

“A Tale of Two Cities”: Mexico City, São Paulo, and the Chances for Citizen Participation in Latin America’s Mega-Cities

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Abstract

This essay compares the cases of Mexico City and São Paulo based on their striking similarities as the most important mega-cities and global cities in Latin America. Both cities have been sites of innovative processes of citizen participation in spite of serious political, social and economic challenges. However, recent studies have found that the nature of such participation is very different regarding people’s direct engagement with the state. Citizens in Mexico City tend to rely more on conflictive relations with public officials or rely on self-provisioning whereas citizens in São Paulo are more prone to exercise pressure on or work directly with state agencies to solve their problems. The author argues that it is important to look at the differences between those patterns of citizen participation in urban policy in order to better understand the potential and limitations of attempts to significantly improve the access of excluded groups in Latin American mega-cities. Given the region’s advanced stage of urbanization there might be important insights for encouraging direct citizen participation in other mega-cities in the global South. The essay offers a conceptual framework as a starting point for addressing some of these questions.

1. Introduction

By the end of 2007 and for the first time in history the planet’s urban population will equal its rural population. In other words, one in two people in the world will live in a city by the end of this year. Cities in the developing world have been and continue to be major sites of this transformation. They currently account for ninety percent of the world’s urban growth (UN-Habitat 2006). Even though much of this growth is taking place in small and intermediate urban centers, its effects are more visible in “mega-cities”: cities with 10 million inhabitants or more. Cities like São Paulo, Mumbai, Mexico City, Jakarta, Lagos and others pose formidable challenges in terms of social and environmental sustainability as well as deeply ingrained patterns of inequality. Moreover, such problems are very likely to worsen as these urban centers are expected to surpass the 20 million people mark, thus becoming “meta-cities” by 2020 following the lead of Tokyo (UN-Habitat 2006).

Certainly this is not a context where many would expect democratic innovations to flourish. However, the opposite is true. Citizens and reformers from cities in the global South have showed their capacity for imagining and devising participatory institutions to relate to one another and address complex problems through inclusive forms of deliberation (Avritzer 2002; Baiocchi 2005; Goldfrank forthcoming). This essay focuses on two Latin American mega-cities, Mexico City and São Paulo, as cases where this democratic potential might be unleashed through citizen participation. The question I am interested in is under which conditions are marginalized groups able to gain entrance and sustain their presence in the public sphere² to influence policies in their favor? Answering this question can help to address the

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² Based on Habermas’ concept: “The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the *sphere of private people come together as a public*; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people’s public use of their reason” (1996: 27).

increasing ungovernability observed in mega-cities in the developing world (Davis 2006; UN-Habitat 2003). In particular, UN-Habitat emphasizes that poor residents' "participation in decision-making is not only a right, but is also instrumental in achieving greater effectiveness in the implementation of public policies" (2003: xxvii).

2. Mexico City and São Paulo: Globalization and Urban Structure

Mexico City and São Paulo are the only two Latin American contenders among the world's ten largest cities (UN-Habitat 2006).³ Additionally they have similar economic and political roles in their countries. As such, these cities offer a valuable opportunity to look at the challenges associated with urban "social sustainability" (Polèse and Stren 2000). Paraphrasing the title of Charles Dickens' book, the story of Mexico City and São Paulo is the "tale of two cities" that play crucial roles in their countries and in the region as a whole. Their importance goes beyond their extreme size. Both cities perform key functions in linking the Mexican and Brazilian economies to the rest of the world. Mexico City and São Paulo have become leading global cities in Latin America, showing a rapid expansion in the number and quality of services offered to global firms, particularly in finance, insurance and real estate (Abrahamson 2004; Parnreiter 2002; Schiffer 2002). Their status as global cities coexists with and builds upon their historical trajectory as economic engines of their respective countries: greater Mexico City generates a third of the national GDP (Parnreiter 2002) and São Paulo concentrates 16.7% of Brazil's GDP and nearly half of the GDP of the state of São Paulo (Prefeitura do Município de São Paulo 2004). Another characteristic feature of global cities, the presence of headquarters from foreign corporations, is highly visible in both cities. Six of the twenty largest foreign-owned companies in Latin America were located in São Paulo in 1999 (Schiffer 2002; Appendix A). Similarly, a majority of international firms doing business in Mexico are also concentrated in Mexico City (Parnreiter 2002; Appendix B).⁴

