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'We all have rights, but …' Contesting concepts of citizenship in Brazil

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Introduction

During the past two decades, the notion of citizenship has become increasingly recurrent in the political vocabulary in Latin America, as well as in other parts of the world. In Latin America, its emergence has been linked to the experiences of social movements during the late 1970s and 1980s, reinforced by efforts toward democratization, especially in those countries with authoritarian regimes.

In Brazil, the notion of citizenship has been increasingly adopted since the late 1980s and 1990s by popular movements, excluded sectors, trade unions and left parties as a central element in their political strategies. Since then, it has spread as a common reference among a variety of social movements, such as those of women, blacks and ethnic minorities, homosexuals, retired and senior citizens, consumers, environmentalists, urban and rural workers and those organized in the large cities around urban issues such as housing, health, education, unemployment, violence, etc. (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998; Foweraker 1995). These movements, organized around different demands, found in the reference to citizenship not only a useful tool in their specific struggles but also a powerful articulating link among them. The general claim for equal rights, embedded in the predominant conception of citizenship, was then extended and specified according to the different claims at stake. As part of this process of redefining citizenship, a strong emphasis was put on its cultural dimension, incorporating contemporary concerns with subjectivities, identities and the right to difference. Thus, the building of a new citizenship was to be seen as reaching far beyond the acquisition of legal rights, since it would

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require the constitution of active social subjects who would define what they consider to be their rights and struggle for their recognition. Such a cultural emphasis asserted the need for a radical transformation of cultural practices that reproduce inequality and exclusion throughout society.

As a result of its growing influence, the notion of citizenship soon became an object of dispute. In the last decade it has been appropriated and re-signified by dominant sectors and by the state to include a variety of meanings. Hence, under neo-liberal inspiration, citizenship began 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 adjustments, consolidated rights are being progressively withdrawn from workers throughout Latin America. In a correlative development, philanthrophical projects from the so-called third sector, which convey their own version of citizenship, have been expanding in numbers and scope in an attempt to address poverty and exclusion.

Today, the different dimensions of citizenship, and disputes over its various appropriations and definitions, largely constitute the grounds of political struggle in Latin America. Such a dispute reflects the trajectory followed by the confrontation between a democratizing, participatory project to extend citizenship and the neo-liberal offensive to curtail the possibilities it contained. In what follows, I will examine these different versions of citizenship as they have emerged in the Brazilian context of the last decades. In addition, I will discuss how these recent versions relate to two previous conceptions of citizenship that have shaped Brazilian historical formation and continue to be active today: *cidadania regulada* (regulated citizenship) (Santos 1979) and *cidadania concedida* (citizenship by concession) (Carvalho 1991; Sales 1994).

Citizenship became a prominent notion in the past two decades because it was recognized as a crucial weapon, not only in the struggle against social and economic exclusion and inequality but – most importantly – in the widening of dominant conceptions of politics itself. Thus, the redefinition of citizenship undertaken by social movement sectors intended, in the first place, to confront the existing boundaries of what is to be defined as the political arena: its participants, institutions, processes, agenda and scope (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998). Contrasting with previous conceptions of citizenship (conceived of as strategies of the dominant classes and the state for the gradual and limited political incorporation of excluded sectors towards a greater social integration, or as a legal and political condition necessary to the installation of capitalism), this was a strategy of the non-citizens, a political project of the excluded – a citizenship 'from below'.

In order to understand the full meaning of this redefinition of citizenship, it is important to examine previous dominant conceptions of citizenship in Brazil and the historical context in which they emerged, as this redefinition and the particular directions it assumed were part of a struggle to confront and break up those earlier conceptions and the practices they promoted.

A brief history of citizenship in Brazil

Since the abolition of slavery in 1888 and the proclamation of the republic in 1889, Brazilian political history has been shaped by three important events. First, the revolution of 1930 inaugurated a process of conservative modernization, in which the state came to play a fundamental role in the installation of industrial capitalism and in the organization of society itself. From 1930 to 1945, under the leadership of Getúlio Vargas, a truly national, authoritarian, centralized and interventionist state constituted the leading force behind national development. Relations between the state and civil society were structured along corporatist lines, and the political organization of social sectors was put under state tutelage and control, setting the basis for the populist arrangement that predominated from 1946, when the democratic regime was re-established, to 1964.

Second, the period of authoritarian military rule, which followed the 1964 *coup d'état*, restricted civil liberties and democratic institutions, repressing the political expression of opposing social sectors.

Third, the transition to democracy, roughly comprising the period between the mid-1970s and late 1980s, was marked by the gradual strengthening of civil society and by the emergence of different social movements. By forming an opposition to the military regime, they tried to establish new parameters for the relations between state and civil society and the re-establishment of democracy. The constitution of 1988, which expresses not only the formal re-establishment of democracy but also significant steps towards its deepening, was a result of the struggle of those forces. These steps included an extension of rights and, most importantly, several mechanisms for the direct participation of civil society, which will be discussed later.

In the following year, Fernando Collor defeated Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, the labour leader and founder in 1980 of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT, Workers Party), and became president after an election that epitomized the struggle between two different political projects (which continued in the years to follow). His government, which lasted from 1990 to 1992, when he was impeached for