On conservative participation – discussion on S. Tawa Lama-Rewal and M.H. Zerah's "middle class" mobilisation in Delhi and Mumbai

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Papers discussed:
Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, "Neighbourhood associations and the democratization of urban governance: Delhi as a case study"
Marie-Hélène Zérah, "Charting the rise of 'middle class' neighbourhood associations in Mumbai: from passive tax payer to assertive political players?"

Introduction

I would like to start by thanking Stephanie TLR for giving me the opportunity to attend this stimulating workshop. I read these two papers with great pleasure: first, because they are extremely interesting (not only for Indian cities but also for broader debates on participation, and in particular on what I will call here conservative participation); secondly because they echo questions and debates we have been grappling with in our South African research project, and the comparison is very helpful in taking a critical and analytical distance.

Our SA programme was narrower in its scope, focusing on urban participatory governance in two cities (Johannesburg and Cape Town), and analysing the articulations between voting patterns, institutional forms of participation (ward committees, participatory forums set up by the state at different levels), and extra-institutional forms of participation (protests, riots, lawsuits, etc.). We have been looking both at upper and lower income areas and groups of residents.
I won't make a presentation of our results, nor draw a systematic comparison between Indian and SA cities democratisation processes (this could be the focus of a following workshop); I'll try to discuss the paper using my SA perspective – so please bear with me if I am over simplistic in my understanding of the Indian situation, or in my exposition of the SA one...

Here the very clear focus of these 2 papers is the analysis of forms of institutional participation amongst the economic elite in Delhi and Mumbai, and their problematic articulation with representative democracy. The 2 papers indeed question the democratic (or undemocratic) character of Indian "middle class" participation through a rising collective activism.

The two papers differ on 3 main aspects:
1) In their conclusion, which is slightly more pessimistic in Stephanie's paper, whose view on middle class participation is that it can be a threat to democratic representative institutions. MH is somehow more optimistic, stressing the potential power of these movements to transform local governance practices and even institutions, beyond their parochial and narrow interest. This nuance come from 2 other differences:

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2) The difference in approach: Stephanie has been looking at the relationships between a dysfunctional municipality and rising residents associations, whilst MH was analysing successful middle class strategies;

3) More importantly maybe, and this could be stressed if the papers are to be published together, there are important contextual political and institutional differences between the 2 cities that might explain the contrasted relationships between residents associations and local government. Apparently there is much more power vested at the local level in Mumbai, more powerful councillors (who can make decision not only on implementation but also on policies? Can prevent a project to occur, etc.) than in Delhi, where the confusion between the municipality and state boundaries, and the status of federal state capital, might hamper municipal and councillors' autonomy. A second element of context that I thought was missing is the political context of the two cities and the two states, which can also explain the different outcomes of the middle class participation strategies.

But for me, this is more a matter of nuance, and the papers are more convergent than they differ: cautiously looking at the impact of these new residents movements on local democratic transformation. Having said that, there are three main themes I would like to discuss for both of these texts:

1) Firstly I would like to stress the originality of this 'middle class' activism, and underline the fact that these studies can make a significant contribution to research on the place of participation in contemporary democracies. I think this is not stressed enough by the authors – obviously because it is a first step, the presentation of the research results- and I would like to suggest some directions to enhance this engagement with broader debates;

2) Secondly, I think it would be useful to clarify the different aspects of the middle class political strategy, and have a closer look at the way middle classes articulate their use of participatory and representative democracy. They seem to me to present some contradictions, and I would like us to discuss them;

3) And thirdly, it is only marginal in the papers but it struck me coming from South Africa, I would like to briefly discuss around the idea of "Indian democratic exceptionalism".

