

Participatory democracy in large-scale contexts

Citizen participation in urban planning in Paris and Córdoba

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Participatory urban planning often comes up against the question of scale, with local councillors accepting to delegate a part of their powers in the context of neighbourhood enhancements, but not when it comes to larger-scale projects. Are we condemned to eternally fluctuate between a strong vision of participatory democracy that is limited to small-scale developments and a concept of consultative democracy that is weaker, but able to include large-scale projects?

Although urban planning and development is the main focus of participatory policy which have become increasingly widespread in Europe over the last 15 years or so (Bacqué et al. 2006; Sintomer, Herzberg and Röcke 2008), there is rarely any question of such measures being extended to major urban projects.

A comparison of participatory practices in Paris and Córdoba highlights the relationship between the level of participation and the scale of the urban project.¹ In Córdoba, where the notion of citizen participation is relatively advanced, with a limited budget set aside to be decided by local residents, urban projects are the subject of joint decisions at microlocal level, but not at citywide level. The democratic process in Córdoba therefore appears more participatory, but in fact concerns only neighbourhood enhancements, while the more timid approach adopted in Paris includes consultations regarding large-scale projects. Has participatory democracy in Paris gained in scale what it has lost in intensity of participation? And, conversely, has participatory democracy in Córdoba gained in quality of participation what it has lost in terms of scale?

Small-scale projects: delegation of power or mere consultation?

In both Córdoba and the 20th arrondissement (city district) of Paris, participatory budgets have been established for the planning of neighbourhood enhancements in the last decade. In the former, from 2001 to 2006, councillors invited residents to make decisions concerning approximately 4% of the city budget. In Paris, from 2002 to 2008, residents were invited to discuss budgetary proposals concerning highways investments. While councillors in Córdoba were committed to respecting the results of the participatory process, the approach adopted in the 20th arrondissement, as in the rest of Paris, remained very much a consultation exercise. In Córdoba, the decision-making powers associated with the participatory budget represent a political choice, which is not openly questioned by any political party. In Paris, on the other hand, hardly any city councillors defend the procedures currently in place, as the first deputy mayor of the 20th arrondissement acknowledges: “Today, there

¹ I carried out a comparative ethnographical survey in Paris and Córdoba, between 2007 and 2009, as part of a sociology thesis on citizens' knowledge of participatory urban planning (Nez 2010) and a PICRI (partnership between institutions and citizens for research and innovation) on the participatory measures that exist in the Île-de-France (Paris) region and in Europe in general (Cresppa/Lavue/Adels/Région Île-de-France).

is no formal political approval that would allow a part of the budget to be decided by local residents, [or even perhaps] delegated to local residents.”² The consultative nature of the participatory measures in place in Paris can be explained by the French context, where a “Republican” vision of politics dominates, according to which the elected representative is the sole guardian of the general interest and thus the only person in a legitimate position to make decisions. The specific nature of the administrative and political context in Paris is also a factor. Despite the French law of 1982 that created fully-fledged municipalities in each of the city’s 20 *arrondissements* (i.e. the *arrondissement* council and the mayor are elected by direct universal suffrage), the overall structure remains hierarchical and centralised: although each *arrondissement*’s council has a consultative role in affairs concerning its territory and may manage certain facilities or exercise competencies delegated to it by the main city council, City Hall still has a monopoly on all budgetary decisions. Organising discussions on the highways budget for the 20th *arrondissement* therefore forms part of a dual context where a consultative dimension necessarily emerges, as the councillor who initiated this approach reminds us: “Can neighbourhood councils decide anything? No, because not even the *arrondissement* council can decide anything.”³

Although the participatory budget in Córdoba goes further than the Parisian approach by establishing a direct link between participation and decision-making, this budget concerns only minor enhancement projects. Moreover, it is probably precisely because the sharing of power with citizens concerns such a small proportion of the city budget that local councillors have not called into question the decision-making nature of this local participation. In Córdoba, urban development projects are coordinated by two main bodies: the infrastructure delegation – the technical department responsible for carrying out and maintaining enhancements at neighbourhood level (parks and gardens, street lighting, highways) – and the *Gerencia de Urbanismo*, a municipal company responsible for urban planning and large-scale projects. The participatory budget essentially concerns projects implemented by the infrastructure delegation, whereas larger-scale urban projects, negotiated directly between city councillors and community leaders, are neither presented nor discussed at public meetings. So, for example, in the Fátima neighbourhood, the creation of a public park and car park (Parque Fátima) was decided within the framework of the participatory budget; however, residents were not consulted about the use of derelict land on the site of a former prison in order to create the second-largest park in Andalusia (Parque Levante), or about the construction of a new district centred on a technology and higher-education hub (Ciudad Levante). The various neighbourhood associations, federated at city level, can send representatives to the *Gerencia de Urbanismo*’s working committees and formulate demands as part of a municipal infrastructure plan, but these interventions remain strictly consultative. As the director of the *Gerencia de Urbanismo* comments, “Participation is more diffuse: there is no direct link with the decision-making process.”⁴

Large-scale projects: institutional consultation or collective action?

