

INTRODUCTION

Está tudo muito parado -it has all come to a standstill- they told me when I arrived in Recife in February 1988 to conduct research on social movements. That did not sound very encouraging and it was rather surprising. For about a year, I had been submerged in social movement literature, ranging from top-heavy theorizations to micro-studies, and if at times I wondered what to think about all that, at least the literature conveyed the impression that Brazil was teeming with social movement.

Admittedly, most of the literature I had come across dealt with movements in the Brazilian southeast, São Paulo in particular, but there was no reason to think they were non-existent in the Northeast. The aim of my research project was to find out about the northeastern movements and, more precisely, about the ones in Pernambuco and Recife. Due to the dearth of studies on movements in that part of the country, I was not committed to anything very precise, though it would be something about "social movements" and "democratic transition." I would assess the feasibility of studying any particular movement once I was in the field.

There was a more precise reason for going to Pernambuco. Early in 1987, Miguel Arraes once again became governor of Pernambuco, where he had been dislodged by the military *coup* in 1964. He is a nearly mythical figure in Pernambucan history, symbolizing the time when Pernambuco seemed to be on the verge of revolutionary change: *O Tempo de Arraes*. In those days, he had been carried to the governorship by a left-wing popular front. The countryside was in a turmoil as a result of the activities of the famous *Ligas Camponesas*, and the city of Recife was known for the radical application of Paulo Freire's conscious-raising alphabetization method. The 1964 military intervention had turned Pernambuco into the site of "The Revolution that never was" (Page, 1972). This historical background was one reason why Pernambuco was interesting, though it would not be the main research focus.

Nevertheless, one thing should be noted. What had struck me when surveying the literature was that the history of Pernambuco and its capital seemed to stop in 1964. Even the newer literature was more concerned with the past than the present. When I was finishing my manuscript on the vicissitudes of neighborhood

associativism in Recife after 1964, I got hold of a recently published study entitled "Social Movements and Political Crisis in Pernambuco, 1955-1968" (Jaccoud, 1990). That promised to extend Pernambucan history for four years beyond the 1964 *coup*. I was disappointed in this respect, however, when I read the introduction:

....lack of time and difficulties encountered in studying the 1964-1968 period impeded the carrying out of this project, so the work remains limited to some considerations on the period and to indications which may be helpful in the development of the theme in future studies.¹

One of the aims of the following study is to reconstruct the history of neighborhood movements in Recife from 1964 to 1988. This history can be divided into three periods, according to the role of neighborhood associations in urban politics and policies. The first period runs from 1964 to 1979 and is marked by what has become known as bureaucratic-authoritarianism and by a repressive attitude on the part of the state to any form of "popular organization" whatsoever. Repression was at its peak between 1968 and 1974 and then relaxed somewhat. The neighborhood associations that had been in existence before 1964 had been dissolved, but sponsored by the Church, a new neighborhood associativism gradually emerged. The second period, from 1979 to 1985, was when the transition to a civilian government gathered steam. The attitude of state apparatuses to neighborhood associativism changed in that in an effort to outflank the increasingly prominent oppositionist neighborhood associations, the government now showed a new concern with the urban poor. The repressive attitude made way for attempts to curry favour with the urban poor through populist and clientelist policies, including setting up government-sponsored neighborhood associations. The third period, from 1985 to 1988, covers the administration of the first elected mayor of Recife after 21 years of imposed mayors.

This brings us back to my choice of subject. Before going to Recife I had not committed myself to the study of any specific movement since for lack of precise information, I did not know what to expect in the Pernambucan context. During a round of visits to people who were supposed to know what was going on, I discovered I had stumbled upon an attempt to democratize the municipal administration in which "urban social movements" were supposed to play a major role. It was related to the "time of Arraes" in that this period was invoked as a historical precedent of democratic and popular administration. This was the more immediate motive for my decision to focus on "urban social movements."

¹ "No entanto, a falta de tempo hábil e as dificuldades enfrentadas para o aprofundamento da pesquisa no período 1964-1968 impediram o desenvolvimento deste projeto, ficando o trabalho limitado a algumas considerações sobre o período e a indicações que possam ajudar o desenvolvimento da temática em estudos futuros" (Jaccoud, 1990:10).

