Can NGOs Make a Difference?

The Challenge of Development Alternatives

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PART II

NGO Alternatives under Pressure

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Challenges to Participation, Citizenship and Democracy: Perverse Confluence and Displacement of Meanings

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The main purpose of this chapter is to discuss the challenges presented by recent developments in Brazil – but also elsewhere – to the participation of civil society in the building of democracy and social justice. The chapter will discuss first the existence of a *perverse confluence* between participatory and neoliberal political projects. From my point of view, this confluence characterizes the contemporary scenario of the struggle for deepening democracy in Brazil and in most of Latin America. Then it will examine the dispute over different meanings of citizenship, civil society and participation that constitute core referents for the understanding of that confluence, and the form that it takes in the Brazilian context.

The Perverse Confluence of Political Projects

The process of democratic construction in Brazil today faces an important dilemma whose roots are to be found in a perverse confluence of two different processes, linked to two different political projects. On the one hand, we have a process of enlargement of democracy, which expresses itself in the creation of public spaces and the increasing participation of civil society in discussion and decision-making processes related to public issues and policies. The formal landmark of this process was the Constitution of 1988, which consecrated the principle of the participation of civil society. The main forces behind this process grew out of a participatory project constructed since the 1980s around the extension of citizenship and the deepening of democracy. This project emerged from the struggle against the military regime, a struggle led by sectors of civil society, among which social movements played an important role.

Two elements of this struggle are particularly relevant to our argument here. First is the re-establishment of formal democracy, with free elections and party reorganization. These changes made it possible for the partici-patory project which had been configured inside civil society and which guided the political practice of several of its sectors, to be taken into the realm of state power, at the level of the municipal and state executives and of legislatures, and, more recently, of the federal executive. Indeed, the 1990s saw numerous examples of actors making this transition from civil society to the state. Second, during the 1990s the confrontation that had formerly characterized the relations between state and civil society was largely replaced by a new belief in the possibility of joint action between the two. The possibility of such joint actions itself reflected the extent to which the principle of participation had become a distinguishing feature of this project, underlying the very effort to create public spaces.

While this project traces its roots back to the late 1970s, the election of Collor in 1989 and the more general state strategy of neoliberal adjustment underlay the emergence of a quite distinct project. This project revolved around the fashioning of a reduced, minimal state that progressively exempts itself from its role as guarantor of rights by shrinking its social responsibilities and transferring them to civil society. In this context, we argue that the last decade has been marked by a perverse confluence between the participatory project and this neoliberal project. The perversity lies in the fact that, even if these projects point in opposite and even antagonistic directions, each of them not only requires an active and proactive civil society, but also uses a number of common concepts and points of reference. In particular, notions such as citizenship, participation and civil society are central elements in both projects, even if they are being used with very different meanings. This coincidence at the discursive level hides fundamental distinctions and divergences between the two projects, obscuring them through the use of a common vocabulary as well as of institutional mechanisms that at first sight seem quite similar. Through a set of symbolic operations, or discursive shifts, marked by a common vocabulary which obscures divergences and contradictions, a displacement of meanings becomes effective. In the process, this perverse confluence creates an image of apparent homogeneity among different interests and discourses, concealing conflict and diluting the dispute between these two projects.

This perversity is clearly perceived by some civil society activists. These would include, for example, those engaged in participatory experiences such as the Management Councils (Conselhos gestores), members of NGOs engaged in partnerships with the state, members of social movements and people who, in one way or another, participate in these experiences or have struggled for their creation, all the while believing in their democratizing

potential (Dagnino, 2002). In most of the spaces that are ostensibly open to the participation of civil society in public policies, state actors are in practice unwilling to share their decision-making power with respect to the formulation of public policies. Rather, their basic intention is to have the organizations of civil society assume functions and responsibilities restricted to the implementation and execution of these policies, providing services formerly considered to be duties of the state itself.

Some civil society organizations accept this circumscription of their roles and of the meaning of 'participation', and in so doing contribute to its legitimation. Others, however, react against it and perceive this perverse confluence as posing a dilemma that expresses itself in questions regarding their own political role: 'what are we doing here?', 'what project are we strengthening?', 'wouldn't the gains be greater with some other kind of strategy which prioritizes the organization and mobilization of society instead of engaging in joint actions with the state?'