I – On 'conservative participation': originality of the papers and theoretical prospects

Firstly, let me underline the originality of the cases presented by Stephanie and MH: it is very unexpected to encounter middle class mobilisation of this nature, at this scale, and having such a public visibility. As far as economic elite mobilisation and intervention in politics is concerned, international literature consider business lobbies (but in more invisible political spaces); nimbysm (not in my backyard) phenomena at a very local scale; and at the metropolitan scale, tax revolt (Davis, 1990, on Los Angeles; such tax revolt of the urban riches also occurred in Johannesburg) and urban secession (Boudreau and Keil 2001). But I have not read much so far on a metropolitan wide movement of middle class residents aimed at challenging local government structure.

This is quite new, very original; this is also rather undertheorised by both theories of democracy and of participation. Participation is indeed usually considered
- good for democracy (complementing the failures of the representative democratic system; helping holding elected representatives accountable during their mandate, after the elections, etc.)
- socially rather progressive – achieving a more equal, just society (here the example of Porto Alegre – that has almost become a paradigm- is dominant).

What if participation is NOT good for democracy, and NOT socially progressive? What it participation, which is essentially about shifting power balances, is captured by the already powerful instead of empowering the disempowered (that could not access power through representative democracy)?

"Conservative participation" can be considered, but it remains marginal in the unravelling of the role of participation in contemporary, urban democracies.

NB: when I talk here of conservative participation, I mean "socially" conservative participation – participation that leads to the empowering of the already powerful, and to a socially more unequal society (the conservation of economic interests). It can be misleading (but is a rather convenient expression, therefore I'll use it) as it does not mean that this participation has no transformation agenda – in particular in the way decisions are made by the state, in the way power is shared at the local level. I'll come back to this in my second point.

Therefore these studies have the potential to theorise further about the potential conservative outcome of participation; and to question the place of participation in contemporary democracies – in its literal sense: finding its right place, balancing the democratising potential of participation with its other effects, therefore also setting its limitations in terms of democratisation.

But, as I started mentioning, the debate is currently rather blurred (and I think the papers would make a stronger argument if they took a clearer position in this emerging debate). It is blurred by three factors:

1) The under-theorisation of conservative participation – we need to question the theories of the role of participation in urban governance taking fully into account its potential (growing?) conservative capture, and question the place of participation in democracies in this respect.

Adding to the confusion is the double and un-reconciled theoretical framing of what is social and spatial justice (Bénit 2006a): one structuralist, neo-marxist perspective looks at the objective inequalities of access to resources for citizens or residents and advocates for a redistribution in order to render this access equal for all; one post-structuralist, post-modern approach (Harvey 1992, Young 1990) emphases the fact that social and spatial justice are the outcome of a 'just' process, cannot be defined a priori but must be the result of a negotiation between different stakeholders involved (participative democracy). But the articulation between these two forms of justice has never been clarified (what if the outcome of the participation process ends up favouring the powerful, in contradiction with the principles of structuralist justice?).

2) Our own ideological position as researchers. Unlike when we research disempowered / lower-income groups' participation (which we see as empowering, progressive, inventive, vibrant, etc. – even if it is not without its own problems), we are in an awkward position when we look at the mobilisation of the elite (which is empowering the already powerful and potentially leading to a more unequal society). We have both sympathy and empathy for the residents 'who try to do something' about the failures of governance; but also antipathy for their sometimes conservative statements, positions, principles.

3) Third factor blurring the picture: the political management of participation, which is also very unclear because it does not (cannot?) really distinguish between progressive and conservative participation in principle, but can clearly see the difference in practice. I'll give a SA example as I think it is quite illuminating (because it is somehow a caricature).

The ANC and the management of "conservative participation" in SA cities

The African National Congress (ANC) is a "dominant party" (Southall 2001), meaning not only it is currently in power at all level of government, but that there is no credible political opposition that can win elections (with the exception of the city of Cape Town and its surrounding Province of the Western Cape) in the short and medium term. Scales and boundaries of government have been carefully designed so as not to offer any political platform for opposition parties (for instance, infra metropolitan 'municipalities', called sub-structures, have been suppressed in 2000 to the benefit of metropolitan councils in the biggest cities).

As a consequence, "participation" is a tool used by the main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA – a party with mainly white supporters), to try and gain some access to power that it will never attain through elections.