Close links to a global and service-based economy have not only increased existing levels of inequality and polarization in Mexico City and São Paulo but have also produced new forms of social exclusion⁵. These polarizing effects are particularly visible in downtown areas that have become the preferred location of global firms and their highly mobile and wealthy elite workers (Sassen 2001 [1991]; Parnreiter 2002; Schiffer 2002). In the case of Mexico City "[f]irms serving local markets move out, presumably following the suburbanizing population while those with links to national and international markets are more likely to remain in the centre" (Rowland and Gordon 1996: 182-183). On the contrary, the links between workers on the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum and global economic actors are less stable. Business strategies followed by industrial firms, especially those that work with international partners, are increasingly dependent on outsourcing production, hiring temporary workers or hiring workers illegally in order to decrease the costs associated with wages and benefits (Buechler 2006).⁶

³ See figure 1.1.4 on page 8. Mexico City and São Paulo are respectively in places 6th and 7th following New York-Newark, Tokyo, London, Paris and Mumbai.

⁴ Between 67% and 75% of the largest foreign groups were located in the city of São Paulo between 1980 and 1999. This was true for 36% to 45% of Brazilian 100 largest groups and a half or more of the 100 foreign largest groups present in Latin America for the same period (Schiffer 2002). In 1999 the Federal District (i.e. the strictest definition of Mexico City) contained almost 60% of the firms with more than 50% of foreign capital located among the 500 top companies in the country in terms of sales. The same was true for 80% of firms with more than 50% foreign capital in the top 100 and top 10 companies in the same category (Parnreiter 2002).

⁵ Here I follow the relational character of the concept as defined by Silver and Miller (2003).

⁶ Buechler's ethnographic account of the jobs performed by low-income women workers reveals some of the crucial links between their work and a global economic chain going back to multinational corporations. For example, she

An increase in the presence of international firms can also generate a higher demand for low-income workers who are needed but not welcome to live in central parts of both cities (Sassen 2001 [1991], 1994; de Mattos 2004). Even in Mexico City, until recently an exception with regard to “urban renewal” projects prevalent in other cities, the local government has been trying to displace low-income residents to provide space for high profile urban projects in order to attract foreign investment (Davis forthcoming; Alvarado and Davis 2004). Similarly, the center-periphery spatial pattern that marked São Paulo’s urban structure for more than five decades, relegating poorer residents to the outskirts,⁷ has been complicated by the city’s increasing integration to the global economy. Even regulatory instruments, like São Paulo’s “master plan” originally intended to foster the participation of poorer residents, have been nearly coopted by more active middle-class groups (Caldeira 2006). Moreover, the starker residential separation of socio-economic groups through the defensive isolation of the middle- and upper-classes in gated communities in the periphery increases the chances for social conflict. In Caldeira’s words such separation threatens the city’s public sphere “by making explicit the social inequalities and the lack of common ground” (2000: 335) among different socio-economic and racial groups.

3. Is Citizen Participation Possible?

Mexico City and São Paulo share serious challenges associated with being the two most important mega- and global cities in Latin America. As a result it might seem counterintuitive to talk about chances for successful citizen participation in these settings. My argument is not only that it is possible to find instances where ordinary citizens influence policies in both cities but also that differences in this regard constitute important sources of learning about the potential and limitations of citizen participation. In spite of differences regarding the timing of political reforms, both cities contain a disproportionate share of power and resources in Mexico and Brazil and they have been crucial political arenas in their countries’ processes of democratization (Davis 2002; Alvarado and Davis 2004; Graham and Jacobi 2002). Activists and reformers seasoned in those processes have been able to initiate participatory mechanisms of various kinds including the participatory budget (PB) implemented by the Workers Party in São Paulo (Sánchez 2004; Hernández-Medina 2005) as well as a more open housing policy for low-income residents and smaller PB experiences in two administrative subdivisions in Mexico City (Interviews by the author October 2007).