The recognition of the centrality of this perverse confluence – and the dilemma it poses – demands that we take a closer look at its mode of operation and its analytical consequences.

Perverse Confluence and the Redefinition of Meanings

The implementation of the neoliberal project, which requires the shrinking of the social responsibilities of the state and their transference to civil society, marks a significant inflection in political culture – in Brazil as well as in most countries of Latin America. Indeed, though less recognized and discussed than the restructuring of state and economy that result from this project, neoliberal transformation has also involved a redefinition of – and struggles over – a variety of cultural meanings and political concepts. What has made this transformation particularly interesting in the Brazilian case is that this implementation of neoliberalism has had to confront a consolidated participatory project that has been maturing for more than twenty years. During that period, this participatory project found significant support within the particularly complex and dense civil society that characterizes Brazil. It was because of this support that this project was able to inspire the creation of democratizing participatory experiments such as management councils, participatory budgets, sectoral chambers, and a vast array of fora, conferences and other societal public spaces and collaborations.

In other words, the neoliberal project found in Brazil a relatively consolidated contender, evidently not hegemonic but able to constitute a field of dispute. The existence of this contender and of this dispute led the forces linked to the neoliberal project to assume particular strategies and

forms of action. To the extent that these strategies and actions differ from those adopted globally, their specificity derives from the extent to which the neoliberal project is forced to engage with, and establish ways of being meaningful, to this opposing field. The need for such engagement and interlocution is accentuated within those public spaces where these two projects meet face to face. Indeed, given the 1988 Constitution's recognition of the principle of participation, social movements began to participate institutionally in those formal spaces that became part of the state apparatus (councils, etc.) (Carvalho, 1997; GECD, 2000). Thus much of the articulation between the neoliberal project that occupies most of the state apparatus and the participatory project takes place precisely through those sectors of civil society that committed themselves to state–society coordination and who therefore became most active in Brazil's new participatory settings and in joint actions with the state; that is to say, those sectors of civil society that were by and large supportive of the participatory project.

It is in this context that it becomes urgent for both analysts and activists to make explicit the distinctions and divergences between these two projects in order to elucidate the dilemma posed by the perverse confluence. It is our contention that if we are to do this, one point of departure, both at a theoretical level and in defining an empirical research agenda, is the notion of 'political project'. We are using the term *political project* in a sense close to Gramsci, to designate those sets of beliefs, interests, conceptions of the world, and representations of what life in society should be that guide the political action of different subjects and play a central role in the struggle to build hegemony (Dagnino, 2002; Dagnino et al., 2006). One of the main virtues of such an approach (Dagnino, 1998, 2002, 2004) is that it insists that culture and politics are necessarily linked. Thus our view of political projects is that they cannot merely be understood as strategies of political action in the strict sense, but rather that they express, convey and produce meanings that come to integrate broader cultural matrices. It is in this sense that we referred earlier to the idea that the neoliberal project has also constituted a cultural inflection.

A careful effort to unpick the different political projects at play helps uncover and understand the ways in which the perverse confluence has blurred particular distinctions and divergences. In the following, we seek to do this by examining the displacement of meaning that occurs in such a context with respect to three deeply interconnected notions: civil society, participation and citizenship. These notions and displacements are central to the forms that have been taken by the perverse confluences between the neoliberal and participatory projects. On the one hand, they were core ideas in the origins and consolidation of the participatory project. On the other hand, they have been central ideas in mediating between the two

projects. They are, in short, common references with distinct and even contradictory meanings. Furthermore, beyond their specific roles in the Brazilian scenario, these notions are also, to different degrees, constitutive of the neoliberal project at the global level.

The redefinition of the notion of civil society and of what it designates is probably the most visible (and, therefore, the most studied) displacement produced under the hegemony of the neoliberal project. For this reason, I will not explore it at length here. It should be sufficient to mention several well-known elements of this displacement: the accelerated growth and the new role played by non-governmental organizations; the emergence of the so-called 'third sector' and of entrepreneurial foundations, with their strong emphasis on a redefined philanthropy (Fernandes, 1994; Landim, 1993; Alvarez, 1999; Paoli, 2002; Salamon, 1997); and the marginalization, or what some authors refer to as 'the criminalization' (Oliveira, 1997) of social movements. This reconfiguration of civil society, in which non-governmental organizations tend increasingly to replace social movements, has resulted in a growing identification of 'civil society' with NGOs – indeed, the meaning of 'civil society' is more and more restricted to NGOs and sometimes used as a mere synonym for the 'third sector'. The emergence of the notion of a 'third sector' (the others being the state and the market) as a surrogate for civil society is particularly expressive of this attempt to implement a 'minimalist' conception of politics and to nullify the extension of public spaces for political deliberation that had been achieved by the democratizing struggles. 'Civil society' is thus reduced to those sectors whose behaviour is 'acceptable' according to dominant standards – what one analyst has called 'five-star civil society' (Silva, 2000).

