercock 2003, page 220). Such a conversation is what would allow citizens as a whole, through an inclusive process, to define the kind of relations they wish to construct together in the city. These ideals of inclusion are highly present in the literature of various authors, either under the idea of "city as the space for differences" (1), or as ideals of "a right to the city" (2), in terms of the*

*possibility of belonging, of being part of that urban conversation.*

*However, the reality is that many groups are excluded from such a conversation. When we speak over and over again about the problem of exclusion in Chilean cities, the housing segregation is usually at the center of the discussion, since housing and the process it entails constitute the biggest driving force for the construction of the city. Nevertheless, there is another type of exclusion, obviously linked to phenomena of spatial segregation, but it has to do with not being a part of that conversation and, therefore, of "conflictive and never finished construction of the desired order" defined by Lechner as politics, and as the space to make room for social subjectivity (Lechner 2002, page. 8).*

*Exclusion as a phenomenon can simultaneously have economic, political and cultural elements, acting as a socio-spatial phenomenon and as "an institutionalized form of controlling access: to places, to activities, to information" (Madanipour 2007, page 160). Exclusion processes imply that groups of people do not have equal access to the various goods offered by the city (economic, physical, cultural and political), and therefore, that social justice, which "requires that existing*

groups have equal access to material well-being, symbolic recognition, and decision-making power and the future generations inherit an environment that has not seriously deteriorated" (Fainstein 1999, page 250).

An ethics of diversity through conversation in the city cannot be understood nor developed separated from an understanding of the economic basis of inequality, such as has been shown by the social movement in its specific demands for public and quality education for everybody, for example. The deterioration of structures which democratically hold this urban conversation has led to a process of exclusion that the social movement expresses by opening a dialogue that wants to be part of that conversation and of the collective construction of the desired order. This dialogue has been opened in the visibility of the public space as a mechanism to avoid being silenced.

## SCENE 2. KNOWLEDGE AND POWER DIALOGUE

The exclusion of some groups from the construction of a collective order has been the driving force of open dialogue for social movement. Opening a dialogue, however, does not necessarily mean that those who dialogue are part of the political conversation. It is necessary for this to be done in a process of inclusion of differences. A classical sociologist like Wirth argues that "in the city, individual differences have 'not only [been] tolerated but rewarded'" (in Madanipour 2007, page 161). Along the same lines, Sandercock declares that "the just city is one that is socially inclusive, where

differences are not merely tolerated, but treated with recognition and respect" (in Fainstein 2005, page 125).

The problem of these definitions of inclusive city appears, however, when presenting the ideal of diversity in terms of merely harmonic coexistence, in which any difference may be exceeded without any confrontation. The ideal of cities as spaces of differences associated to the desire of inclusion clashes against the fact that the overlapping of differences inevitably implies the supremacy of certain ideas over others, according to the structures of power. Or, as Latour says, "Ignoring social asymmetry is as ridiculous as claiming that Newtonian gravitation does not exist" (Latour 2005, page 63).

The process of overlapping differences may be determined by existing asymmetries, or by more or less democratic processes. As Hayley suggests, "concepts of the 'good' and the 'just' were themselves constructed through relations of knowledge and power" (in Fainstein 2005, page 9). Knowledge construction and any type of dialogue takes place in spaces which are not neutral but shaped by power relations that precede and shape them (Cornwall 2003), and the city, as a political entity, does not escape this.

What is interesting about the current social, technological and communicational context, however, is that this presents a particular situation to understand diversity, where different types of knowledge are distributed more democratically. A new "nature of power in the networking society" (Castells 2011,

page 416) has determined the emergence, in the public arena, of groups that were hidden or without a voice.

If we accept that power determines what type of knowledge shapes our relationships, a scenario of new knowledge distribution would imply a new scenario of power as well. With the construction of new democratic spaces of knowledge, spaces are opened where asymmetries can be put into place, so that an inclusive dialogue can take place. Such a dialogue, in any case, can only be understood as a conflicting process.

## SCENE 3. CONFLICT

Any process of participation is in itself a conflict. That "conflict should be understood as one that is neither physical nor violent, but a friction that emerges on a content and production level, a conflict played out within the remit of the democratic arena. Acting within this arena produces reality" (Miessen 2010, page 101).

Conflict as friction is basically the space where differences appear. If they do not appear, it means that diversity has been crushed by asymmetries without friction and, therefore, does not have space to accommodate the diversity of ideas. Hajer and Reijndorp define "a true public domain as an experience in which there is interplay of friction and freedom" (in Miessen 2010, page 100). The possibility of constructing jointly desired new orders entails understanding conflict as a tool to widen the boundaries of what is possible.

Social movement has opened a conflict not only because of a simplistic reading of the violent confrontations in the street;

it has also required to make frictions and differences explicit from a sectorial problem, education, questioning whether education should be free for everyone, if there should be profit from education, or if it is legitimate to march along the streets without authorization.

To state these frictions is to open conflict. It is the opposite of assuming that certain knowledge should exercise power over another without a dialogue. Thus, it is not possible completely to understand conflict without speaking about the following scene. Conflict, like friction, is a synonym of democracy.

#### SCENE 4. DEMOCRACY

Social movement has explicitly requested more democracy. What is interesting, in terms of the transformation process, is that when asking for it and opening conflict, democracy is already being constructed.

