

The democratization process as an immaterial legacy: the experience of education management in Várzea Paulista (2005-2012)¹

*O processo de democratização como um legado imaterial:
a experiência de gestão da educação em Várzea Paulista (2005-2012)*

*El proceso de democratización como legado inmaterial:
la experiencia de gestión educativa en várzea paulista (2005-2012)*

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Abstract: This article analyzes the considerations of managers and teachers about the management of the Municipal Department of Education (SME) of Várzea Paulista-SP, between 2005 and 2012, focusing on the perspectives and tensions related to the democratic process established. The hypothesis is that the political guideline of democratization of relations, adopted by the managers, contributed to the formation of democratic subjectivities and represented a concrete practice of democratization of educational management. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed according to the content analysis methodology (BARDIN, 2016), based on Santos' (2011) reflections on democracy. The results indicate that the valorization of diverse knowledge in the construction of educational policies and the sharing of authority promoted rebellious and competent democratic subjectivities, capable of proposing social alternatives. As an intangible legacy, the democratization of relations between the subjects involved in the educational process stands out.

Keywords: Democratic management; Educational policies; Democratic subjectivities.

Resumo: O artigo analisa as considerações de gestores e professores sobre a gestão da Secretaria Municipal de Educação (SME) de Várzea Paulista-SP, entre 2005 e 2012, focando nas perspectivas e tensionamentos relacionados ao processo democrático instaurado. Parte-se da hipótese de que a diretriz política de democratização das relações, adotada pelos gestores, contribuiu para a formação de subjetividades democráticas e representou uma prática concreta de democratização da gestão educacional. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas e analisados conforme a metodologia de análise de conteúdo (Bardin, 2016), embasando-se nas reflexões de Santos (2011) sobre democracia. Os resultados indicam que a valorização dos diversos saberes na construção de políticas educacionais e o compartilhamento de autoridade promoveram

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subjetividades democráticas rebeldes e competentes, capazes de propor alternativas sociais. Como legado imaterial, destaca-se a democratização das relações entre os sujeitos envolvidos no processo educativo.

Palavras-chave: Gestão democrática; Políticas educacionais; Subjetividades democráticas.

Resumen: El artículo analiza las consideraciones de directivos y docentes sobre la gestión del Departamento Municipal de Educación (SME) de Várzea Paulista-SP, entre 2005 y 2012, centrándose en las perspectivas y tensiones relacionadas con el proceso democrático establecido. Se basa en la hipótesis de que la directriz política de democratización de las relaciones, adoptada por los directivos, contribuyó a la formación de subjetividades democráticas y representó una práctica concreta de democratización de la gestión educativa. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas y analizados según la metodología de análisis de contenido (BARDIN, 2016), a partir de las reflexiones de Santos (2011) sobre la democracia. Los resultados indican que la valorización de conocimientos diversos en la construcción de políticas educativas y el reparto de la autoridad promovió subjetividades democráticas rebeldes y competentes, capaces de proponer alternativas sociales. Como legado intangible destaca la democratización de las relaciones entre los sujetos involucrados en el proceso educativo.

Palabras clave: Gestión democrática; Políticas educativas; Subjetividades democráticas.

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Introduction

The article discusses the urgency of realistic alternatives to address economic, social, and political challenges, especially in the face of attacks on democracy and social rights. It emphasizes the importance of educational management practices that promote the democratization of relations and value democracy as an essential principle for improving human relations and building inclusive and participatory educational policies.

The research was conducted in the city of Várzea Paulista-SP, governed by the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*) between 2005 and 2012, a period marked by democratic experimentalism aimed at democratizing knowledge and strengthening participatory democracy, breaking away from historical patrimonialist and clientelist practices.

Data were collected between 2019 and 2020 through semi-structured interviews with teachers and managers from the Municipal Department of Education (SME). Participant inclusion and exclusion criteria were: managers selected for holding high-ranking hierarchical positions, considered by their peers as government ideologues with more than four years in leadership roles;

and teachers chosen for their active participation in the three main educational policies⁴ during the eight-year administration, without any party affiliation with the government.

The analytical process was structured into three articulated stages. In the pre-analysis phase, a preliminary reading of the material was conducted, from which initial hypotheses and provisional thematic axes emerged to guide the organization of the corpus. During the exploration phase, coding was performed by semantic registration units, operationalized into themes and condensed sentences, linked to their respective context units.

Codes were initially defined based on the research problem and the theoretical framework—specifically Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s conception of democracy—and were subsequently expanded based on emerging content from participant interviews. This resulted in the incorporation of new analytical dimensions, such as democratic subjectivities and the democratization process as a legacy.

In the data treatment stage, registration units were grouped by semantic criteria, giving rise to categories and subcategories constructed at the end of the analytical process, in compliance with the principles of homogeneity, relevance, and mutual exclusion. Data interpretation occurred through the articulation of these categories with the adopted theoretical framework, highlighting how the analyzed experiences express processes of democratization of relations and the constitution of critical and proactive subjectivities.