In particular, the PB implemented in São Paulo from 2001 to 2004 constituted an ambitious and far-reaching attempt to favor poor residents by increasing public investment in marginalized areas. During its last two years, the PB also included an affirmative action mechanism designed to increase participation by

describes the role of “Josefa”, a homemaker making clothing tags in one of the city’s “favelas” or squatter communities: “Working more than eight hours, she was able to do approximately 1,000 to 1,500 tags a day depending upon her housework and the type. When her sister helped her, they could do 2,500 tickets together. She could therefore earn on average only R\$10 a week or R\$40 a month (or the equivalent of approximately US\$35 before the steep devaluation of the currency a few months later). Josefa was on the fourth rung of a long production chain. The principal clients were multinationals such as Levi Strauss and Pierre Cardin. These companies hired graphics companies to produce clothing tags. The graphics companies outsourced part of the production to a woman, “Cica”, who lived in a low-income neighborhood next door to Favela Sul. In turn, Cica outsourced part of the work to women like Josefa” (Buechler 2006: 242).

⁷ And therefore excluding them for higher-quality urban services: “Whereas in the central district (Centro) 1.3 percent of the domiciles lacked water, 4.5% lacked sewage treatment, 1.7 percent lacked paving, and 0.8 percent lacked garbage collection, in Itaquera, a new district in the eastern periphery, 89.3 percent of the domiciles lacked water, 96.9 percent lacked sewage services, 87.5 percent lacked paving, and 71.9 percent lacked garbage collection” (São Paulo - Sempla in Caldeira 2000: 228).

traditionally excluded groups such as women, Afro-Brazilians, the GLBT community, senior citizens, and persons with disabilities, among others (Hernández-Medina 2005). Cases like this indicate that it is important to conduct more comparative research on participatory institutions in mega-cities in the South to better understand the conditions under which they are able to effect substantial changes on the existing political opportunity structure.⁸ For example, Brazilian political scientist Leonardo Avritzer argues that institutions like the PB expanded the political opportunity structure for marginalized groups as part of a cycle that is associated with the socio-economic and political polarization of the city. According to Avritzer “participation in São Paulo is like a “*sanfona*” [accordion]: when the state gives incentives [to participation], it expands but when more conservative administrations are in power, it contracts” (Interview by the author August 2004).

More generally, a recent study compares the nature and scope of citizen participation in both cities (Houtzager et al 2005). Communities and civil society organizations in São Paulo build upon a trajectory of well-developed “repertoires of contention” (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2002), and therefore expect city government to be at least partially responsive to their claims. On the contrary, local communities in Mexico City build upon their traditions of self-organization and self-provisioning in order to solve their problems (Appendix C). Houtzager et al. (2003) suggest that São Paulo offers a varied range of spaces for participation oriented towards decision-making (Houtzager et al 2003; Lavallo et al 2005) whereas this range is more limited in Mexico City.

4. Ideas for a Research Agenda on Citizen Participation in Latin American Mega-Cities

This last section offers a conceptual framework to look at citizen participation in mega-cities in Latin America taking Mexico City and São Paulo as starting points.⁹ The central question in this project is how and when marginalized groups can meaningfully influence public policies in their favor at the city level. First, I briefly present selected literature in political sociology, urban studies and political science relevant to answer this question. Secondly, I describe a conceptual model offered to address them. Analyzing the differences in citizen participation between the two most important mega-cities and global cities in the region will offer some clues about the conditions under which urban governance in the developing world can be improved through citizens’ active involvement (see Appendixes D and E).

