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On arches and stones, places and experiments: Public libraries and democratic society

Sobre arcos e pedras, lugares e experimentações: biblioteca pública e sociedade democrática

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Abstract

This article discusses the role of public libraries under the new political and social dynamics of democratic societies. It assumes that the continuity and expansion of the democratization process lead society to demand an increasingly larger and more active participation in the public arena and in decision-making. In the landscape of a world in crisis, seeking spaces of participation and new forms of coexistence and fellowship seem insufficient. Formal cultural institutions are urged to dialogue with new, proactive players, and with the new loci of production, circulation and appropriation of culture in democratic societies. Flexibility and openness to the new social dynamics are a challenge that they must address. This article is an exploratory reflection and, as such, the essayistic form was chosen as a strategy that allows one to understand, by means of subjective perceptions grounded on the bibliography of various fields of the human sciences, the emblematic situations of an emerging context presenting knowledge in a way that keeps it open, so that it includes its own rectification and originates new cogitations.

Keywords: City. Democracy. New social dynamics. Public library.

Resumo

O presente artigo busca problematizar o papel das bibliotecas públicas na nova dinâmica político-social em sociedades democráticas a partir do pressuposto de que a continuidade e o alargamento do processo de democratização levam a sociedade a exigir uma participação cada vez maior e mais ativa na arena pública e na tomada de decisões. Na paisagem de um mundo em crise à procura de novas formas de convivência, os espaços de participação parecem insuficientes. As instituições culturais formais estão instadas a dialogar com a proatividade dos novos atores e com os lugares de produção, circulação e apropriação da cultura em sociedades democráticas. Flexibilização e abertura a novas dinâmicas sociais é desafio a ser enfrentado por elas. Como constitui-se em reflexão exploratória, adotou-se a forma ensaística como estratégia que permite compreender, a partir de percepções subjetivas embasadas em bibliografia oriunda de diferentes campos das ciências humanas, situações emblemáticas de um contexto emergente, apresentando o conhecimento e mantendo-o aberto, o que inclui sua retificação e seu desdobramento em novas reflexões.

Palavras-chave: Cidade. Democracia. Novas dinâmicas sociais. Biblioteca Pública.

Introduction

We live moments of restlessness and uneasiness. The lenses we use to see the world no longer seem

able to fathom the context in which we are immersed, and we have yet to find new lenses that might allow us to understand it. The continuity and expansion of the democratization process lead society to demand

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an increasingly larger and more active participation in the public arena and in decision-making. The difficulty of today's democracies in dealing with the conflicts of complex societies is abundantly clear, given the disproportion between the demands of civil society and the political system's ability to respond - what Bobbio (1986) called an 'overloading of government'.

Awareness of the new political-social dynamics and the proactivity of the new players compel us to a fundamental reflection on our formal cultural institutions - libraries, museums, cultural centers - and their role in the new, emerging context if we hope to preserve their relevance. The formal cultural institutions are urged to dialogue with the new individuals and loci of production, circulation and appropriation of culture (understood as a process that makes something proper, subjective, driven by desire and will) in democratic societies.

This article is an exploratory reflection and, as such, it seems to us the essayistic form is a strategy that allows one to understand, by means of subjective perceptions grounded on the bibliography of various fields of the human sciences, the emblematic situations of an emerging context. The essay form also allows us to point out manners of prospective understanding, i.e., manners of seeing in other ways what is happening - or, as Canclini (2014) pointed out, of presenting knowledge in a way that keeps it open, so that it includes its own rectification and originates new cogitations.

City, territory and the public library

The Italian writer Calvino (1978) was fascinated by cities. For him, they expressed the tension between geometric rationality and the entanglement of human existence. His fascination resulted in a beautiful book, "Invisible cities", in which Marco Polo, the Venetian traveler, describes to Kublai Khan, the Mongolian emperor, the fantastic geography of his immense empire. Each of the cities described is a symbol of complex relationships, of infinite possibilities. The stories are told symbolically to express the tension between our perception of how cities actually are and our desire of what we would like them to be.

