

The Participation of Civil Society in County Councils: How does this Citizenship Practice Happens?

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Summary

This work deals with the results of the research “Configuration of the participatory democracy experienced by the civil society in the county councils of Cruz Alta” and aimed to check the level of the civil society participation in the county councils of Cruz Alta, Rio Grande do Sul State, Brazil. The surveyed results corroborate what has been characterized as the Brazilian Political Culture, the relations between the Brazilian political and civil societies which are in a negotiation process, mediated by the political positions before the state. In view of a totality perspective, both societies have formed partnerships to defend polarized projects in the minimum state and in the radicalization state of the democratic deepening. In the space of these struggles there is a permanent tension in which, due to the fragility of the democracy, civil society acts under the perspective of representative democracy, delegating the voting power to a representative and remaining absent from the process, leaving to those elected the responsibility to carry out the political processes.

Introduction

Our interest in research that seeks to understand the regional socio-cultural practices related to the politics arises from the comprehension that there is no productive political participation in instances in which the regional civil society has a seat. We have pursued this object of research from situated practices as the scope of participatory democracy. In previous studies we have found that the social development of the region is hampered by the lack of the civil society participation in formulating spaces of public policies and social control, the lack of regional environmental planning, low commitment of civil society with the proper use of natural resources; weakness in management processes; lack of policies that address the diversity of cultural expressions (FAPERGS/UNICRUZ, 2014, p.5). It is precisely this aspect highlighted in bold that triggered our research and also the observation of the restricted operation of the councils of Cruz Alta county, trying to identify the number of vacancies for civil society on the boards, as well as the degree of vacancies occupied and the frequency and attendance of meetings. Still, analyze the quality, relevance of the participation of counselors, verify if the political-party relations compromise the participation of civil society and monitor the processing up till at least four demands of the civil society have been presented and approved. We have worked in a perspective to ensnare issues of participation and citizenship, always bringing ideology, speech, politics and politician. In this sense, we are developing a number of projects within the Graduate Program in Social and Cultural Practices and Social Development, projects of the oriented graduate and undergraduate students initiating their scientific career.

Methodology

The methodology used in the investigation was of qualitative nature, exploratory, calls for the field of communication science and social and applied sciences and starts with the theoretical and methodological procedures of the French Discourse Analysis – AD. The AD itself is constituted as a discipline of interpretation and inset, situated between history, psychoanalysis and linguistics. This form of interpretation is scientifically validated in the interlacing theories that enable to take the historicity, the sense/subject in its own participant character of the story and not the product of history. The subject is seen also as devoid of omnipotence, driven by the effect of unconscious processes, and taking into account the presence of the ideological in the scientific. The latter is a strong brand of the reconfiguration of the place of the interpretation of the AD, since there is no way to approach an object without considering that this is being done under a certain look, under an ideological position that mark on the own choice of the theoretical and methodological framework. Language is the materiality that provides access to the discourse of the civil society subject. It is important to highlight that the AD operates following the criteria of comprehensiveness, representativeness and homogeneity

The place and the involved subjects comprise the sample of one (1) member of each one of the County Councils of Cruz Alta, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, which are part of the organized society. Data collection for the study had as technics and instruments a bibliographic research of the issue under study, the documental analyses of municipal and federal laws regarding the issue and the regulation of each of the councils, and semi-structured interviews carried out individually, with time and place previously scheduled according to the availability of the respondents. Structure analysis and functioning of the county councils, following plenary meetings and analysis of the interviews were also performed.

2 Founder Notions

In order to maintain consistency with the guiding discipline of theoretical and analytical practice, it is important to clarify some concepts. Situated in the historical materialism, it should be noted that when we look back on the socio-cultural practices we are focusing them in full size and it is here, as pointed out by Kosik (1876), that the Marxist Theory of Totality is the great fundament of the discipline of interpretation, that does not accept separation in the analysis of movement, for example, between civil society and State. As the author of the Dialectic of Concrete says, the dialectical thinking.

It is a realization process that precedes the whole to the parts and from the parts to the whole, from the phenomena to the essence, from the totality to the contradictions and from the contradictions to the totality; it is just in this spiral process of correlations that the concepts come into reciprocal movement and are mutually elucidated, reaching concreteness. The dialectical understanding of the totality means not only that the parts meet each other in relation to internal interaction and connection among them and with the whole, but also that the whole can not be petrified in the abstraction located above the parts, since the whole creates itself in the interaction between the parts (Kosik, 1976, p.42).