Following this path, the results are organized around the constructed analytical categories, most notably: (i) the subjects’ perceptions of the democratic process experienced; and (ii) the constitution of democratic subjectivities and the legacy of the analyzed experience.

The results indicate that the democratization of relations in the management of the SME contributed to the development of democratic subjectivities capable of proposing social alternatives and valuing democracy as a concrete practice of emancipation. This educational management experience, which sowed critical and competent subjectivities, left an intangible legacy of democracy and points to paths for educators committed to social transformation.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s Conception of Democracy

It can be argued that the meaning of democracy is ambiguous and that the rhetorical coexistence of this ambiguity has intensified with neoliberal globalization in the Western world. In this context, the defense of democracy can be used by movements aligned with the guarantee and expansion of social rights and the distribution of wealth, as well as to favor the

⁴ Construction of the Curricular Framework; Continuing Education Program; Municipal Education Plan.

causes of the free-market economy and an increased oligopoly of political parties. Added to this are currents that frankly oppose democracy, evoking authoritarian regimes.

The contemporary triviality that the concept of democracy has acquired allows for the non-harmonious rhetorical coexistence of these currents. If everything is democratic or appears to be so, there is a risk of a vacuum of meaning and of democracies "dying democratically"⁵, despite the nods from some in the daily life of Brazilian society.

While there is a certain consensus that representative democracy is in crisis, given the dysfunctional distance between representatives and the represented that plagues the latter with hopelessness as they see their aspirations sidelined from political decisions, there emerges, however, the need to rethink an alternative democracy to the hegemonic one.

On this path, Boaventura de Sousa Santos denounces the sources of domination stemming from capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism that affect society and announces the emergence of a new paradigm sustained by other ways of understanding the world beyond the hegemonic scientific canons of the West. He proposes social conceptions, ideas, and practices that confront and point toward emancipatory alternatives to the three aforementioned sources of domination.

Given this epistemological stance, the Portuguese thinker focuses on alternative forms of democracy sustained by other paradigms, especially those originating from the countries of the global South—understood here as an epistemological and political South, and not necessarily a geographical one⁶. These are democracies that are not content with being a political regime in which citizens grant authorization (through periodic elections) for representatives to represent them; they go further. They seek the direct participation of the subjects involved in the decisions that affect their daily lives.

It is no longer desirable to think of democracy as strictly linked to periodic proceduralisms delimited by the voting for representatives and the state sphere, coexisting comfortably with situations of poverty and social exclusion. According to Santos (2010; 2011; 2016), it is necessary to democratize, beyond the State, all spaces where unequal power relations prevail, generating "social fascism" within them. The author defines six structural spaces of power production in capitalist society that are autonomous and non-hierarchical but articulate in specific and complex ways (Santos, 2011). They are:

⁵ Santos (2011).

⁶ The South of epistemologies is not geographical, but rather epistemological and political. It is a South that also exists in the North of the globe, just as there is a North that exists in the South. Australia is a country located in the Southern Hemisphere, but politically and epistemologically, it is part of the North. Haiti, conversely, is the opposite. The South is a metaphor for the suffering produced by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy (Santos, 2019).

- The household space, characterized by the set of social relations of production and reproduction of domesticity and kinship. The form of power manifested in this space is patriarchy;
- The production space, being a set of social relations developed around the production of economic exchange values and labor processes. The mode of power, in this case, is capitalist exploitation;
- The market space, as a set of social relations of distribution and consumption of exchange values. In this space-time, the form of power is the commodity fetishism;
- The community structural space, constituted by social relations developed around the production and reproduction of physical and symbolic territories and common identities or identifications. The power manifested is, in this case, that of unequal differentiation between those who do not belong to the community and those who do and claim the right to treat the outsider unequally;
- The citizenship space, as the set of social relations that constitute the public sphere, primarily the vertical relations between the State and citizens. The form of power in this space is inequality in access to political decision-making and in the control of political decision-makers—the visible power of domination;
- The world space, as the total sum of the effects of social relations through which the global division of labor is produced and reproduced. Power, in this case, is that of unequal exchange in economic, political, and military trades.

These structural spaces are constituted by six dimensions: social practice, institutions, dynamics of development, forms of power, forms of law, and epistemological forms. Each dimension of each structural space is present in any other corresponding dimension of any of the other structural spaces. Santos (2011) clarifies this with the following example:

[...] the privileged form of social practice in the household space is sexual and generational difference, but this does not mean—as feminist theories have shown convincingly—that sex and generation are confined to the household space. On the contrary, to take the example of sexual difference, sex combines specifically with class in the production space, with the client-consumer in the market space, with race, ethnicity, or religion in the community space, with citizenship in the citizenship space, and with the nation and nation-state practices in the world space. The same can be said of any of the other dimensions (Santos, 2011, p. 279, our translation).