The relations between state and NGOs exemplify the idea of perverse confluence. Endowed with technical competence and social insertion, 'reliable' interlocutors among the various possible interlocutors in civil society, NGOs are frequently seen as the ideal partners by sectors of the state engaged in transferring their responsibilities to the sphere of civil society. For their part it is extremely difficult for NGOs to reject such a role (Galgani and Magnólia, 2002) when these partnerships seem to present them with a real opportunity to have a positive effect – fragmented, momentary, provisory and limited, but positive – on the reduction of inequality and the improvement of living conditions of the social sectors involved. The proliferation and visibility of NGOs is, on the one hand, a reflection of a global neoliberal paradigm, in the sense that NGOs constitute a response to the demands of structural adjustment. On the other hand, with the growing abandonment of the organic links to social movements which had characterized many NGOs in former periods, the increasing political autonomy of NGOs creates a peculiar situation in which these

organizations are responsible to the international agencies which finance them and to the state which contracts them as service providers, but not to civil society, whose representatives they claim to be, nor to the social sectors whose interests they bear, nor to any other organ of a truly public character. As well intentioned as they might be, their activities ultimately express the desires of their directors.

Perhaps less explored, these reconfigurations of civil society also have important implications for the issue of representation. The question of representation assumes varied facets and/or is understood in different ways by various actors of civil society. If we take the case of the Landless Movement (MST), its capacity to pressure and to represent is, for example, evident in the protests and mass demonstrations it organizes – just as the large numbers of participants in participatory budgeting processes also reflect great capacity for mobilization. Such a capacity is here understood in the classic sense of representation. But there is also a displacement in the understanding of representation, as much by the state as on the part of actors in civil society. In the case of NGOs, for example, the capacity to represent seems to be displaced onto the kind of competence they have: the state sees them as representative interlocutors in so far as they have a specific knowledge that comes from their connection (past or present) with certain social sectors: youth, blacks, women, carriers of HIV, environmental movements, and so on (Teixeira, 2002, 2004). Bearers of this specific capacity, many NGOs also come to see themselves as 'representatives of civil society' (in a particular understanding of the notion of representation). They further consider that their capacity to represent derives from the fact that they express diffuse interests in society, to which they 'would give voice'. This representation comes, however, from a coincidence among these interests and those defended by the NGOs, rather than from any explicit articulation, or organic relationship with social actors.

This displacement of the notion of representation is obviously not innocent, neither in its intentions nor in its political consequences. The most extreme example is the composition of the Council of the Comunidade Solidária, created by the Cardoso government in 1995, where the representation of civil society took place through invitations to individuals with high 'visibility' in society – such as television performers or persons who write frequently for newspapers, and so on. This particular understanding of the notion of representation reduces it to social visibility, as made possible by various types of media. In the case of NGOs, this displacement is sustained by the organizations themselves, as well as by governments and international agencies that seek reliable partners and fear the politicization of social movements and workers' organizations, and by the media, frequently for similar motives.

Closely connected to these processes, the notion of *participation of civil society*, which has constituted the core of the democratizing project, has been appropriated and re-signified by neoliberal forces during the last decade. Such redefinition follows the same lines as those characterizing the reconfiguration of 'civil society', with the growing emphasis on 'solidary participation', 'voluntary work' and the 'social responsibility' of individuals and private enterprises. The basic principle here seems to be the adoption of a privatizing, individualistic perspective, replacing and re-signifying the collective meaning of social participation. The very idea of 'solidarity', the great banner of this redefined participation, is stripped of its original collective and political meaning and rests instead in the moral, private domain.