In order to look at the ways in which ordinary citizens participate in urban policies in Latin America I propose to enter a dialogue with three bodies of literature respectively focused on state-society relations, the relationship between globalization and cities, and social movements and participatory institutions in Latin America. My project builds upon the literature on state-society synergy (e.g. Migdal 1988; Evans 1997) by applying its perspective on state-society interdependence to the city level following Evans’ (2002) emphasis on “livability.” This research agenda also needs to address two under-researched areas: the “socio-political implications of globalization” (Davis 2002) and the effect of class and spatial polarization on the emergence of “new political actors” and alliances in urban contexts (Sassen 2003). Finally, it is crucial to build upon the rich literature on recent social movements (Chalmers et al 1997; Alvarez et al. 1998; Roberts and Portes 2005) and participatory institutions (Baiocchi 2005; Avritzer 2002) in the region and the way they have informed processes of democratization. More research is needed on how demands from civil society are transformed, if at all, into public policies particularly at the

⁸ The concept of the political opportunity structure refers to the configurations of factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of social movements’ success in creating social change. It highlights the interaction between social movements and political parties and the state apparatus (e.g. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001).

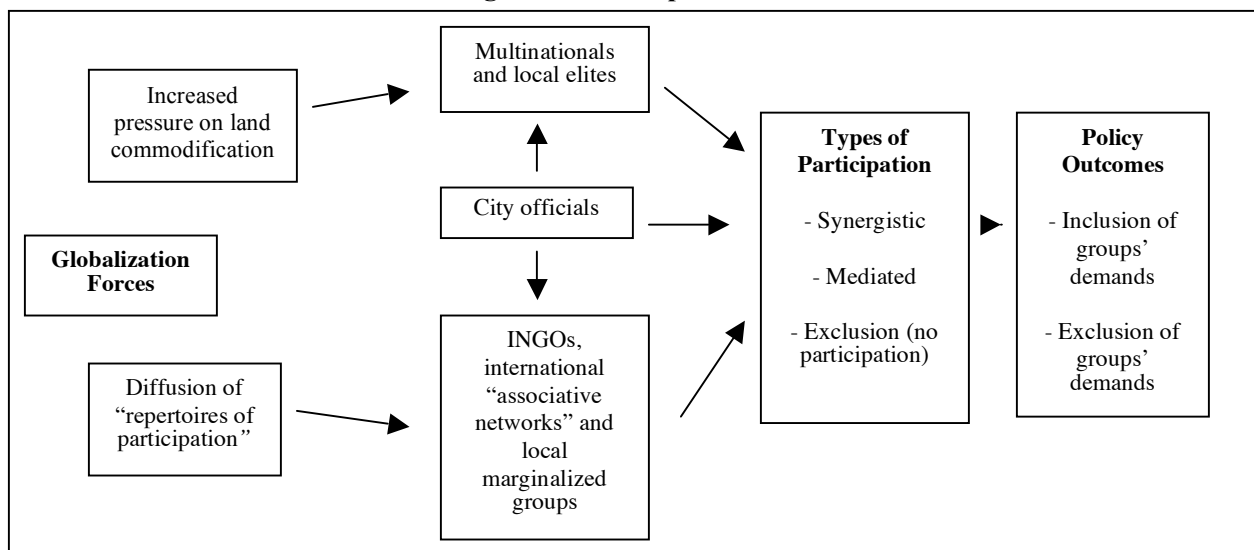
⁹ This section is based on the dissertation proposal “Synergy, Mediation, or Exclusion? Globalization, Citizen Participation and Urban Policy in Mexico City and São Paulo.”

city level. Focusing on land use (Harvey 2002; Logan and Molotch 1987) and urban services (Castells 1983) provides the clearest connection between globalization and citizen participation in urban contexts.

