

Conflicts of proximity and urban dynamics. Latin-American readings. Call for articles for *Géocarrefour* (2011)

This thematic issue will study relations between urban dynamics and government actions in Latin-American cities based on the analysis of conflict situations and local mobilisations. Groups mobilise in an effort to weigh on the conditions of coexistence between different uses of space, on the definition of common territorialized property (patrimony, environment, public spaces), the modalities by which activities or infrastructures are sited, the organisation of city services (water, transport, waste) and more generally, to demand an improvement in their living conditions and surroundings. More or less intense depending on national contexts, these mobilisations often result in a project being abandoned or modified, or in the setting up of a consultation body.

In France as in Latin America, such situations, under the name of urban, territorial, patrimonial and environmental conflicts, have given rise to debates and controversies on the future of urban sub-assemblies, and have become objects of study for geography and the social sciences, intent on understanding the social construction of urban, environmental and patrimonial issues. (Duhau, Giglia 2008; Melé et al., 2003; Sabatini 1997; Torre & Kirat, 2008). Though we have become accustomed to calling situations of collective action “conflicts”, most often there is a continuum between times of mobilisation, opposition and participation, characterised by different levels of confrontation. Consultation bodies are often rapidly put in place to try to (re)construct conditions of consent, even if mobilisation continues and strategies for disrupting public order are more or less firmly repressed (Melé, 2008).

We propose using the notion of conflicts of proximity to describe situations bringing into play mobilised residents for the control of their nearby space. However, competition for the use of space is not the only matter at issue. The spiralling in the number of these controversies seems to characterise a change in the perception of uncertainties, of environmental inequalities and of risks (Sénécal, 2005). These terms do not necessarily imply reference to the school of proximity in economics, nor that the term “nearby” will be used by the researcher in the sense of a territorial limit or objective measurement. Our definition of proximity is that given by residents or users when they say they a project, activity or practise affects their “environment”.

Latin-American cities are a particularly interesting context for the analysis of these situations due to the amplitude of urban problems, the rapidity of changes in the use of urban and peri-urban spaces, and the difficulties of urban policies to control the modalities of urbanisation. But also because in contemporary Latin America there has been an overall return to democracy, to decentralisation, to intense local political struggles, to experiments in urban participative governance and the strengthening of the legal context of government action in issues concerning urban, patrimonial and environmental policies.

In the Latin-American context, scientific literature most often analyses these situations as (new) social movements, as a form of resistance on the part of local communities, as ways of creating an organised civil society and access to citizenship, or as demands for the recognition of rights (housing, environment, minority groups). Other research stresses the role of traditional modalities of struggle between political groups using the clientelistic framework of disadvantaged populations and women's place in these movements, or they evoke interpretations in terms of NIMBY to characterise tendencies of the middle and well-off classes towards withdrawal to residences spaces. Most often,

researchers are interested in identifying the causes of conflict situations or in proposing solutions aimed at lessening them.

We propose to adopt a different perspective, viewing conflict not as a dysfunction, but as a modality of relations between groups, between residents and public authorities, analysed here in terms of Latin-American specificities. This thematic issue of *Géocarrefour* will give priority to three entries focusing on the territorial, legal and political productivity of conflicts of proximity¹.

The territorial productivity of conflicts of proximity

If conflicts can be analysed as being revelatory of how local groups try to anchor themselves, they can also be viewed as a form of territorialisation, since they produce solidary groups aware of a common destiny based on having roots in space. Mobilised groups materially appropriate a space by stating their vigilance, proclaiming to care for it, and ideally, by naming and valorising it. Networks of inhabitants that participate in a collective action engage in a sociability with a strong spatial anchorage constitutive of territoriality. In order to defend their position, mobilised inhabitants assert the qualities and values of the space in question, thus producing a representation of their residential space. This production/promotion of the territory then strengthens the specific territoriality produced by the collective action. But it is also a territorialisation process in another sense of the term, involving the confrontation of mobilised inhabitants with the spatialisation modes of government actions (zoning, protected spaces).

The legal productivity of conflicts of proximity

Law plays an important role in conflicts of proximity, not only as a resource, but also as a cognitive framework. Of course, it encourages the litigation of differences. In numerous Latin-American national contexts, the role of legal bodies has been strengthened. But beyond complaints or legal recourse, the law contributes to the building up of expectations, to the determining of positions, and constitutes a resource for argument. Since the 1990s, many Latin American countries have been marked by a judicial transition involving urban reforms and a strengthening of the framework of environmental government policy (Azuela, 2006). Mobilised inhabitants often present their action as a demand for the effectiveness of legal norms and ask for local adaptation of the legal order (Bassols, Melé 2001). In some contexts, they try to fight for the recognition of new rights, or for increased legal regulation of activities. Furthermore, the different illegal production channels of urban space represent specific regulation contexts – the inhabitants of these spaces can try to negotiate different forms of legitimisation or regularisation in the context of mobilisation strategies or resistance to government projects (Fernandes, Varley 1998).

The political productivity of conflicts of proximity

Since conflicts create an area of debate and are often brought to public attention by the media or give rise to ad-hoc bodies for negotiation and consent, they contribute to the production of what Alberto Melucci (Melucci 1999) calls an intermediate public space, a new form of political space whose function is not to institutionalise conflicts, but to create conditions enabling issues to be recognised and transformed into political decisions. Mobilisations, conflicts, and their recognition by government action can in some cases

¹ The notion of productivity is used here in the sense of “capacity to produce”. Thus it is a matter of studying the productive nature of conflict situations, focusing attention on the territorial, legal and political dimensions of their effects.

be analysed as a collective experiment in the co-production of the public good, while in other cases they can run up against closed doors, insofar as the authorities are concerned.

More broadly speaking, the aim of this issue, in the context of Latin-American cities, is to contribute to the spread of a reflection on the effects of conflict situations. Propositions for articles can concern other interpretations of the productivity of conflicts.

Deadlines and instructions

Authors can contact Patrice Melé patrice.mele@univ-tours.fr, coordinator of the issue, to express interest and request information concerning the text. In conformity with our new submissions procedure, articles should be deposited on our online interface (<http://manuscripts.revues.org/index.php/geocarrefour>) no later than 30 April 2011. Articles can be written in French or English. Texts in Spanish or in Portuguese can also be submitted and will be reviewed by the referees. But in case of acceptance, they will be published only in French or in English. Translation is at the expense of the author. Texts should contain no more than 40,000 characters including spaces (editors reserve the right to reject articles of more than 60,000 characters). Authors are requested to respect the norms of the review, as indicated on the site (<http://manuscripts.revues.org/index.php/geocarrefour>). Articles will be judged by the reading committee in double blind. Authors will receive notification of the decision (and correction instructions) by 15 September 2011, at the latest.

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