In Paris, all measures are presented as consultative; however, they concern large-scale urban projects and are generally open to the general public (and not just to neighbourhood organisations, as in Córdoba). Although these projects do not form part of any sort of participatory budget, they are often presented and discussed at public meetings. This is the case for urban operations at city and metropolitan level, such as the extension of the tramway in the eastern suburbs, the possibility of building skyscrapers on the edge of Paris proper, or the Greater Paris public transport project that was recently the focus of a particular committee of the National Public Debate Commission. Major urban projects are, at the very least, the subject of information meetings; in the best-case scenario, they are debated by a permanent consultation committee, as for Paris Rive Gauche or the Halles

2 Contribution by Julien Bargeton at the working group on the Neighbourhood Councils Charter, 3 July 2008.

3 Contribution by Jacques Baudrier at the working group on the Neighbourhood Councils Charter, 3 July 2008.

4 Interview with the director of the *Gerencia de Urbanismo*, 26 April 2007.

district. Furthermore, a body such as the local urban planning committee in the 20th *arrondissement* actively encourages residents to participate in theme-based consultation workshops concerning medium-term projects involving the construction of housing or public facilities within the *arrondissement*. Although these forward-looking approaches with regard to urban issues remain purely consultative, they nevertheless go some way beyond short-term investments at the microlocal level. Consequently, while the measures in Paris are more modest than Córdoba's participatory budget in terms of the way in which residents' proposals are integrated into the decision-making process, Parisians' views may be sought on much larger urban projects as part of a wide-ranging consultation approach. However, residents do of course only have a very limited influence on major urban transformations via these consultative procedures, which are open to all. At the Paris Rive Gauche mixed development zone, although local associations have managed to make a non-negligible impact on the development of the project (in particular, by obtaining changes to the street plan, which was originally focused on vehicular traffic, and succeeding in preserving elements of industrial and railway heritage that were initially to be demolished), it was because they combined action as part of the council's consultation exercise with more conventional types of collective action based on redressing the balance of power with public bodies, such as taking their case to court: "In concrete terms, changes did occur with regard to our case, because, despite everything, this period [prior to the consultation process] was not a waste of time: the fact that we tried to redress the balance of power and continued to fight clearly had an impact [...] When the consultation committee was set up, we moved towards permanent action within the framework of this consultation process, applying outside pressure when obstacles arose."⁵ Similarly, in Córdoba, neighbourhood associations do manage to have some influence on large-scale projects, such as the use of the derelict former prison site in the Fátima district, by acting as a counterbalance armed with contradictory expert findings.

Towards participatory democracy at all levels

This state of permanent fluctuation that has been observed, between a strong vision of participatory democracy limited to small-scale projects and a weaker consultative democracy for larger-scale operations, can be explained by the economic and political stakes. The fact that major projects are managed in the context of a public–private partnership gives greater influence to the economic players who are in part financing the project. Citizen participation is therefore considered less relevant and is consigned to the sidelines. Additionally, elected representatives may have a desire to leave their mark on the urban landscape, which may encourage them to promote certain large-scale projects against the wishes of local residents. The way in which the debate on skyscrapers along the Paris city boundary was initiated, namely by forcing the inclusion of the subject in the 2008 municipal election campaign and then presenting it to the Paris Rive Gauche neighbourhood consultation committee as the electors' choice, speaks volumes about the difficulties that citizens face in influencing major urban transformations that go beyond neighbourhood enhancements. The overwhelming weight of the political and economic stakes and the importance accorded to expert opinions thus appear all the greater – and citizens' room for manoeuvre all the more restricted – in direct proportion to the scale of the urban project and the complexity of the partnership between public and private bodies.

Although large-scale projects represent obstacles to participation, the comparison of the cases of Paris and Córdoba shows that the compromise between the intensity of participation and the scale of urban project is not justified. The implementation of wide-ranging consultation exercises in Paris does not enable citizens to influence major transformations in the city; although local residents may succeed in acquiring a space to obtain information and express their opinions, it is only by combining this kind of participation with collective protest action that these residents are able to actually have an impact on citywide projects. It is clear to see that the gains in scale do not

5 Interviews with the chairman of the Tam-Tam association, 23 November 2008 and 10 February 2009.

compensate the losses in terms of intensity of participation. This comparison also shows that these two cities would benefit from putting the most advanced participatory measures into place and making the most of their respective experiences – by giving citizens real decision-making power in a context of participatory budgets, and by opening up discussions of urban issues that extend beyond neighbourhood boundaries.

Further reading

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