First, I propose looking at two types of international flows and the interaction between them and local factors. An economic flow is represented by the **increased pressure on land commodification** that takes place between multinational corporations and local elites interested in using areas of the city to reinvest excess capital (Harvey 2002). Cities' increased dependence on external sources of capital shapes the priorities of city officials given the need to promote economic growth (Peterson 1981; Savitch and Kantor 2002). Elites frequently benefit from such investment whereas neoliberal policies have had a more homogeneous and negative effect on marginalized groups (Portes and Hoffman 2003). This in turn might lead to the emergence of pro- and anti-growth coalitions (Logan and Molotch 1987). The second flow is the political channel constituted by the cross-country **diffusion of "repertoires of participation."** Building upon Charles Tilly's concept of "repertoires of contention", this idea describes collaborative efforts between marginalized groups, NGO practitioners, and progressive state reformers from different countries in sharing resources for promoting citizen participation. This channel helps to explain the rapid diffusion of participatory institutions through collaborative or "associative networks" (Chalmers et al 1997) even in geographically isolated countries like the Dominican Republic (Hernández-Medina 2007).

One way of analyzing outcomes from citizen participation is to trace the composition and actions of two types of coalitions benefiting from the land commodification and participatory flows described above. These coalitions can be successful in gaining full access to spaces for decisions about urban policies through "**synergistic participation.**" That is, the ideal (yet relatively rare) type of participation, which implies a regular and collaborative space between citizens and policy makers that ensures mutually beneficial policy outcomes. But citizens might also have to resort to more sporadic and weaker forms of "**mediated participation**" such as demonstrations, clientelistic networks or consultations. Finally, citizens might be completely left out from decision-making mechanisms resulting in "**exclusion**" or absence of citizen participation. The decisions of city officials are crucial. Previous work on São Paulo's participatory budget (Hernández-Medina 2005) suggests that different government factions might have very different agendas regarding citizen participation. The conceptual model presented here presupposes a direct relationship between the level of inclusion of elite or marginalized groups' demands in urban policies and each group's type of participation. Diagram 1 below shows a synthesis of this model.

Diagram 1: Conceptual Model



Final Remarks

The complex reality faced by the majority of people living in today's mega-cities constitutes an enormous challenge for those studying or attempting to manage urban growth, as Davis (2006) has dramatically shown. More needs to be done to tap into the great creative potential of citizens and reformers dealing with these problems. Part of the challenge requires a profound change among academics. We need to learn not only to relate to citizens and practitioners as peers (instead of mere "research subjects") but we also need to pay more attention to the experiments already taking place on the ground in the mega-cities of the South.

Certainly there are insights to be learned from experiences in cities in the developed world (Polèse 2000) but those lessons need to be just a part of a greater conversation about options and visions to share this relatively new "urban planet" by looking at what is being done and created everywhere. UN-Habitat (2006) has determined that urbanization processes in Latin America are more mature than they are in other developing regions. At the same time, Latin America continues to be the most unequal region worldwide. Inter-city comparisons like the one proposed in this essay can help us identify the conditions under which excluded populations can empower themselves to change the fate of today's cities in their favor. Hopefully some of those ideas might become part of the South-to-South and South-to-North conversations we all need to expand (Appadurai 2000).

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Appendixes

Appendix A

Headquarters of Private Companies Established in the City of São Paulo

Of the Largest	1980 %	1985 %	1990 %	1992 %	1994 %	1996 %	1997 %	1999 %
100 Brazilian groups	45.0	45.0	42.0	36.0	36.0	40.0	47.0	39.0
40 foreign groups	...	...	72.5	62.5	75.0	70.0	...	67.5
100 foreign companies	51.0	54.0	47.0	45.0	47.5	68.0	65.0	63.0
50 Brazilian companies	42.0	34.0	40.0	30.0	32.0	26.0	38.0	34.0

Source: Schiffer (2002), Table 3, p. 217

Appendix B

Location Patterns of Major Foreign Firms Registered in Mexico, 1998 (Percent)