In retrospect, I feel that the choice was even more appropriate than I realized at the time. It was not just that I was examining a process of municipal democratization which might be considered a more or less "natural" outcome of the fact that after over twenty years of authoritarianism and imposed municipal executives in 1985 Recife had been allowed to elect a mayor again. In fact I was studying one of the first serious efforts at municipal democratization by a left-wing administration in one of Brazil's metropolises. The effort was exceptional at the time. It resulted from a particular local political conjuncture which had carried a left-wing popular front candidate to the mayoralty. By the end of my year in the field, another round of elections for municipal executives under Brazil's *Nova República* had brought a major breakthrough for the Left with the election of Luiza Erundina of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT) in São Paulo. The PT broke through in various other large cities as well and its proposals for the democratization of the municipal administration turned out to be quite similar to what had been going on in Recife. I had had the opportunity to study a rather unique phenomenon.

Recently, studies of the process as it has been taking place in São Paulo have started to become available (e.g. Gohn, 1991a; 1991b; Jacobi, 1991). Although these studies suggest parallels to the developments in Recife, it is beyond the scope of this study to develop anything like a systematic comparative framework. I hope, however, that the present study will contribute to the discussion and comparison of experiments in democratization at the municipal level in Brazil.

The focus on the relationship between "urban social movements" and "democratic transition" had wider implications. It brought into view the interface between movement and state, an issue that had until then hardly been addressed in concrete terms, though it had emerged in the Brazilian theoretical debate. In the usual theorizations of "urban social movements," be it inspired by marxism or by post-marxism, state and social movements are regarded as each others' negation. In the marxist perspective, dominant in the 1970s, this is related to a still present dual power perspective in which "urban social movements" are regarded as supports for an emerging workers' state in confrontation with the capitalist state. In the post-marxist perspectives, social movements tend to be conceptualized in the context of a struggle of "civil society against the state" or as being beyond political and material concerns. Though this may be a healthy corrective to the older obsession with "taking power," the exclusive focus on civil society leaves little room for thinking about processes of democratization, i.e. changes in the relationship between civil society and the state. In more practical terms, both perspectives serve to underpin the idea that social movements should be "autonomous" from the state, the capitalist state in the first case and the state as such in the second case.

This brings us to another point. One of the striking things about the Brazilian scene is that the notion of "social movement" has entered common speech.

The municipal administration in Recife between 1985 and 1988 appealed to the "organized social movements of civil society" and this was a meaningful interpellation. I shall argue that this penetration of the term "social movement" into political discourse and common speech is significant, as it indicates how the Brazilian "social movements" were socially produced.

This social production of "urban social movements" is highlighted in this study. In the Brazilian discussion, the somewhat ingenuous notion that "urban social movements" are a spontaneous response of the urban poor to "urban contradictions" has been criticized since the early 1980s. The presence of "external agents" has been signalled with increasing frequency. Nevertheless, the role and "nature" of such agents, apart from the role of the Church, has hardly been systematically discussed. However, there has recently been more attention for the rise of the Brazilian "new middle classes" and the relevance of this process for the Brazilian political process. The emergence of organizations of these new middle classes and the emergence of the "popular movements" have hitherto usually been discussed as separate, parallel processes. The ubiquitous presence of the "external agent" in "popular movements" suggests a more complicated relation, however, and in this study I shall highlight the interrelations between the processes of the emergence of the new middle classes and the "popular movements." The existence of these interrelations seems only recently to have become apparent in that the former "unity" is now perceived as having been "dissolved" (e.g. Gohn, 1991a:13).

Taking the "unity" in the social production of the "urban social movements" into account will help us understand the formation and dynamics of movement leadership, the emergence of groups of "neighborhood movement" spokespersons and the forms of self-understanding of such movements. Highlighting the relations with sectors of the new middle classes, professionals in the social sciences and social work -including the clergy- can account for the penetration of the notion of "urban social movement" into the discourse of neighborhood associations leaders and "the neighborhood movement" spokespersons. It also helps to understand, in part at least, how the influence of such movements comes about by taking into account such middle class agents as "translators and articulators of social demands" (Oliveira, 1988).

If one looks back at the mobilizations of the 1970s and early 1980s, one gets the impression that "it has all come to a standstill." Such an assessment is superficial, however. Like beauty, it is in the eye of the beholder. Although the visibility of "the movement" has diminished, this does not mean it has simply vanished. Instead, in the course of the 1980s neighborhood associativism changed from a relatively unified "movement" which provided a field of recruitment for street demonstrations, into an increasingly dispersed and heterogeneous phenomenon. The idea that "it had all come to a standstill" at least in part expressed the view of people who had emerged as spokespersons of "the movement" during the earlier period. For

them, it is above all the large manifestations of "the movement" that count. People at the grassroots, though not simply unaware of such issues, have other priorities. During the elections for the directory of a dwellers' council, I once asked the voters why they bothered to cast their vote. The answer almost invariably was something like: *Pra sair da lama*: to get out of the mud. If that can be done in any other way than "going out in the street," so much the better, though I also saw them going out in the street to protest eviction attempts by somebody who pretended to own the land.