Amidst a multiplicity of desires and fears, we build our cities, which express the encounters, conflicts

and contradictions of the tangle of existences, of the field lines and vanishing points that allow them to be transformed. In one of the book's dialogues, Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone:

But which is the stone that supports the bridge?
Kublai Khan asks

The bridge is not supported by one stone or another, Marco answers, but by the line of the arch that they form.

Kublai Kahn remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds, Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me.

Polo answers: Without stones there is no arch
(CALVINO, 1978, p.82).

To conceive the public library in its inextricable relationship with the city and the territory, the subject which we propose to reflect upon, led us immediately to Calvino's book, both for its poetic prose somewhere between desire and fear, the elements that shape our cities, and for the image of the arch, which doesn't exist without the stones that compose it. This, in other words, is the perspective that alludes to the impossibility of understanding understand today's public libraries without understanding their relation with the surrounding territory and city, i.e., without understanding the broader political-social dynamics and the multiple players who interact in the public arena. The contemporary way of life is increasingly participative; society feels itself excluded from the public arena, and wants to be acknowledged by it and participate in it. A sense of discomfort and discontent exists, generating tension from the manifold and heterogeneous forces in action.

The complexity of contemporary processes is most visible in cities. In the territory of the city, a living culture emerges from encounters, confrontations, interactions, interconnections, demands, pieces of knowledge, unknown items and reciprocal acknowledgments. The city is a collective work that inevitably reflects multiple desires and needs. Likewise the public library, where one can create or refuse conditions of possibilities.

Public libraries are an expression of the social-historical context in which they are immersed. According to Silveira (2014), since their emergence in post-Industrial Revolution England, when significant

numbers of people arrived in the cities from the countryside, public libraries were supposed to incorporate the masses and contribute to the 'social order', the 'maintenance of democratic frameworks', and the 'progress of the nation'. Their civilizing mission was tacitly assumed in the face of migratory flows, which, although necessary for the developing industries, also created new urban dynamics, laying bare differences and inequalities. Later, public libraries gained new contours:

[...] it was realized that public libraries could contribute to the socialization of their users and to their individualization as well, either by preserving and transmitting the representational inputs of the culture of specific groups, or by promoting the intellectual life of individuals and the places where they were inserted. With this, the definition of their attributes and social functions became structured "by the use made of recorded information and its importance in people's lives" (SILVEIRA, 2014, p.3, our translation)².

From another perspective, the historical approach proposed by Coelho (1997), reflecting on the concept of cultural action in cultural institutions, highlights how, at first, the focus was on the works of culture themselves and more attention was paid to the institutions' assets, their preservation and the grouping of collections in manners detrimental to the public. There was later a shift in focus that gave a larger number of people access to their cultural heritage. Since the mid-1960s, the focus has been on the individual and on enhancing conditions for full fruition and artistic creation. With regard to public libraries, cultural mediation became part of their policies - especially those regarding reading activities - but they still did not open themselves to broader public participation, much like other cultural institutions.

Jaramillo (2010), in her article "*La biblioteca pública: un lugar para la participación ciudadana*", launches a discussion on the conceptual void of the public libraries' political dimension to better understand

their new meanings and functions in the 21st century. This is true particularly with regards to citizenship education, which is a central element and a fundamental condition of democratic societies, as Jaramillo points out. Public libraries are seen as facilitating agents and mediators of cultural and educational actions of citizenship education, which consubstantiates itself on three axes: autonomy, coexistence (or fellowship) and participation. Her considerations, however, focus on the right to information as the key issue from the perspective of cultural democratization.

In a context of emerging creative processes dispersed in spaces throughout the city, outside of formal institutions, cultural and artistic practices are being transformed, expressing a desire to live and convey multiple experiences, and for new social experiences and spaces of enhanced conversations. From the perspective of cultural democracy - which, dialogically, interacts with conflicting imbrications, "in keeping with the purpose of articulating for many what is produced by many" (HONORATO, 2013, p.5, our translation)³ - the challenge facing cultural institutions, including public libraries, goes beyond the focus on access proposed by the paradigm of democratization. This seems to us the challenge we face to keep up with the present, paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze, in complex and plural societies.