This principle is also very effective in an additional displacement of meaning, depoliticizing participation and dispensing with public spaces where the debate of the very objectives of participation can take place. In this process the political meaning and democratizing potential of public spaces is replaced by strictly individualized ways of dealing with issues such as social inequality and poverty.

On the other hand, in most of the spaces open to the participation of civil society in public policies, the effective sharing of the power of decision with respect to the formulation of public policies faces immense difficulties. As mentioned before, most state sectors not only resist sharing their exclusive control over decision-making but also attribute a specific role to civil society, which is the provision of public services formerly considered duties of the state itself. The role of so-called 'social organizations', through which the participation of civil society was explicitly recognized in the administrative reform of the Brazilian state (Bresser Pereira, 1996), is reduced to this function and clearly excluded from decision-making power, which is reserved to the state 'strategic nucleus'. Here again, the crucial political meaning of participation, conceived by the participatory project as an effective sharing of power between state and civil society through the exercise of deliberation within the new public spaces, is radically redefined as and reduced to management (*gestão*). In fact, managerial and entrepreneurial approaches, imported from the realm of private administration, have been increasingly adopted in joint actions by state and civil society (Tatagiba, 2006).

The notion of *citizenship* offers perhaps the most dramatic case of this process of meaning displacement – in two senses: first, because it was through the notion of citizenship that the participatory project was able to obtain its most important political and cultural gains by redefining the contents of citizenship in a way that penetrated deeply into the political and cultural scenario of Brazilian society (Dagnino, 1994, 1998); second, because such a displacement is linked to the handling of what constitutes our most critical issue – poverty.

The extent of the displacement of meaning of citizenship can be better understood if we examine briefly the recent history of this notion and the role it played in the democratization process, not only in Brazil but in Latin America as a whole (Dagnino, 2005). Increasingly adopted since the late 1980s and 1990s by Latin American popular movements, excluded sectors, trade unions and left parties as a central element of their political strategies, the notion of citizenship has become a common reference among social movements – such as those of women, blacks and ethnic minorities, homosexuals, retired and senior citizens, consumers, environmentalists, urban and rural workers, and groups organized around urban issues such as housing, health, education, unemployment and violence (Foweraker, 1995; Foweraker and Landman, 1997; Alvarez et al., 1998). These movements have found reference to citizenship not only to be useful as a tool for their particular struggles but also as a powerful concept for articulating links among them. The general demand for equal rights embedded in the predominant conception of citizenship has been extended by such movements and used as a vehicle for making more specific demands related to their particular concerns. In this process, the cultural dimension of citizenship has been emphasized, incorporating contemporary concerns with subjectivities, identities and the right to difference. Thus, on the one hand, the construction of a new notion of citizenship has come to be seen as reaching far beyond the acquisition of legal rights, requiring the constitution of active social subjects identifying what they consider to be their rights and struggling for their recognition. On the other hand, this emphasis on the cultural dimension of citizenship has made explicit the need for a radical transformation of those cultural practices that reproduce inequality and exclusion throughout society.

Citizenship and the concept of rights have been particularly attractive because of the dual role they play in the debate among the various conceptions of democracy that characterize contemporary political struggle in Latin America. On one hand, the struggle organized around the recognition and extension of rights has helped to make the argument for the expansion and deepening of democracy much more concrete. On the other hand, the reference to citizenship has provided common ground and an articulatory principle for an immense diversity of social movements that have adopted the language of rights as a way of expressing their demands while escaping fragmentation and isolation. Thus the building of citizenship has been seen as at once a general struggle – for the expansion of democracy – that was able to incorporate a plurality of demands, and a set of particular struggles for rights (housing, education, health, etc.) whose success would expand democracy.

As the concept of citizenship has become increasingly influential, its meaning has quickly become an object of dispute. In the past decade it

has been appropriated and re-signified in various ways by dominant sectors and the state. Thus, reflecting the effects of neoliberalism, citizenship has begun to be understood and promoted as mere individual integration into the market. At the same time and as part of the same process of structural adjustment, established rights have increasingly been withdrawn from workers throughout Latin America. Related to this, philanthropic projects of the so-called third sector have been expanding in number and scope in an attempt to confront the poverty and exclusion that convey their own version of citizenship.