However, there also was an ebb in mobilization when the hopes of the early 1980s about the new democracy were dashed. Recife, like the rest of Brazil, experienced the growing crisis and the consequences of neo-liberal policies. This contributed to an atomization, which seems to acquire increasingly Hobbesian aspects. In 1990, the North American *Population Crisis Committee* ranked 100 metropolises all across the globe according to the quality of life. Recife ended 96th, between Dacca (Bangladesh) and Lima (Peru). Only a third of the children between the ages of 14 and 17 years were registered at a secondary school. Infant mortality was 122 per 1,000 (and in the *favela* Irã-Iraque -what's in a name- the municipality even recorded an infant mortality of 20% in 1986). No more than 57% of the homes were connected to the water and electricity supply. Joaquim Francisco, a neo-liberal who had been Mayor of Recife since 1988 and had just been elected Governor of Pernambuco, announced that if he visited Washington, he would drop in at the Population Crisis Committee to bang on their table and spit on their papers. The Brazilian weekly *VEJA*, which reported the story, commented that the Committee had still been generous in its ranking. Its data were from 1984 and since then things had only deteriorated (*VEJA*, November 28, 1990). In any case, spitting on papers won't make it better.

The aim of this study is to reconstruct the history of neighborhood associativism in Recife from 1964 to 1988, devoting particular attention to the relation between "the neighborhood movement" and the (municipal) state apparatuses in view of the focus on the "democratic transition" process. The first Chapter provides an overview of the theoretical issues. I argue that theorizations of "urban social movements" have actually contributed to the shaping of Brazilian neighborhood associativism and to the self-understanding of leaders of "the neighborhood movement." The ways this contribution came about can only be understood if we take into account the role of "external agents" and the broader organizational networks whose intention it is to help movement leaders play their role. The notions about "urban social movements" thus transmitted, strongly emphasized the concept of "autonomy." This is helpful in fending off attempts at cooptation by state agencies or instrumentalization by political parties, but it is less helpful when

it comes to thinking about democratization and forms of institutional innovation, such as the formation of "popular councils."²

The following three chapters introduce the reader to the city of Recife. Chapter 2 discusses the historical and demographic development of the city in its regional context, while Chapter 3 focusses on the internal development and tendencies of spatial division between the rich and the poor during the first half of the 20th century. Chapter 4 focusses on the 1955-1964 period, when neighborhood associations spread during the popular-front administrations.

Chapter 5 covers the 1964-1979 period. After a general overview of the period to sketch the context, I discuss the urban policies of the bureaucratic-authoritarian regime and how these policies worked out in Recife. These policies were consistently aimed at removing the low income groups from the city center and were strongly biased to the construction of motorways and huge viaducts. Investment was concentrated in already the privileged areas of the city. This resulted in a city with an elaborate road system, but a sewerage system that barely covers 10% of the municipality and only serves a third of the population. In the second part of the chapter, I discuss the reemergence of neighborhood associativism and how it was promoted by the Church. I argue that in the course of this period, the theorizations of "urban social movements" started to influence the practices of social workers and clergy in the promotion of neighborhood associations and ideas about the future role of neighborhood associations started to filter down to groups of local leaders. This implied a shift in the perspective of their activities. Initially the Church had promoted forms of communitarian self-help, but the new perspective tended toward a socio-political analysis of the problems of the urban poor and consequently tended toward political solutions. This politicization was not easily reconcilable with the more religiously oriented communitarianism and generated tensions that can be regarded as symptomatic of the problems of Church sponsored neighborhood associativism. Nevertheless, a certain shift in the activities of the local variety of the well-known Ecclesial Base Communities took place in the sense that they became more outward oriented and more engaged in the general political struggles against the authoritarian regime which marked the second half of the 1970s.