The approach adopted here follows the perspective on cultural dynamics proposed by Williams (1992), whereby three levels coexist simultaneously: the dominant culture, the residual culture and the emerging culture that will evolve and eventually become dominant in the future. Thinking ahead requires an understanding of the emerging dynamics. Herein lays our challenge: to strive to see with new lenses what is already being announced.

Philosopher Jacques Rancière, in his book "*O ódio à democracia*", seeks to understand how, in supposedly democratic societies, a dominant intelligentsia (which, by the way, does not wish to live under any

² "[...] percebeu-se que as bibliotecas públicas poderiam contribuir para a socialização de seus usuários e para sua individualização, seja através da preservação e transmissão dos insumos representacionais da cultura de grupos específicos, seja pela promoção da vida intelectual dos indivíduos e lugares onde se inseriam. Com isso, a definição de seus atributos e funções sociais passou a ser estruturada" pelo uso feito da informação registrada e pela importância desta na vida das pessoas".

³ "Conforme o propósito de uma articulação entre muitos do que é produzido por muitos".

other regime) denounces daily the evils caused by democracy, “the catastrophe of democratic civilization”. (RANCIÈRE, 2014, p.11, our translation)⁴. In other words, the expansion of democracy is disturbing, especially because of its core principle, namely, that anyone has the power to govern, to enter spheres previously reserved for the few. The intensity of democratic life, its ungovernability arising from its own constant and conflictive expansion, substantiates its government. According to Rancière, “The democratic process is the process of a perpetual bringing into play, of invention of forms of subjectivation, and of cases of verification that counteract the perpetual privatization of public life” (RANCIÈRE, 2014, p.81, our translation)⁵.

The *raison d'être* of democracy is the acknowledgement of the other, the permanent exercise of acknowledgment, and its fundamental principle is the expansion of rights, whose raw material is desire, in the wonderful formulation of Ribeiro (2002). Democracy moves and expands through desire, the desire of individuals struggling for recognition by means of new logics and new sensibilities in the public arena. Since democracy is the politics of acknowledging otherness, the desire for recognition in the public arena is what expands democracy. The future enters the present in the form of otherness, as Certeau (1995) once wrote.

We are living, therefore, a phenomenon peculiar to democratic development, namely, the constant struggle to expand space in the public arena, which ensues from the multiplicity of desires. Coping with this diversity is something specific to the dynamics of democracy and one of the great challenges of democratic organization.

The permanence and expansion of the democratization process lead society to increasingly demand greater active participation in the public arena and in decision-making. The legitimacy of the State has been shaken by the intricacy of addressing society's transformations. This translates into a constant tension

between the institutions of the State and the new social dynamics, and directly bears upon public policies, their programs and actions, which seem to be guided by previously legitimized models and systems, but no longer have the means to face our contemporary indetermination, *i.e.*, the multiple dynamics that compose the social landscape. Civil society is a key player in today's dynamics. The perception of many individuals and groups is that over-regulation and over-management restrict and paralyze desires. Pog words, from the *Coletivo Lado Sujo da Frequência* ['Dirty Side of Frequency' cultural collective], come to mind:

Do-it-yourself has gained space in the city and today has a pull on various types of cultural production. [...] All in all, very organically and horizontally, these [cultural] collectives are producing a living culture that almost always mutates during the process of execution [...] unlike the public entities that want to preserve their plans at any cost and turn cultural production into something plaster-like and very boring! (POG, 2016, p.39, our translation)⁶.

The present moment demands a non-simplifying understanding of the numerous representations, contradictions, voices and silences that vie for visibility in the public arena, often stretching the limits of pre-established demarcations and the effective use of the city, where the diversity of voices collectively and conflictually builds the symbolic or material boundaries that segregate, approximate and array the relations between individuals and groups.