The complexity of contemporary cities and societies forces us to understand a democracy that cannot be limited to a mere periodic accumulation of votes. Democracy has to be a way of confronting ideas and differences, where majorities are heard without crushing minorities. As Hallward indicates, we have an opportunity if we understand that “the concern of democracy is not with the formulation of agreement or the preservation of order but with the invention of new and hitherto unauthorised modes of disaggregation, disagreement and disorder” (in Swyngedouw, 2011, page 26). In this sense, if democracy is a synonym of conflict, the current social process must be interpreted as a process of deepening democracy.

In most cases, however, democracy is understood as a space of consensus and homogenization of ideas. Swyngedouw (2011) states that nowadays what prevails is a “post-political consensus” and a “post-democracy”, both managed by an elite comfortable in a status quo that favors it, that rejects any type of disagreement or space of dissent (Swyngedouw 2011). In this context, neither democracy nor real politics can exist. This view permeates society as a whole to the extent that the network culture of today can sometimes be based more on consensus than on conflict (Miessen 2010). The trick is that democratic consensus may be so only through a “conflicting consensus” that expresses differences. Therefore, the challenge is finding spaces for democratic deepening through this conflicting consensus.

#### SCENE 5. CITY

Although it may be obvious, it is worth repeating that “city forms, whether they have been specifically thought about or they are the rather spontaneous result of different dynamics, crystallize and reflect the logic of the societies that accommodate them” (Ascher, 2004, page 20). What is the logic that Chilean societies, in particular, admit? Even though any description would be a generalization, I should like to refer to a condition already recognized ten years ago by the Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme, which specifically refers to resistance to conflict:

“The specificity of the Chilean imagery seems to lie on the sanctification of order as a unit determined from its origin,

being at the same time threatened by disorder. This imagery takes force from the imagery antonym: the omnipresence of dark forces lying in wait. It is fear of the “Other”, the different and unknown other” (PNUD 2004, page 22). It is evident that, in that sanctification of order, understanding democracy as a space for dissent seems strange and fearsome. The democracy of consensus has governed and shaped the last decades as far as possible. In other words, “if fear of conflict is projected into the future, it might take away vitality from democracy as it demands a narrow demarcation (not conflicting) of what is possible” (PNUD 2004, page 24); that is to say, to a limited construction of the desired order, less democratic.


This condition of fear of disorder is what has probably caused the new dialogue spaces opened through conflicting encounters by the student movement, more or less violent, to generate rejection and fear in certain areas of society. Such areas claim that the movement is violent, without recognizing the deep democratic condition of the open dialogue. If the city is understood as a place for consensus, the emergence of conflict becomes uncomfortable. It is clear here that “while community mobilization is the necessary first step of an insurgent/ radical planning, it is rarely sufficient for lasting change” (Sandercock 2003, page 211). This needs an institutional support that recognizes a democratic practice in this conflict and that, at the same time, there is an “Insurgent practice” that aim to support new citizenship claims” (Ríos 2008, page 216) emerging in the world of design.

Taking up again the discussion about inclusion and city, the need appears for the city to be not just a space for the differences that take place in urban conversation, but for such conversation to give conflict the chance to expand the boundaries of what is possible through democratic deepening, and thus, think “the city as a space for accommodating difference and disorder. This hinges critically on creating egalibertarian public space” (Swyngedouw 2011, page 52). In this way, the city plays a role not so much giving room to dissent as transforming itself because of the demands of the democratic dialogue process that bring together the wish for democracy and justice. The depth of the transformations demanded gives rise to discussions equally radical in sectorial policies such as housing, with special attention on consolidating spaces – physical and political – for the deepening of conflicting and democratic dialogue.

The particularity of the night of “caceroleos” is that fear of conflict shifted to a second level giving room to a democratic exercise whose driving force is not fear, but empathy with the possibility of having spaces for non violent dissent. The eighty per cent support reached by the student movement and its demands is another of its symptoms. Everyone in the streets, on their feet or through the sound, making the conflict visible and heard, demanding democracy and constructing at the same time. Chilean cities, allowing an open conversation and showing the need for a wide discussion to rethink social order not only in terms of education but in the broad spectrum of fields that shape

it, including the design of the built environment.

#### A STORY

“The march was not authorized, and in the central areas of Santiago it was easy to see how during the morning the police attacked secondary students with water and tear gas, the youngsters in their school uniforms, who intended to march, just that, to march along the street. But they could not. It was August and it grew dark very early. We went out into the street and tried to march as so many other times. It was difficult to cross Plaza Italia, even though the lemons helped us to face gas. We met a “batucada” marching to the sound of rhythmic chants. We walked with it along the streets, not avenues, following its route. From block to block it had to break up after meeting policemen or barricades that the students and their supporters themselves had started. It was strangely lively and furious. During the day, the official violence had been greater than in previous months and we had all seen it. After a long time, we decided to walk back home, the singing continued but by night everything seemed tenser. As we returned, walking along the streets, people in their homes began to hit their pots and pans, “cacerolear”(protest by banging pots and pans) as they had done before, protesting against official violence. Neither the students nor the hooded protesters, but women, children, grandparents, aunts, everybody “caceroleando” from their Windows, using the street not with their feet but with the sound. Everybody was there, in the street, rejecting violence against the conflict, asking for more democracy” (4th August 2011). 

## NOTES

- (1) See this in depth in Madanipour (2007), Fainstein (1999, 2005), Sandercock (2003).  
 (2) See this in depth in Lefebvre (1996); Harvey (2003).

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