Citizenship has become a prominent notion because it has been recognized as a crucial weapon not only in the struggle against social and economic exclusion and inequality but also in the broadening of dominant conceptions of politics. Thus, as Latin American social movements have redefined citizenship through their concrete struggles for a deepening of democracy, they have sought to change existing definitions of the political arena – its participants, its institutions, its processes, its agenda, and its scope (Alvarez et al., 1998). Adopting as its point of departure the conception of 'a right to have rights', this redefinition has supported the emergence of new social subjects actively identifying what they consider their rights and struggling for their recognition. In contrast to previous conceptions of citizenship as a strategy of the dominant classes and the state for the gradual and limited political incorporation of excluded sectors with the aim of greater social integration, or as a legal and political condition necessary for the establishment of capitalism, this is a conception of non citizens, of the excluded – a citizenship 'from below'.

While the concern of Latin American social movements with the need to assert a right to have rights is clearly related to extreme poverty and exclusion, it is also related to the *social authoritarianism* that pervades the unequal and hierarchical organization of social relations (Dagnino, 1998). Class, race and gender differences constitute the main bases for the forms of social classification that have historically pervaded our cultures, establishing different categories of people hierarchically distributed in their respective 'places' in society. Thus, for the excluded sectors, the perception of the political relevance of cultural meanings embedded in social practices is part of daily life. As part of the authoritarian, hierarchical social ordering of Latin American societies, to be poor means not only to experience economic, material deprivation but also to be subjected to cultural rules that convey a complete lack of recognition of poor people as bearers of rights. In what Telles (1994) has called the incivility embedded in that tradition, poverty is a sign of inferiority, a way of being in which individuals become unable to exercise their rights. The cultural deprivation imposed by the absolute absence of rights, which ultimately expresses itself as a suppression

of human dignity, then becomes constitutive of material deprivation and
political exclusion.

The perception that this culture of social authoritarianism is a dimension
of exclusion additional to economic inequality and political subordination
has constituted a significant element in the struggle to redefine citizen-
ship. It has made clear that the struggle for rights – for the right to have
rights – must be a political struggle against this pervasive authoritarianism.
This lays the bases for a connection between culture and politics that has
become embedded in the actions of urban popular collective movements.
This connection has been fundamental in establishing common ground for
articulation with other social movements that are more obviously cultural,
such as the ethnic, women's, gay, ecology and human rights movements, in
the pursuit of more egalitarian relations at all levels, helping to demarcate
a distinctive, expanded view of democracy. The reference to rights and
citizenship has come to constitute the core of a common ethical-political
field in which many of these movements and other sectors of society have
been able to share and mutually reinforce their struggle. This was reflected,
for instance, in the emergence in the early 1990s of the *sindicato cidadão*
(citizen trade union) in the context of a Brazilian labour movement that
had been traditionally more inclined toward strict class-based conceptions
(Rodrigues, 1997).

The perception that social authoritarianism itself structures exclusion
has also made possible a broadening of the scope of citizenship, whose
meaning has become far from restricted to the formal-legal acquisition
of a set of rights under the political–judicial system. The struggle for
citizenship has thus been presented as a project for a new sociability: a
more egalitarian basis for social relations at all levels, new rules for liv-
ing together in society and not only for incorporation into the political
system in the strict sense. This more egalitarian commitment implies the
recognition that the other is also a bearer of valid interests and legitimate
rights. It also implies the constitution of a public dimension to society in
which rights can be consolidated as public parameters for dialogue, debate
and the negotiation of conflict, making possible the reconfiguration of an
ethical dimension of social life. This project has unsettled not only social
authoritarianism as the basic mode of social ordering in Brazil but also
more recent neoliberal discourses in which private interest is the measure
of everything, obstructing the possibilities for consolidating an ethical
basis to social life (Telles, 1994).

Furthermore, the notion of rights is no longer limited to legal provisions
or access to previously defined rights or the effective implementation of
abstract, formal rights. It also includes the invention/creation of *new* rights,
which emerge from specific struggles and their concrete practices. In this

sense, the very determination of the meaning of rights and the assertion of something as a right are themselves objects of political struggle. The rights to autonomy over one's own body, to environmental protection, to housing, are examples (intentionally very different) of new rights. In addition, this redefinition comes to include not only the right to equality, but also the right to difference, which specifies, deepens and broadens the right to equality.