	Federal District	State of Mexico	ZMCM (Metropolitan Area)	State of Mexico minus ZMCM	Nuevo León	Jalisco	Other States
Firms with > 50% foreign capital in the top 500 (sales) (n=413)	39.4	8.2	46.7	0.9	13.5	8.4	30.0
Firms with > 50% foreign capital in the top 100 (sales) (n=80)	53.7	2.5	56.2	...	27.5	2.5	13.7
Firms with > 50% foreign capital in the top 10 (sales) (n=4)	50.0	...	50.0	...	50.0	...	...
Firms with > 50% foreign capital in the top 500 (sales) (n=84)	58.3	14.2	66.6	5.9	3.5	5.9	17.8
Firms with > 50% foreign capital in the top 100 (sales) (n=19)	78.9	...	78.9	...	5.2	10.5	5.2
Firms with > 50% foreign capital in the top 10 (sales) (n=5)	80.0	...	80.0	...	...	...	20.0

Source: Parnreiter (2002) Table 2, p. 159

Appendix C

Citizen Relations to Agents of Government in Mexico City and São Paulo

Relation to State	SÃO PAULO	MEXICO
Direct	33	22
Mediated	4	4
Contentious	19	4
Detached	11	25
Direct, Mediated, or Contentious	20	12
Detached & others	15	33
Total share of Problem Solvers	100%	100%

Source: Houtzager et al (2005), Table 4

Appendix D

Categories for Comparing Citizen Participation in Urban Policy in Mexico City and São Paulo

Dimension / City	Mexico City	São Paulo
Status as “global city” in Latin America (Abrahamson 2004; Parnreiter 2002; Schiffer 2002)	Yes	Yes
Parallels in social and geographical polarization (Caldeira 2000; de Mattos 2004; Davis forthcoming)	Yes	Yes
Conflicts regarding land use (Davis forthcoming; Caldeira 2000; Caldeira and Holston 2005) and provision of urban services (Keck 2001; Roberts and Portes 2005)	Yes	Yes
Central role in national political structures (Davis 2002; Alvarado and Davis 2004; Graham and Jacobi 2002)	Yes	Yes
Citizen participation in public policies ¹⁰ (Houtzager et al 2005; Houtzager et al 2003; Lavallo et al 2005)	“Detached” (25%) or “direct” (22%)	“Direct” (33%) or “contentious” (19%)

¹⁰ 33% of citizens interviewed in São Paulo engaged in “direct” relations with the state. If that didn’t work then they resorted to “contentious” relationships (19%) and only 11% were “detached.” In the case of Mexico City, 25% were “detached” followed by 22% of “direct” and only 4% of “contentious.” Clientelism was low in both cities (just 4%). And this pattern takes place even though citizens in both cities see the state as responsible for issues such as urban services, order and medical care (Houtzager et al 2005).

Appendix E

Methodology for Fieldwork in Mexico City and São Paulo

Since this project aims to uncover the causal mechanisms behind different outcomes in citizen participation engaging the state in Mexico City and São Paulo, the methodology is based on both the comparative-historical tradition and the qualitative tradition of fieldwork. I follow a “most-similar analysis” approach (Gerring 2007), which is used to analyze cases that end up having different outcomes despite sharing key similarities. The project follows a comparative design at two levels: between two cities and between two neighborhoods inhabited by members of marginalized and elite groups respectively. I will trace the commodification and participatory flows described above by analyzing: (a) city wide processes of participation around land use regulations and the provision of public services, and (b) forms of participation (or lack thereof) in one low-income and another upper-class area, that can be considered as representative of changes in relation to these issues during the last decade.

My data collection strategy starts with semi-structured interviews with key informants (academics and urban planners) and archival analysis of the press, official planning documents, etc. In this first stage I pay special attention to new forms of participation in urban planning in each city. Based on this work I select a low-income community and an affluent community that can be seen as representative of such changes and that have had conflicts around new urban regulations. Next I will conduct interviews and focus groups with residents, merchants, and real estate developers associated with each community as well as non-participant observation of meetings, assemblies, and other public group activities. I will analyze the results in NVivo, a specialized software for qualitative coding and analysis. My coding manual will be based on the project’s conceptual model, focusing on political and economic global flows, actors, types of participation, and policy outcomes.