In this sense, when seeking the functioning of the representations in the countycouncils, we are even making reference to civil society and to political society, not seeing them as a dichotomy. Although the Brazilian political history has contributed to the establishment of rigid boundaries between the two in order to separate the post-64 militarized state from the opposing civil society. According to FONTES (2009), since the eighteenth century, civil society was placed as the natural order, that is, no man lives alone, and also as a space of the private. The political society results from pacts and has defined requirements, different from the civil society, being encharged of taking care of the life, the security, the property, of the order and of the external defense. In opposition, we understand it according to the thought of Gramsci who, with the advent of Marxism, XIX century, refounds the concept under the political paradigm of class society in which the State and the political society are composed by the bourgeois society. According to Semeraro (1999), marxist shows the inseparability between political society and civil society.

Yet, in this phase of the text, it is important to point out the conceptions of culture and political culture that permeate our analysis. It was said earlier that the Marxist category of the totality stands as a principle to be adopted by the French line of discourse analysts, so when it proposes the discussion related to the political culture, we have to say that this is a way to demarcate a given territory of socio-cultural practices. However, when we talk about culture, we are understanding it in its intrinsic relation with ideology and politics. Culture, as defined by Santos (2009), is welcome, since it is presented in a perspective of the whole, as set forming the totality. According to him, culture is “the dimension of the society that includes the whole knowledge in a wide sense and the various ways this knowledge is expressed”. It is a dynamic dimension, a fundamental dimension of the contemporary societies (p.41). In this sense, it already holds the political practices such as those regarding to culture. If we conceive it as out of the socio-cultural practices we are going in the opposite direction of what Marxism proposed. From Escobar (1979) we bring a citation that contributes to explain what we say. He says: If the notion of culture is equivocal it is, precisely, both for constituting in the supporting notion of an anthropology aiming to distort the social analysis through the realization “cultural” human relations and to isolate the basic superstructural practices, as in to be false of a speech above the contradictions that serve to support the cultural apparatus (p.184).

The position of Escobar (1979) about culture as an ideological apparatus, brings politics to culture and supports what Santos (2009) says. However, there is a specificity in the political sociocultural that runs and falls naturally in the cultural universe of a given social formation. So, we have a slice of these practices that are characterizing the way these political relations, for example, candidates and voters, elected and voters, are related. The authors start from their observations of the emerging democracies after World War II and make questions about what the future of democracy in the world, and write. The civic culture is a pioneer work that provides the foundation for the political culture in political science. They themselves say in the review of the work in 1989 that political culture is not a theory, it refers to a number of variables that can be used in the construction of theories.

According to Almond and Verba apud Gonçalves (2014), there are three types of political culture, which are based on: a) political guidance of the cognitive subject: refers to knowledge and beliefs about the political system; b) policy guidelines of the affective subject: relates to the sense of connection and engagement with the policy; c) political guidelines of the evaluative subject: the judgment and opinion of the subject in relation to politics, which originates from the combination of the above types. The author describes this cultural specificity. Political culture is, therefore, the combination of different types of cognitive, affective and evaluative guidelines from the political system, if possible, from there to identify three ideal types of political culture: parochial, subject and participatory (GONÇALVES, 2014:3).

The same author has followed Almond and Verba, which is, each one, parochial culture: characterized by a structure of traditional values, decentralized, in which individuals are reduced to the private sphere. It is more affective and normative rather than cognitive. The subject of the culture is characterized by an authoritarian structure, marked by centralization; participatory culture; the guidance is for the system as a whole, for both structure and political and administrative processes.

Baquero (2011) shows that Latin America presents hybrid political culture with weakened dissent, with relations based on negotiation, clientelism and individualism. Representative democracy consists in relations permeated by the culture and does not represent the civil society, according to this author. This corroborates what was already pointed out by Gramsci cited by Semeraro (1999), when he shows that the relationship between state and civil society prepares, educates the consensus and is neutralized or the dissent is hidden. On the other hand, we know that there is no productive political relationship to citizenship without dissent.

3 Management Councils for Public Policy

We know that managers of Public Policy Councils are the result of struggles for popular participation that started in the period of military dictatorship which produced effects in the 1988 Constitution –Citizen Constitution. The issue of popular participation in the formulation of public policies and in the control and implementation of them is incorporated in the Constitution and a form of this participation is consolidated in the early 1990's, institutionalizing it through the councils, which start to function at the federal, state and municipal levels.

In the analysis of the legislation, we will find the creation of prior to 1988. However, only after the Citizen Constitution is that they have national regulatory framework. To our surprise, we still find in the 1960's, specifically on March 16th, 1964. A few days before the fateful Day when the country was taken by the military dictatorship, the creation of the National Council of the Human Rights, through the Law No. 4319; in 1981 is created the Advisory Council of Social Security and Health Administration; in 1985 the Council for the Defense of Women Rights, being followed by others. It is important to point out that it is up to the states and municipalities the task of creating their respective councils, but in compliance with the national regulations.