An additional important consequence of such a broadening in scope has been that citizenship is no longer confined to the relationship between person and state. The recognition of rights regulates the relationships not only between the state and the individual but also with society itself, as parameters defining social relations at all levels. To build citizenship as the affirmation and recognition of rights was seen as a process through which more deeply rooted social practices would be transformed. Such a political strategy implies moral and intellectual reform: a process of social learning, of building up new kinds of social relations. On the one hand, this implied the constitution of citizens as active social subjects. On the other hand, for society as a whole, it requires learning to live on different terms with these emergent citizens who refuse to remain in the places that have previously been socially and culturally defined for them.

Finally, an additional element in this redefinition transcends a central reference in the liberal concept of citizenship: the demand for access, inclusion, membership and belonging to a given political system. What is at stake in struggles for citizenship in Latin America is more than the right to be included as a full member of society; it is the right to participate in the very definition of that society and its political system. The demand for political participation certainly goes beyond the right to vote, although in some countries even the free exercise of this right is still disputed. The direct participation of civil society and social movements in state decisions is one of the most crucial aspects of the redefinition of citizenship because it contains the potential for radical transformation of the structure of power relations. Political practices inspired by the new definition of citizenship help one to visualize the possibilities opened up by this process. Clear examples of such practices would be those that emerged in the cities governed by the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party – PT) and its allies in Brazil, who implemented participatory budgets in which the popular sectors and their organizations have opened up space for the democratic control of the state through the effective participation of citizens in the exercise of power. Initiated in Porto Alegre, in the south of Brazil, in 1989, participatory-budget experiments have been tried in approximately 200 other cities and have become models for countries such as Mexico, Uruguay, Bolivia, Argentina, Peru, Ecuador and others.

The dissemination of this conception of citizenship in Brazil was very significant and underlay not only the political practices of social movements and NGOs but also institutional changes such as those expressed in the 1988 Constitution – the so-called 'Citizen Constitution'. Thanks to this dissemination, the term 'citizenship' in Brazil – in a way that differs from the case in other countries in Latin America – assumed a clear political meaning and was far from being merely a synonym for 'population', 'inhabitants' or 'society in general'. As a consequence, this political meaning and the potential it offered for social and political transformation soon became the target of the emerging neoliberal conceptions of citizenship, within a context characterized by the sorts of struggle over meanings that characterize the perverse confluence between different political projects.

Neoliberal redefinitions of citizenship rely upon a set of basic procedures. Some of these revive the traditional liberal conception of citizenship; others are innovative and address new elements of contemporary political and social order. First, they reduce the collective meaning of the social movements' redefinition of citizenship to a strictly individualistic understanding. Second, they establish an attractive connection between citizenship and the market. Being a citizen comes to mean individual integration into the market as a consumer and as a producer. This seems to be the basic principle underlying a vast number of projects for helping people to 'acquire citizenship' – examples here would be projects helping people to initiate 'microenterprises', or to become qualified for the few jobs still being offered. In a context in which the state is gradually withdrawing from its role as guarantor of rights, the market is offered as a surrogate instance of citizenship. Labor rights are being eliminated in the name of free negotiation between workers and employers, 'flexibility' of labour, etc., and social rights guaranteed by the Brazilian Constitution since the 1940s are being eliminated under the rationale that they constitute obstacles to the free operation of the market and thus restrict economic development and modernization. This rationale, in addition, transforms bearers of rights/citizens into the nation's new villains – enemies of the political reforms that are intended to shrink the state's responsibilities. Thus a peculiar inversion is taking place: the recognition of rights seen in the recent past as an indicator of modernity is becoming a symbol of 'backwardness,' an 'anachronism' that hinders the modernizing potential of the market (Telles, 2001). Here we find a decisive legitimation of the conception of the market as a surrogate instance of citizenship – as the market becomes the incarnation of modernizing virtues and the sole route to the Latin American dream of inclusion in the First World.

An additional step in the construction of neoliberal versions of citizenship is evident in what constitutes a privileged target of democratizing projects – the formulation of social policies with regard to poverty and inequality.

Many of the struggles organized around the demand for equal rights and the extension of citizenship have focused on the definition of such social policies. In addition, and consequently, the participation of social movements and other sectors of civil society has been a fundamental demand in struggles for citizenship in the hope that it will contribute to the formulation of social policies directed towards ensuring universal rights for all citizens. With the advance of the neoliberal project and the reduction of the role of the state, these social policies are increasingly being formulated as strictly emergency efforts directed towards certain specific sectors of society whose survival is at risk. The targets of these policies are seen not as citizens entitled to rights but as 'needy' human beings to be dealt with by public or private charity.