By defining the forms of power and how they manifest in different space-times, as well as the possible interrelations between them, Santos (2016) considers it imperative to transform these spaces in the struggle against any social relation regulated by an unequal exchange, which he conceptualizes as power. On this foundation, the author understands democracy as

any process of transforming unequal power relations into relations of shared authority, and argues that each of these spacetimes can be a field of democratic struggle against the fascism generated within it (Santos, 2016).

The democratization of the six space-times is the path toward social emancipation, which Santos (2016) defines as the aggregate effect of struggles against different forms of social power, measured by the success with which they transform unequal power relations into relations of shared authority. Based on these fundamentals, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, supported by alternative epistemologies and emerging participatory democratic experiences in the developing countries of the Global South, considers that democracy must be reinvented as an essential condition for a more just and solidary society.

For the author, through the democratization of spacetimes, another democracy will emerge, defined as high-intensity democracy. Its basis lies in the participation of minority groups in the decision-making processes of both formal and non-formal political systems, and its goal is the establishment of shared authority relations in all spheres of action. Although citizen participation is foundational in Santos's theoretical proposition of democracy—as it brings to light obscured social demands through the voices of the excluded subjects themselves—it does not function in isolation from representative democracy; rather, a complementarity must be established between them (Santos; Avritzer, 2002).

Participatory Budgeting (PB) constitutes an example of successful articulation between representative democracy (RD) and participatory democracy (PD) by expanding local participation through the transfer of decision-making power from government officials to the subjects directly involved in daily demands, configuring an experience that expands the democratic canon beyond the hegemonic proposition.

Both Santos (2007) and Santos and Avritzer (2002) understand that the emergence of other forms of democracy, which begin to coexist in peaceful or conflictual ways with hegemonic practices, are fundamental to reinvigorating the meaning of democracy in a globalized society and to contesting the meanings attributed to democracy in the West. *Demodiversity*, as the authors term this process, is a condition for strengthening democracy with the prospect of it becoming high-intensity.

Furthermore, to strengthen democracy, one must consider the transition of counter-hegemonic experiences from the local level, such as PB, to the global level, so that democratic practices occurring around the world can recognize themselves as resistance movements against low-intensity democracy⁷.

⁷ How Santos (2016) defines the hegemonic representative democracy in the West.

In light of this, another thesis emerges: the expansion of democratic experimentalism. Regarding this, Santos and Avritzer (2002) point out that successful experiences of participation were acquired experimentally; thus, for the cultural, racial, and distributive pluralization of democracy, experiments must multiply in all directions. It will be observed that the democratic experience set in motion during the management of the SME in Várzea Paulista (2005-2012) sowed rebellious and competent subjectivities, which Santos (2010) considered another principle for the reinvention of democracy, alongside the democratization of structural spaces and the recognition of epistemological diversity.

Rebellious subjectivities are grounded in the conception of rebellious action or *action-with-clinamen*⁸, coined by the author. Unlike conformist action, which reduces realism to what exists, "rebellionism" is the turbulent action of a turbulent and creative thought that aims to redistribute the anxiety and insecurity of the excluded to the included, making it evident that reducing the anxiety of some is not possible without reducing the anxiety of others. *Action-with-clinamen* is the deviation from conformism; it is the rebellious inclination promoted by destabilizing subjectivities that do not refuse the past but rather assume and redeem it by the way they deviate from it, and in this movement, they signal an alternative future.

Santos's theoretical considerations are not content with merely denouncing the crisis of representative democracy and the entire civilizational paradigm of modernity⁹, nor are they intangible musings; after all, the democratic experimentalisms present in the world point toward alternatives, an embryonic "becoming" that signals a future that does not have to be a repetition of the present.

Thus, the author indicates principles without claiming the right to universalize them, makes visible other¹⁰ democratic possibilities, and encourages the creation of as many as are necessary in the reinvention of democracy. According to Santos (2016), the challenge today consists of how to democratize democracy.

Despite this unfavorable conjuncture, successful social experiences exist that strive to narrow the relationship between public power and society, establish relations of shared authority, and foster democratic experiences that broaden the strictly procedural understanding of democracy. These are potent experiences that can leave indelible marks on the subjects involved.

⁸ Santos (2010) draws on Lucretius to establish a metaphor with the concept of *clinamen*. Thus, *clinamen* is what causes atoms to cease appearing inert and reveals a power of inclination, that is, a power of spontaneous movement.

⁹ See Santos (2011).

¹⁰ For more on democratic experiences in various parts of the world, see Santos (2019).

The Subjects' Considerations Regarding the Experienced Democratic Process

Within the scope of the analytical category concerning the subjects' perceptions of the experienced democratic process, the analysis of the accounts from managers and teachers of the municipal network allows for the identification of meanings attributed to the education management experience in Várzea Paulista (2005-2012), especially regarding participation, decision-making, and forms of organizing educational work, with direct implications for the formulation and implementation of educational policies.