The councils are of two types: the sectoral and the human rights. The first refers to policies for certain sectors, such as health, social welfare, environment, education, tourism, sport, water resources, with deliberative function, and the advisory sectors, like science and technology, labor, rural development. The human rights councils are voted for determined segments with recognized discrimination conditions or facing discrimination and/or suffering inequalities due to historical reasons. These councils are divided into deliberative rights: children and adolescents, those with disabilities and elderly, and human rights: female, racial equality, youth.

In order to illustrate the composition and operation of the County Councils we discuss with the City Board of Education. Regarding this council, the National Constitution of 1988 makes it clear in Article 211 that "The Union, the States, the Federal District and the municipalities shall organize, in a collaborative way, their education systems." Law No. 9394/96 regulates the institution of municipal education systems through Art. 8, in harmony with the state education system, defining the powers and the scope of municipal education systems, giving priority to pre-school and elementary school. It presupposes the possibility of an advisory body, normative and deliberative, that is, a council with the competence as regards the scope and the hierarchy of the entities of the federation. Thus, the Municipal Education Council is a body that makes up the Municipal System of Education and brings, in its nature, the principle of participation and community representation in the management of education.

Like other councils of the area, it is considered necessary for the process of decentralization/municipalization and the strengthening of municipal systems. In Cruz Alta, the Municipal Council of Education, among its functions, has to participate in the definition of municipal education policies, monitor, control and evaluate the implementation of plans, programs, projects and innovative experiences in the area of municipal education, developing standards for authorization, accreditation and supervision of the institutions of the municipal education system; decide on the creation, authorization and accreditation of new schools to be maintained by the municipality, as well as to know the educational reality of the city and propose measures for public authorities to improve the flow and school performance.

According to Gohn:

Councils are analyzed as agents of innovation in public policy because, when conducting mediation between civil society organizations and government agencies, they are building a new public power and social control. As such, represent organized social forces, they contribute to the strengthening of new political subjects (2001, p.31). These functions, if implemented as the statute suggests, is an area of management and definition of educational policies, but it can be said that there is still the need to overcome the concentration of power of the executive in the demanded issues, and increase the participation of the social actors that are part of the community. Participants of this board have in common the fact that they represent the interests of social and educational sectors. Therefore, they can not keep silent in decision-making and not be carried away by constructed political discourses which represent the public power. Due to the fact that they represent very frequently a threat to the power of the executive and to the Municipal Education Departments – MED, by removing tasks that historically were exclusively under their responsibility, the Municipal Education Council shows the long road you need to travel so that it can effectively fulfill its primary function: to formulate and control municipal public policy in education.

The MED can and is supposed to constitute a democratic public space with a political-pedagogical role. For this to be possible, the great challenge of this joint committee is to ensure that their actions are not guided solely by bureaucratic issues and by the agenda of the municipal government, since participative democracy will only have credibility for the society if able to produce concrete results, that is, to promote the quality of life and access to the entire population's rights.

4 Provisional Conclusions

The findings, made possible by the interviewed, representatives of the civil society and also by institutional members – UNICRUZ – led us to conclude that what was just an observation was actually confirmed. These representatives, in a paraphrastic movement, show the lack of temporal regularity in the functioning of the great majority of councils. The cultural setting regarding the political culture observed in the functioning of the Municipal Councils is given along the lines described by the authors mentioned before. It is presented as a political culture that, in addition to clientelism and individualism causes the silence of the civil society. Silence is not imposed by the prohibition of speech space, but by denial, that is, the mechanism of granting on the boards for illegitimate representation of the civil society. Silence here is treated under the perspective of Orlandi (1995), who considers it as a constitutive function. In the case of councils, we consider that the silencing of the civil society takes effect neutralizing dissent and making the consensus be established in such a way as to homogenize positions.

The way to silence is in the composition of some council, which are formed including a large number of public workers linked to county groups or to political parties that are ahead of the executive and also including members of non-governmental organizations. The ambiguity of the civil society concept is manifested in municipal councils in which workers who are managers of public institutions occupy positions of civil society, but they actually represent the political society.

Regarding the activities of non-governmental organizations with municipal councils, Sorj (2007) shows that they have welfare and proactive configuration and their main originality is to serve the poor and the needy and be social spaces of some groups and companies. And we say to ourselves that the, based on Banquero (2011) that the activities of non-governmental organizations with municipal councils preclude the emergence of a political subject in the society.

5 Theoretical References

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Origin of the term is in Almond and Verba apud Gonçalves (2014).

The University of Cruz Alta sits and is represented on all boards, committees and observatories of Cruz Alta. This makes a number of twenty-eight representatives.

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