One of the consequences of this situation is a displacement of issues such as poverty and inequality: dealt with strictly as issues of technical or philanthropic management, poverty and inequality are being withdrawn from the public (political) arena and from their proper domain, that of justice, equality and citizenship, and reduced to a problem of ensuring the minimal conditions for survival. Moreover, the solution to this problem is presented as the moral duty of every member of society. Thus, the idea of collective solidarity that underlies the classical reference to rights and citizenship is now being replaced by an understanding of solidarity as a strictly private moral responsibility. It is through this understanding of solidarity that civil society is being urged to engage in voluntary and philanthropic activities with an appeal to a re-signified notion of citizenship now embodied in this particular understanding of solidarity. This understanding of citizenship is dominant in the action of the entrepreneurial foundations, the so-called third sector, that have proliferated in countries like Brazil over the past decade. Characterized by a constitutive ambiguity between market-oriented interests in maximizing their profits through their public image and what is referred to as 'social responsibility', these foundations have generally adopted a discourse of citizenship rooted in individual moral solidarity. As in the state sectors occupied by neoliberal forces, this discourse is marked by the absence of any reference to universal rights or to the political debate on the causes of poverty and inequality.

Such a displacement of 'citizenship' and 'solidarity' obscures their political dimension and erodes references to the public responsibility and public interest built up with such difficulty through the democratizing struggles of our recent past. As the distribution of social services and benefits comes to occupy the place formerly held by rights and citizenship, the demand for rights is obstructed because there are no institutional channels for making such demands – meanwhile distribution depends purely on the goodwill and competence of the sectors involved. Even more dramatic, the

very formulation of rights – their enunciation as a public issue – becomes increasingly difficult (Telles, 2001). The symbolic efficacy of rights in the building of an egalitarian society is thus dismissed, and the consequence has been the reinforcement of an already powerful privatism as the dominant orientation of social relations.

Such a scenario cannot be considered as anything but harmful to the very subsistence of civil society, for which a culture of rights is a condition of existence. It is equally nefarious for the poor and subaltern sectors, increasingly excluded from access to equal rights and left to the arbitrariness of charity. Most importantly, such a scenario points to what may constitute a practical abandonment of the very idea of rights, particularly of social rights, so exemplarily described in the work of Marshall (1950) and incorporated into a liberal view of citizenship towards the end of the nineteenth century. This practical abandonment is evident when what counts as social rights becomes understood as benefits and services to be looked for in the market. In the neoliberal model, this can be seen for instance when social organizations become motivated by a moral sense of solidarity with the poor or by plain traditional charity, or in the form of governmental emergency programmes to distribute food to the needy poorest. Such a reconfiguration cannot be understood if it is not placed within the more general framework that expresses the distinctive and novel character of what has been called neoliberalism. Thus, the redefinition of citizenship is intimately connected to a new phase of capitalist accumulation and its requirements – the excessive growth of the space of the market, the restructuring of labour, the reduction of the state and its social responsibilities and the related increase in the roles of civil society. This definition also responds to the need to reduce the scope and significance of politics itself, in order to ensure the conditions for the implementation of those requirements (Dagnino, 2004). The recent adoption of the term 'third sector' as a substitute for civil society is indicative of this, if we recall that the expression 'civil society' emerged in the political vocabulary of Brazil in the mid-1970s as part of the struggle for democracy, claiming and affirming both a space for politics and the existence of a set of political subjects that had previously been denied and repressed by the military regime.

Conclusion

The interconnected displacements of meaning discussed in this chapter seem to be articulated by a single aim: the depoliticization of concepts which have been central references in the democratizing struggle for the extension of citizenship and democracy. This depoliticization represents a

counteroffensive to the gains made in redefining the political arena that have derived from that struggle. In this sense, these displacements point towards a broader redefinition, that of the very notions of politics and democracy. Thus, along with a conception of a minimal or reduced state, the neoliberal project also works with a minimalist conception of both politics and democracy. Under an apparent homogeneity of discourse, the perverse confluence active in the public spaces of participation of civil society produces a minefield, where, in fact, what is at stake is the success or failure of very different political projects.

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