The analytical reading of these meanings evidences the centrality attributed to the expansion of participation and the redefinition of power relations within educational management.

In this context, guiding questions for the analysis emerge: After all, is it a matter of democratic management? What kind of democracy is being discussed?

Based on these questions posed to the managers and teachers of the municipal network who lived the experience at the time, they stated in a unison discourse that the democratization set in motion distanced itself from proceduralisms that tasked a political elite with deciding the paths of society based on strict rationality. Contrary to this current, the research participants¹¹ elevated democracy as a value to be cultivated in relations, seeking to include social demands through the voices of those who are typically sidelined from political decisions.

Participation and debates were highlighted in their accounts, in addition to the guarantee of material and formative conditions to enable a more horizontal dialogue and direct decision-making power to the subjects involved in the process.

Given this understanding of democracy by the research participants, the subsequent interlocution sought to understand if that experience of administering an SME had indeed been a democratic management.

The manager participant (MP1)¹² pointed out the narrowing of distances between the SME and the teachers as an important trait of the experience, which for him was democratic, while nonetheless emphasizing what should have received more effort to be achieved:

The existence of a management group that plans the SME, with supervisors who visit schools and engage with teachers, is fundamental. When we facilitate sensitive discussions within the network that may create disagreement regarding assignments, FUNDEF [the national fund for primary education development], or career plans, we are upholding a democratic principle. Listening to a principal express the desire to

¹¹ The research was composed of six managers, the ideologues of educational actions and policies at the time, and four teachers who participated actively in the conception and implementation of educational policies.

¹² Managers are identified as MP and teachers as TP.

manage her school like this and that is a significant step. Given these characteristics and the openness of the SME, the process was deeply democratic. From this point of view, it was very democratic! **While time did not allow for a more comprehensive approach in all areas, such as the implementation of a participatory budgeting process specific to education, the experience remained fundamentally democratic** (MP1, our translation, emphasis added).

Certainly, a PB specific to education would constitute an unprecedented democratic experimentalism (Santos, 2002) in the region, bringing forth democratic alternatives that could contest the power to define the application of the educational budget. For curricular policies, having an Educational Participatory Budget (EPB) would sow a ground that could be interesting for inserting the public educational budget into school curricula and, perhaps, discussing alternative forms of economy that could tension capitalism as the sole and credible mode of wealth production.

In this way, in daily pedagogical labor, the knowledge emerging from the EPB would be treated as a means of producing a dignified life (Ponce, 2018), allowing subjects to understand and act in the world (Ponce; Araújo, 2019) while being grounded in the application and priorities of the funds destined for the area. Furthermore, it would foster democratic coexistence, cultivating the debate over various perspectives on education and opening paths for curricular justice¹³ (ibid., 2019).

In the opinion of manager MP2, the highlight of democratic management was having empowered the subjects through the democratic process:

I believe this was a case of democratic management, as the work carried out demonstrates this. Several actions consolidated this management style, which I characterize as an empowerment of educators, society, and students. Even within a short timeframe, we contributed to a generation that holds significant memories of that period. It provided a grassroots formation that is often lacking, and which many currently in power do not possess. **I believe these students now hold a different perspective, marked by an empowerment that allowed people to feel truly integrated into the teaching and learning process of Várzea Paulista. From the janitorial staff and security guards to the school cooks, teachers, coordinators, and supervisors, everyone felt like an integral part of the process. In this sense, there was no traditional hierarchy, instead, a mutual dialogue prevailed. This involved visiting schools, engaging in discussions, and listening to problems and constructive criticism.** Therefore, the most significant legacy is not the infrastructure or the schools we built, though those were important contributions, but rather the empowerment that everyone experienced during this period (MP2, our translation, emphasis added).

¹³ For more, see Ponce, Costa, and Araújo (2023).

As highlighted, the excerpt above is evidence that the management experience involved various segments and transcended school times and spaces. By feeling "empowered," in the manager's words, the subjects of the process narrowed relations, reducing distances or even historically consolidated hierarchies.

As Santos (2002) warns, a high-intensity democracy occurs in the process of democratization in all space-times where there are unequal power relations, and in this process, democratic subjectivities capable of resisting and changing the course of history are constituted. By highlighting that democratic management was not confined to the state space, suggesting it was also present in intergenerational relations in education, MP2 points toward horizons of a high-intensity democracy in effect in the municipality.

In ratifying the management process she participated in as "democratic," one manager participant (MP3) considers it "another way of governing under the constitution of a State model responsive to social demands and under the auspices of popular participation assumed in the government project," thus nodding to the strengthening of the State and participation as founding elements of citizenship. The participatory nature and the possible democratic experimentalisms are other elements observed in this manager's considerations regarding the management of the SME:

To engage in and expand the practice of discussion and debate, moving individuals beyond inertia to foster a better understanding of municipal government. Being a citizen entails this very knowledge. It involves transparency, participatory budgeting, and a deeper grasp of budgetary matters [...] (MP3, our translation).