According to Martín-Barbero (2014), cultural communities are becoming a crucial venue for recreating a sense of collectivity, reinventing identities, renewing how their assets are used, and converting them into a space of productive articulation between the local and the global. From the concept of 'cultural sustainability', which for Barbero is still under construction, it is possible to think about social development. The concept is based on three vectors:

⁴ “A catástrofe da civilização democrática”.

⁵ “O processo democrático é o processo desse perpétuo pôr em jogo, dessa invenção de formas de subjetivação e de casos de verificação que contrariam a perpétua privatização da vida pública”.

⁶ “O faça você mesmo ganhou espaço na cidade e hoje atinge os mais variados tipos de produção cultural [...]. Tudo de maneira muito orgânica e horizontal, esses coletivos vêm produzindo uma cultura viva que quase sempre sofre mutações ao longo do processo de execução [...] diferente do poder público que quer manter seus planos a qualquer custo, transformando a produção cultural em uma coisa engessada e muito chata!”.

the community's awareness of its own cultural capital; its ability to make decisions that allow it to conserve and renew this cultural capital; and the ability to open its own culture to exchange and interaction with other cultures from around the country and the world (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 2014). It is this new cultural ecosystem that may lead to the establishment of more plural, more democratic and more equitable societies.

Participatory spaces may seem insufficient, given the backdrop of a world in crisis seeking new forms of coexistence. A society that is being democratized requires many things and cannot submit to, or accept, the world's rigid and heavy-handed agendas. Today's way of life is participative, sustains Nogueira (2013).

Life wants to live, to avow its potency, to experiment without mediations, to affect and be affected, devoid of overly conventionalized and predefined processes. This creates tensions with formal institutions, including the cultural institutions, which follow another time frame. It's like shoals and small fishes coexisting with humongous transatlantic vessels.

We are witnessing a desire to live and narrate multiple experiences, to effuse the multiplicity of voices that can no longer be contained within delimited spaces, within traditional channels and institutions. Formal cultural institutions are urged to confront the challenges posed by the proactivity of individuals and collectives, to respond to their desire to participate and experiment, and to face up to the new loci of production, circulation and appropriation of culture.

Canclini (2013), reflecting on the relationship between cultural equipment and the city, proposes that, in the new settings where art and culture circulate, the former must become an element of the creative process, modifying its function and structure. Museums, cultural centers and libraries are challenged to rethink themselves, to reconsider the bonds they establish with their audiences and with the city. This implies an articulated reflection on the idea of participation and proximity that stem from forms of creative interaction and from a kind of multiculturalism that is lived more as a productive interaction than as a threat. How should a cultural institution that owns or manages a collection

proceed vis-à-vis the multiple cultural assets of the different individuals that inhabit the city? Canclini (2013) is interested in thinking these institutions in a scenario where multiple actors are on stage, where new cultural practices are at stake, and where the challenge lies in the interaction, in the new relations and reflections that may operate within the institutions. How can libraries, museums and cultural centers partake in this debate about the meaning of culture in the city, he wonders.

Participation and proximity are threads of the same weft. To participate, to experiment, to act, are actions that consubstantiate in a place - i.e., in a space that becomes public through practical and symbolic disputes, through interactive actions between various agents that render differences and plurality visible. This also implies the possibility of achieving understanding through the negotiation of meanings, as sociologist Leite (2007) asserts in his book *"Contra-usos da cidade"*. A public space does not exist *a priori*; rather, it is structured by the presence of actions that give it meaning, of practices that structure themselves in a certain place. A public space is the result of meanings built by places. It is a territory of subjectivation, a space of practice. Places are spaces of symbolic convergences that result from shared experiences. The articulation between the notion of citizenship and the existence of spaces for public sociability configures possibilities of understanding. This is not synonymous with consensus, but rather involves processes of symbolic interaction and qualification, according to Leite (2007). Citizenship presupposes the existence of sociability based on the acknowledgment of society's multiplicity of values and interests. For a place to exist, it is necessary that its constitutive social practices be related to a space, turning it into a territory of subjectivation. "The universal is the local minus the walls". This is an axiom that makes one truly think (COMITÉ INVISÍVEL, 2016).