² I must admit I often had doubts about this view since my experience was limited to the case of Recife. I wondered whether the appeal to "autonomy" was indeed what one might call "paradigmatic." It also might merely be a way of not engaging in a particular coalition. Though this aspect was present, I think the paradigmatic aspect is important. In a recent paper about the experiments with "popular councils" in São Paulo, Gohn (1991b:38) notes the same problems I encountered in Recife: "A final question relates to the necessary deliberative character which the popular councils should have. If they are not part of the administrative institutions (*instituições governamentais*), if they are not organs of parallel power and if they do not pretend to stand above the constituted powers, the question arises: what is their effective power?"

Chapter 6 is devoted to the 1979-1985 period, when the transition to a civilian government gathered steam. While electoral politics became increasingly important, the earlier repressive attitude to the urban poor was replaced by policies aimed at defusing their discontent, which tended to be channeled through the new neighborhood associativism. I first discuss the shifts in urban policies in Recife and the policy of setting up government-sponsored neighborhood associations. This process was not without contradictions, as groups of professionals active in their implementation were increasingly critical of the urban policies as well as of the clientelist and neo-populist policy of sponsoring neighborhood associations. Their criticism converged with and legitimized the resistance of independent neighborhood associations and contributed to what became known as the "identity crisis" of the planning agencies. The discussion focusses on three issues, namely the new "participatory" policy style developed in the context of the "politics of *abertura*," the World Bank financed *Projeto Recife*, and the policies on urban land use. These three points are taken up again in the discussion of the alternative approach developed under a democratically elected left-wing administration. In the second part of this chapter, I discuss the vicissitudes of the independent or "authentic" neighborhood movement and the efforts to articulate local organizations into a platform of citywide scope. This efforts were promoted by the increasing number of non-governmental organizations sponsoring neighborhood associativism, and it were accompanied by the emergence of a group of leaders or spokespersons of "the movement," whose primary concern was with the political impact of the neighborhood movement.

Chapter 7 covers the 1985-1988 period and the effort to democratize urban policies in cooperation with the "organized social movements of civil society" through the formation of something like "popular councils." I first discuss how this proposal arose and was debated during the 1985 electoral campaign, and then devote attention to the implementation of democratization policies. The first policy area is the decentralization of urban policies and the creation of mechanisms through which neighborhood associations can influence local and overall urban policies. Secondly, I briefly discuss the attempt at participative reorientation of the World Bank financed *Projeto Recife*. Finally, I discuss the policy of regularizing landholding in "popular settlements" and of urbanizing these settlements. I argue that the failure of the institutionalization of popular participation in these policy areas was partly due to the particular political conjuncture they took place in and to the particular signification the notion of "autonomy" had acquired during the preceding periods. The problems were largely due to the role the spokespersons of "the movement" had come to play. The position they took resulted in the mutual wearing out of the municipal administration and this group of spokespersons, whose credibility among the local neighborhood associations rapidly declined.

Chapter 8 is presents a review of the general arguments and to my own concluding observations.

The research for this study was conducted from early February 1988 to late January 1989. The reconstruction of the history of the neighborhood associations in Recife is partly based on archive material. Special mention should be made of the *Setor de Documentação e Informação Popular* (SEDIPO). This data bank, which functioned in the Archdiocese framework, was summarily closed during my fieldwork period in the offensive launched by Archbishop Dom José Cardoso Sobrinho against the "Church of the People." A highly valuable source of information on the popular movement of Pernambuco and Recife thus disappeared, which was unfortunate for my research but even more so for people I had come to admire for their dedication and friendship who lost their jobs. Further information was gathered from the files of the local *Comissão Justiça e Paz*, which was also to be disarticulated somewhat later, and from the archives of the *Escritório Técnico de Assessoria, Pesquisa e Ação Social* (ETAPAS) and the *Centro de Estudos e Ação Social* (CEAS). These data were complemented by a series of interviews with participants in the neighborhood movement. Data on the municipal democratization program were also gathered from these sources, and were made available by the municipality. They were complemented by interviews with officials involved in the implementation of these policies and interviews with participants in the neighborhood movement. Throughout the year I attended innumerable meetings in the context of these democratization policies, notably meetings on the overall democratization program at the neighborhood and the municipal level. I also attended the meetings of "the movement" itself. Finally, I visited neighborhood associations and accompanied two local organizations more systematically throughout the year. My original intention was to devote two chapters to these groups, but the focus on the municipal level developments and a lack of time made me decide otherwise. Nevertheless, my intention of encouraging local history projects under the auspices of neighborhood associations led to my contribution to a neighborhood history book to be used at the local school (Silva, 1990).