In the course of the manager's speech, democratic experimentalism moves toward weaving together management experiences and practices, grounded in references but without a formatted model distant from the inserted context. For this collective construction, it is worth highlighting "knowledge" as a fundamental element for the full exercise of citizenship, pointing to the PB as an element of transparency for public affairs.

The highlight in manager MP4's account is school education as a privileged space to elevate the lives of children, given a local scenario of marked social inequality.

Indeed, there was an underlying principle. At times, some things were overlooked or could have been handled differently, but the intent was purely democratic. The focus was always on the children, particularly the children of the working class. Given that this is our target audience, we focused on the child in the classroom, recognizing that public education is the only means available to them to improve their lives in the future. (MP4, our translation).

By depositing their aspirations in school education, with a democratic management that transcended into other spaces, conceptions are aligned that credit education as a privileged means for constructing a more just, equal, and democratic society. This perspective holds the struggle for social justice on the horizon, as proposed by Ponce (2018) and Ponce and Araújo (2019) when deepening the dimensions of knowledge, care, and democratic coexistence within curricular justice.

Since democracy is a process that occurs in the transformation of unequal power relations into relations of shared authority according to each local context (Santos, 2016), manager MP5 provides her considerations based on the patrimonialist and authoritarian context encountered when the administration took office:

I believe it was a starting principle because democratic management is a journey. It is not something that is simply finished; it is a daily construction. However, I undoubtedly believe there was the beginning of such a construction there, both in the team's understanding of what it means to be a group within a democratic perspective and in the relationship between this team and the schools. We aimed to instill a logic different from the authoritarian one we have always had, moving instead toward a democratic management (MP5, our translation).

Beyond the democratic experimentalism in process within education management, another essential element of high-intensity democracy is the democratization of other spaces:

I strongly believe in interdisciplinary work for specific issues within the SME and Education. I think this is also how you begin to implement democratic management, because it must be collective. It is collective within Education, but not only within it; it is also necessary to build a dialogue with other Departments (MP5, our translation).

The last manager we interviewed (MP6) provides interesting signs that a procedure of *translation*¹⁴ (Santos, 2007) may have occurred among SME managers regarding the present educational perspectives. This constituted a reciprocal intelligibility between forms of knowledge without destroying diversity, thus seeking consensus to administer the city's education:

As a supervisor of the pedagogical department, I believe there was democracy during my tenure. Everyone on my team had a voice and everyone was heard. We validated opinions, or not, and although we converged toward the same goals, everyone respected one another (MP6, our translation).

¹⁴ *Translation* is part of the set of sociological procedures conceived by Santos to recognize, value, and constitute reciprocal intelligibility among the different forms of knowledge emerging from the struggle against domination.

Along these lines, teacher participant TP1, when questioned about democracy and democratic management, reinforces that the democratic perspective in the analyzed education management considered the incompleteness of knowledge and the search for ethical convergences:

I believe democracy must also be learned, specifically the valuing of others' repertoires of knowledge and values, provided these values do not affront the human person. Democracy follows this line of respect for culture and identity, as long as it is not a human affront, while trying to seek a more just and egalitarian path together. In this sense, I see that it was democratic and had a democratic foundation, as we collectively thought about the direction of municipal education. Each person brought their school experience and the reality they lived to find a fairer path. (TP1, our translation).

According to the epistemological elucidations of Santos (2011), there was a primacy of knowledge-emancipation¹⁵ in process, where the valuation of different ways of understanding municipal education constituted solidarity as a form of knowledge, necessary for the reinvention of democracy¹⁶.

The recognition and valuation of these articulated forms of knowledge are an element of struggle against the endogenous domination that existed in the relations between State and citizen, and perhaps in the relations of domination occurring in the homes of educators and students, in their workplaces, and in the communities they belong to, essentially in the spaces where capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism reach with their oppressive arms.

A seed of this struggle against unequal power was sown in the education management experience of Várzea Paulista (2005-2012), leaving democratic marks as a possible legacy. This is observable in the manifestations of resistance woven by manager MP4 regarding the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC):

[...] I cannot yet quantify or qualify it, but I notice, for instance, the extent to which the BNCC is unsettling us. And I say 'us' because, as I mentioned regarding the inconsistencies, there are times when I observe certain people and realize it is not about rejecting the BNCC itself, but rather the way it is being imposed. That is when I say: 'No, that previous work did yield results¹⁷, because today people do not want something ready-made'; they want to build it collectively (MP4, our translation).

By not conforming to a vertical curricular policy, "antidemocratic from birth"¹⁸ like the approved version of the BNCC, the teachers act as non-conformist historical subjects. They resist

¹⁵ For Santos (2011), there are two forms of knowledge established in modernity: knowledge-as-regulation and knowledge-as-emancipation. The latter is based on the trajectory from a state of ignorance (colonialism) to a state of knowledge (solidarity).