A location has many places, says Spink (2001): local, regional, national, global and virtual spaces intersect in a place. "They are all social products with different degrees of intermediation. The place, in constant construction, is what we have; there is nothing beyond it. Its horizons and limits are disputed by us" (SPINK, 2001, p.16, our translation)⁷.

⁷ "Todos são produtos sociais com graus diferentes de intermediação. O lugar, em constante construção, é aquilo que temos; não há nada além dele. Seus horizontes e limites são disputados por nós".

Underlying the idea of place is the sense of belonging, of affection, of occupation, of the self-organization of ordinary life, of the power of simply being there. The insistence on laying claim to the public, to that which should be common and accessible to all, is a characteristic trait shared by various players.

Klein (2003) chose a provocative title for a lecture at the American Library Association/Canadian Library Association: 'Why being a librarian is a radical choice.' Her argument is based on the indispensable work that libraries perform in the context of a globalization driven by the frantic and stifling pursuit of capital to the detriment of people. She stressed that the public library represents the preservation of three essential values for democratic societies, always at risk: knowledge, as opposed to the mere gathering of information; public space, as opposed to commercial or private space; sharing, as opposed to buying and selling. I would add openness to dialogue, in the broadest sense of the term, i.e., the willingness of different players to liaise, however conflictually.

The idea of participation that mobilizes individuals and collectives - an emerging form of social political dynamics in different spheres - reveals the will to put into practice a communal way of life, sustained by meetings, dialogues and exchanges, by the development of joint projects, by the idea of experience in the broadest sense of the term, i.e., a metamorphosis in the relationship with things, with others, with oneself. Experience is a crossing over (and, therefore, dangerous), an openness to the ever-changing process of becoming, a transformation. Yet, running counter to experience as such, today we have a world that has been previously defined and delineated, and bombards us with prefabricated and reified representations that usurp our consciousness and prevent any kind of democratic critique (SAID, 2003).

If they wish to retain their relevance, formal cultural institutions - the libraries, cultural centers and museums that used to compose one of the defining axes of the regimes of visibility and sayability - must open themselves to the new dynamics. This means expanding the limits of maneuverability and mobility

within themselves, becoming more flexible, opening channels that allow culture to thrive, turning themselves into a space for experimentation. In a nutshell, it means a permanent questioning of the institution itself, a continuous pushing of its limits and borders. Culture is dialogue; culture is also a field of uncertainties.

Allowing breathing and respite, enabling propositional and participative actions in the decision-making process, creating negotiated agreements and readiness for individuals and groups to act, establishing spaces that allow interactions between people and between languages, stimulating critical reflection. These observations by Honorato (2009) on art museums may serve us well in thinking about other cultural institutions, such as public libraries. Honorato (2009) advocates that mediation by the institution should be seen as a negotiation between diverse interests without conciliatory power, and that the institution should not exempt itself from revealing its own interests and contradictions. This implies not only creating spaces of experience, but also evincing the impossibility of institutional neutrality that prevents effective dialogue between the parties. The institution is a translating entity in the etymological sense, i.e., a means of transportation between borders.

Individuals and collectives do not wish to remain as mere users of equipment; they want to go beyond, to appropriate and transform themselves and the places from a common perspective: that of touching the sacred and profaning it, transforming it into something ordinary. To profane is to remove from the temple something has been laid there and restore it to common usage. The passage from sacred to profane can also happen through a use, or reuse, that is totally incongruous with sacredness, as philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes. To profane is to assume life is a game, is learning to put separations to new use, is playing with them. We'd like to underline this idea of Agamben: to put to new use. In his own words, "Profanation, however, neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use" (AGAMBEN, 2007, p.68, our translation)⁸. Put another way, one should stimulate institutions that

⁸ "Neutralização daquilo que profana. Depois de ter sido profanado, o que estava indisponível e separado perde a sua aura e acaba restituído ao uso".

allow respiration, transpiration, encounters with the unexpected and with what has not yet been seen - a negotiated institutionality that acquires legitimacy and perennality. These are great challenges that must be addressed. One should always remember that culture is a proliferation of inventions.