¹⁶ See Santos (2011).

¹⁷ Refers to the third version of the document and its swift approval.

¹⁸ Coined by Santos (2016).

the history that constituted them and act to alter its "naturalized" course, pointing toward alternatives—in this case, the collective and democratic construction of school curricula.

The democratization of relations among those involved constitutes, in process, rebellious, competent, and democratic subjectivities, as will be observed in the following section.

Rebellious, Competent, and Democratic Subjectivities as a Possible Legacy

Within the scope of the analytical category regarding democratic subjectivities and the legacy of the investigated experience, elements emerge from the participants' accounts that allow for an understanding of the constitution of critical, proactive, and inventive subjects.

Based on the problematization constructed in this analysis concerning how such subjectivities are formed, it is considered that an interpretive key can be found in two currents of knowledge suggested by Santos (2007). One is linked to reason, which he calls the *cold current*, and the other to emotion, postulated as the *warm current*.

Although both are important and everyone carries them, the author emphasizes that the current linked to emotion is commonly poorly managed, despite being responsible for providing the boldness necessary to transgress: "[...] the cold current is the consciousness of obstacles; the warm current is the will to overcome them. Cultures are distinguished by the primacy they give to the cold current or the warm current" (Santos, 2007, p. 65, our translation).

Thus, while it is not possible to state that the actions of the educational management were solely responsible for the critical and proactive analysis of the conjuncture made by the teachers, which will be presented subsequently, it is reasonable to say that the democratic legacy was a necessary condition for the arguments raised regarding the political scenario.

The democratic experience lived in the municipality in analysis expanded the range of social practices still alive in the interviewed subjects, signaling a future where high-intensity democracy (Santos, 2016) can be the condition for the reinvention of society. This brings forth a type of sociology of emergencies termed by Santos (2019) as *ruins-seeds*.

For the author, *ruins-seeds* embody a sociology that is both memory and an alternative for the future, represented by social conceptions and practices that, even when defeated by sources of power, also constitute dignity and the hope that another society is possible. It is a "ruin" because it refers to an oppressive nostalgia, yet it must be lived as a guide toward an alternative future, since other alternative social practices were also experienced in the past (Santos, 2019). In the case of Várzea Paulista, this was an educational management experience that sought to expand democratic canons and inaugurate other ways of experiencing democracy within that context.

In this way, the current obscurantist and authoritarian times are lived by subjects who have experienced other social practices; thus, in the movement of resistance to this, the "seed" of an alternative future already experienced in the past is constituted. *Ruins-seeds* are lived simultaneously (ibid., 2019).

An embryonic legacy of this resistance was present in the reports of the research subjects, echoing in their discourses the indignation and non-conformity regarding the political and social ills spearheaded by the President of the Republic at the time of the interviews¹⁹.

In the *warm current* elevated by the management, there was an impulse of passions mediated by reason to constitute other subjectivities that reported the political conjuncture of the time as a "social tragedy" (MP5; MP6), while still gesturing toward future alternatives that are not a repetition of the current moment.

It is worth noting that the analyzed management did not set in motion an experience that envisioned being democratic while observing its effects "from above". It was a rational, emotional, and corporeal experience, involving many other ways of living and understanding the process in which the managers were deeply intertwined.

It is not possible to distinguish the experience from the subject who lives it (Santos, 2019), making it fundamental to present the considerations that both managers and teachers made about the conjuncture, with the horizon that the lived democratic process contributed to weaving criticisms and propositions.

The traces of this non-conformity regarding the current moment resonated in rebellions with a strong critical accent from all participants, who denounced the "regressions" (MP3) of the federal and municipal governments (TP2; TP3), pointing to the political conjuncture as a scenario of "social hopelessness" (MP1) and "distrust in political representations" (MP6), being an "unprecedented social tragedy" (MP5). According to manager MP5:

We are living through a worse moment because it resembles the military dictatorship in terms of totally isolating any political issue that is not the currently prevailing one. You don't even know what that policy is because, in truth, it is a confusion of people and parties; what exists does not even qualify as politics. Therefore, it is impossible to engage in a political debate because it is not ideological. What we have is a policy disguised by purely emotional issues and prejudices. It is difficult to have a political dialogue because what is currently in force in the name of politics is not truly politics. Isolating Black people or LGBTQ+ individuals is not politics. An ideological discussion involves debating the role of the State. So, we are living through a tragedy. However, I want to believe that this is also an important moment for us to 'separate the wheat from the chaff' and realize that we had good things that we are currently throwing away (MP5, our translation).

¹⁹ Data were collected between 2019 and 2020; therefore, the President of Brazil was Jair Messias Bolsonaro.

The denial of politics as a strategy to seize it and dictate the political directions of Brazilian society was a common discourse in the 2018 elections in Brazil, reinforcing authoritarianism in the face of the young Brazilian democracy. This is an authoritarianism that does not tolerate differences, whether political and/or identity-based, as highlighted by the manager, distancing itself even from a low-intensity democracy.