Reflecting on experience and territory against the backdrop of a profound crisis of representation in various spheres, Perán (2013) emphasizes how institutions are not porous to the changes and re-ingressions of meaning that, from the world of life, we have constantly offered them. For him, our challenge is to distill the meanings of experience from the reoccupation of territories, building political sense by reoccupying the streets, building aesthetic sense from our own imaginative skills, our own knowledge, our own aesthetic experiences. To go back to being cartographers, (*volver a devenir cartógrafos*), as proposed by Perán, refers to the idea of territory as the space available to carry out and transcribe experiments, to distill their meanings, to elapse the meanings of space, and to create cartographies of counter-memory, of forgotten spaces, of forgotten stories. A territory must be a space available to transcribe a renewed world of experiences.

Public libraries, which can be found in more places in the city than any other formal cultural institution (INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE GEOGRAFIA E ESTATÍSTICA, 2014), play a fundamental role in this reinvention, with a view to expanding the creation of spaces and territories, in order to build experiences and develop the imagination; to exercise the possibility of moving in other ways; and to constitute a place.

The city is a network of spaces of exchange that increasingly comprise individuals who claim what is common to all, what must belong to all, what is created by all - i.e., that is public in the broadest sense. To produce something new is to invent desires, instigate desires, associations, new bonds and forms of cooperation; it is the negotiated construction of many voices in processes of interaction. Harvey (2013) reminds us that, "The freedom to make and remake our

cities and ourselves is [...] one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights" (HARVEY, 2013, p.28, our translation)⁹. Opening space to individuals and to the dynamics of collective life is a statement of affection for the city and its citizens.

Conclusion

The multiplicity of voices that seek space in the public arena is inherent to democratic exercise. The continuity and expansion of the democratization process lead society to demand an increasingly larger and more active participation in the public arena and in decision-making.

To ponder the role of legitimized spaces (e.g., museums, libraries, cultural centers) in the context of the new dynamics - whereby the system of cultural production acquires new contours, whether we're speaking of the production, circulation, use or appropriation of culture - one must perceive the constant tension between the players, which directly bears upon public policies that seem to be guided by previously legitimate models and systems that no longer address our contemporary indetermination. In the landscape of a world in crisis, seeking spaces of participation and new forms of coexistence and fellowship seem insufficient. This is one of the great challenges facing the consolidation of democratic societies. Formal cultural institutions, such as public libraries, are also urged to respond to it; otherwise they will become irrelevant in the future, forgoing their inherent power in order to participate in the strengthening of a plural society, to accept differences in resolving inequalities, and to open channels for the countless voices that make up society. How cultural institutions will deal with the new cultural ecosystem is an important perspective that must be considered and squarely faced. Can they drive the new dynamics? Are there institutional forms relevant to the new configuration? If cultural institutions wish to remain relevant in the future and not become temples of sacred pilgrimage that nurture the spectacularization of life, they must open themselves to the new dynamics.

⁹ "A liberdade de fazer e refazer a nós mesmos e às nossas cidades é um dos mais preciosos de todos os direitos humanos".

In short, myriads of issues can be unfolded from the initial approach outlined here. It seems to us essential that we consider, in a theoretically sound way, the uncertainties of the present moment that render unreliable all descriptions of, and responses to, the social structure and the emergence of players that are creating the new dynamics.

Public libraries are vital for the consolidation of public spaces, for the creation of territories, for building experiences, for developing the imagination, for generating knowledge, for exercising the possibility of us moving ahead in other ways, permeable to the social dynamics.

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