The solace may lie in the possibility of "realizing the good things that are being thrown away" (MP5); among them, the democratic experience lived in Brazil after the military regime (1964-1985)—specifically, the democratization process that Brazilian society underwent following the 1988 Federal Constitution.

Another point of emphasis was the concern regarding the conservative wave that took over the international scene, entangled with colonialist interests that hindered an ongoing national sovereignty project through the trade alliance between emerging economies known as BRICS²⁰.

[...] the current situation is a massive setback. I believe this conservative wave is very serious, and the hard part is knowing it is not just in Brazil; it is global and justifies certain geopolitical positions of global dispute. Thus, U.S. geopolitics and its relationship with various other places, all these emergencies that began to appear with BRICS, are threatening to the United States because it is the dominant power. I see no other name for this entire conservative wave, including help from conservative Americans, other than an alignment with U.S. foreign policy (MP3, our translation).

In this vein, the proximities between the State and religion are underlined by the teacher (TP3) as a nefarious characteristic of the current situation, present in both federal and municipal governments.

A very dangerous point that we haven't touched upon, but since you are discussing the federal government and this also happens at the municipal level, is religion. When politics and religion began to mix, things worsened significantly. In the name of God, a crowd of people who do not know what they are doing is moved; but since 'God spoke,' they title themselves and speak in His name. This is a very delicate subject because I shock people a bit, but it is terrible. I believe religious and political leaders should not mix because it is not working. We see the president, who was practically elected in the name of God and is a global embarrassment; he does not represent me, and I am ashamed of him (TP3, our translation).

In addition to an abject feeling toward the President of the Republic, for the teacher, this lack of representativeness depicts a reported problem of representative democracy.

²⁰ Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

It is worth noting that this teacher had an active role in the conception of educational policies in the municipality, where elements of representative and participatory democracy were articulated. Such experience allowed her to critique more demanding forms of representation.

Teacher TP1 lamented the centralization of decisions currently occurring in the municipal government, which, according to her, are in line with federal government actions. Her arguments are anchored in the use of standardized teaching materials (vouchers/workbooks), the control of teaching actions, the absence of training programs, the constitution of a Municipal Education Council tutored by the public administration, and the infamous "*Escola Sem Partido*" (School Without Party)²¹ project established by municipal law.

[...] the issue of teaching materials, the standardized workbooks, and the mindset of: 'I need to know which page you are working on today; I know the other school is on the same page.' There is this sense of control, even though every child is unique. This weakens our voice. There is no training offered, or when there is, the director does not participate. At the macro level, a proposal from a congressman that in 2010 suggested vouchers for early childhood education is returning, and now homeschooling is also gaining strength. So, we are very much aligned with the macro level. Regarding the *Escola Sem Partido*, the municipal law states in article three that the school should not interfere in sexual education or family values. So, if a family believes they should beat a child and this child comes with a bruise, what do I do? It is a danger, isn't it? (TP1, our translation).

By being categorical in stating that the actions occurring in the political scene do not align with democracy, the teacher indicates that her lived experiences provide the conditions to understand other ways of living democracy; entangled with professional training, the teacher's inventive freedom, and public education as a duty of the State.

In addition to the federal government's irresponsibility in dealing with education, teacher TP2 emphasizes that, at the municipal level, there is a "closing of the Secretariat" to collective work, often seen by teachers as if the department held a monopoly on knowledge. However, what the teacher lamented most was the disregard for the curricular framework, which was a collective construction by education professionals.

[...] Another thing that worried and upset me greatly was our construction of the Curriculum. The Curriculum is the most beautiful part of our history; we met for many months: representatives from daycare, preschool, and elementary school. We built this Curriculum thinking about the child and their transition between stages. I am very concerned because, when this new group took over the Secretariat, the first thing they did was change the Curriculum (TP2, our translation).

²¹ The "*Escola Sem Partido*" was a political movement and legislative project in Brazil that aimed to restrict what it termed "ideological indoctrination" in classrooms. Critics and educational researchers argue that the movement threatened pedagogical autonomy and the pluralism of ideas, often targeting discussions on gender, sexuality, and political history under the guise of "neutrality."

In the face of an already experienced democratic social practice of curricular construction, the teacher's latent non-conformity reveals a competent rebellion that does not petrify into a product built in the past, immersed in an immobilizing nostalgia, but carries with it the experience of a participatory democracy as a value to be cultivated. This is how she continues her considerations:

Can the Curriculum be changed? Yes, there is no problem, as long as it is done collectively. So, you can deconstruct, provided the deconstruction is collective, isn't that right?! It is not right for me to simply arrive, think differently, and undo what the community and the team have built (TP2, our translation).

By "undoing what the community had built", and by denying the right to be part of the decisions that would affect curricular practices, an affront was imposed on the dimension of democratic coexistence and also on the care for curricular justice, as noted by Ponce (2016; 2018), relegating the social right of popular participation and democratic management. The discouraging scenario reported by the participants was always accompanied by the hope built in the lived democratic experience, signaling that the educational management in Várzea Paulista (2005-2012) may have constituted a real democratic experimentalism.

I think it is a moment for us to be concerned. But it is no use worrying and isolating oneself. It is a moment to worry and join with people who share the same affinity of ideas to build, following what we did in Várzea within the perspective of Paulo Freire. Through dialogue, through participation, toward an increasingly better society. I believe this is a path we can follow (MP1, our translation).

By elevating the elements of the local democratic experience as a current of hope and an alternative to the conjuncture of the time, the manager pointed toward what Santos and Avritzer (2002) highlight as one of the theses for strengthening participatory democracy: necessary articulations between democratic experiences in various local contexts and the expansion of these experiences to the global level.

The "seeds of democracy watered with hope" is the synthesis of manager MP2's considerations.

[...] I also believe that the seeds that were planted, if we may say so, will bear fruit, and they are bearing fruit. We see a lot of resistance, we see a lot of critical thinking, and we see many people still capable of feeling indignant. I think the worst thing is complacency and conformism. I see that everything we did was solid; it left this seed, it left this hope, this flame burning. So, I do believe that, both in the teachers' movement and among the school community, the parents who experienced it, and the Councils that were created and empowered, people are dissatisfied with what is happening.

Perhaps it is still a moment of waiting for a part of society, but people are understanding that we will not solve things through this sectarian, fascist, and self-punitive line. It is through solidarity, fraternity, construction, dialogue, and democratic management. This is a permanent democracy of constant popular participation (MP2, our translation).

Even if in a "state of waiting," the subjects of education, shaped by the democracy put into effect during the analyzed educational management, pointed, in the manager's words, toward the constitution of rebellious subjectivities capable of weaving other social grammars.

Final Considerations

As highlighted in the opening epigraph of this article, we reach its end with hope. A hope forged in non-conformity, in rebellion, in realistic alternatives to the present situation, of a different future, and of a democracy that is not restricted to voting, nor confined to the state space and strict scientific rationality. A hope anchored in democracy cultivated as a value, thus recognizing and including social demands through the voices of those who are sidelined from political decisions, considerations presented by the participants of this research.

Both the managers and the teachers interviewed emphasized at various moments in their accounts the participatory nature of the educational management carried out at that time. This process strengthened the relationships between the subjects involved and sought, through daily actions, to horizontalize them and diminish historically consolidated hierarchies. This work of democratization transcended the walls of education and allowed the subjects of the process "an empowered experience"²². One dares to say that the democratic experience lived constituted, among the research subjects, an anticipatory consciousness (Santos, 2011) of an alternative future that has at its vanguard non-conformist, rebellious, and competent subjectivities forged in the relations of shared authority that occurred.

This rebellion was observed in the considerations the participants made regarding the political conjuncture in light of the democratic experience lived in the municipality's education, making it possible to consider that the experienced democratization process was a legacy of the analyzed educational management.

A democratic legacy as a necessary condition for the arguments raised by the participants regarding the Brazilian political scenario, where they pointed out the prevailing obscurantism; the conservatism that intermingles State and religion; the advancement of political projects that weaken the State and deny politics; and the resurgence of centralization in decision-making.

²² As referred to by manager MP2.

However, the subjects experienced an alternative democracy that succeeded in transforming unequal power relations into shared authority, and, to that end, recognized the other as a subject capable of charting the course of their own life and aligning it with so many others who suffer from the same oppression and dream of a different reality. Thus, the discouraging scenario presented by the participants was always accompanied by the hope built on non-conformity and the democratic social practices lived in Várzea Paulista between 2005 and 2012.

The local democratic experimentalism, articulated with so many others emerging worldwide²³ in resistance to oppression, was a nod from managers and teachers to the "seed of democracy watered with hope", which forged rebellious, competent, and democratic subjectivities in the democratization process spearheaded by the researched management.

The democratic possibilities put into action by the analyzed management were a legacy that marked the intimate "self" of each interviewed subject; thus, their accounts did not allow for thoughts on social organization perspectives that were not through democracy in its participatory, inclusive, distributive, and solidary sense.

This perspective of democracy, grounded in the collective construction of educational policies that spread to other places and generations, as stated by one of the managers, expanded the range of possibilities for living in society. Perhaps it has sown non-conformity in school education and an embryonic movement toward the constitution of emancipatory social practices yet to be strengthened.

A "pinch" of belief, emotion, and utopia in the face of the data collected and articulated with the theoretical framework used gives the current obscurantist moment signals and clues extracted from already realized democratic social experiences for a future that does not become a mere repetition of the present, expectations that pulsed within the bodies of the study participants.

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²³ See Santos (2019).

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