As a consequence (I argue), ANC's strategy is to limit by a series of structural, institutional and practical obstacles (I won't go into details here) the importance of participation in decision-making. The party and the state use a very strong rhetoric of local participation (as it is impossible to avoid in a global society which promotes 'good governance', whatever it may mean), but makes it powerless.

Reacting to these inefficient participatory institutional channels, groups of residents ('communities' in a SA context) both from low- and in high-income categories, use extra-institutional channels to voice their concerns (e.g. protests, riots, law-suits, informal lobbies, etc.).

Both low and high-income communities' mobilisation forms are discarded by the state, but not in the same way. Some low-income (black) communities' actions are discredited as violent and 'criminal' (Miraftab 2006), or 'manipulated' by minority elements; most of the high-income (mainly white) communities' actions are discarded as "non participatory".

The state (in particular, local government: here Johannesburg City Council) cannot discard conservative participation saying 'it is not legitimate because it is enhancing social inequalities" (as its political agenda itself has become neo-liberal). It says: "it is illegitimate because it aims at recreating apartheid", using the racial card (Bénit 2004). The state thus opposes what is seen as good, legitimate participation from good and legitimate 'communities': the 'civic' (meaning: residents associations in the non-white townships, developed under apartheid to fight the racist regime, and surviving, more or less, today); to the "bad" and illegitimate participation from bad and illegitimate 'communities' described by the equally connoted '*laager*' (an afrikaaner term referring to the circle of chariots created by the Afrikaaner settlers to defend themselves against the African tribes and armies in the XIXth century).

This is politically rather efficient, but is also blurring the picture... if participation is legitimate in decision-making (as is the principle 'one man, one vote', a motto of the anti-apartheid struggle), why would the participation of the riches be less legitimate than the participation of the poor? (and the participation of the deserving poor more legitimate than the participation of the so called 'criminals'? this is another question).

I suggest we take as a point of departure the two following principles:

1) Participation is not inherently leading to progressive outcomes for society as a whole

2) Participation is an empowering process, creating "active citizenship", "involved" urban citizens (no reference here to nationality or tenure: citizens in the sense of 'inhabitants', see Lefebvre 1968) negotiating the balance of powers with their elected representatives.

3) In this sense it can enhance democratisation – but the limit (and risk) is to create trends for "autonomous" citizenship (Johnston 2001 elaborates on this in the case of crime control, but this can be extended to all forms of community governance; see also Bénit-Gbaffou 2006b) leading to forms of political and social secession.

4) "Communities" (or groups of mobilised residents, whatever form that might take: residents associations, RWA, ALMs, CBOs, etc.) are not good or bad per se: they are all parochial and defending their own (locally based, often class based) interests; they are all both creating inclusivity (a sense of belonging, to a group, to a neighbourhood) and exclusion (defining an outsider that is often a threat to the neighbourhoods' identity, values or territory).

Both authors are aware of this but nevertheless have not always articulated it clearly enough – and the confusion of this debate is extremely pervasive. I'll give two examples in both texts:

1) Marie Helene, p.5, argues that ALMs are not "social movements" because
   a) "They are located in pockets of the city";

b) "Their objective is limited to better governance and service delivery"

c) "Their methods" (not specified, I suppose MH means: a very formal method, using relationships with administration, lobbies, etc. rather than marches and protests?)

For me it is a way of discarding them as 'true' participatory movements (because of their conservative nature). But actually if you look at a 'social movement' from the lower-income side, from the 'left', in Johannesburg, the 3 criteria mentioned above could also apply. I'll take for instance the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, a social movement born in the late 1990s as a reaction against the commodification/corporatisation of electricity, illegally reconnecting electricity for households who have been cut-off because they could not pay.

a) The movement actually consists in different local branches, very unevenly mobilised, with a quite loose network and often heterogeneous objectives (Wafer 2006): so the SECC too is characterised by "pockets" of mobilisation

b) OK, the SECC's objective is eventually more 'revolutionary' – but not at branch level, where residents ultimately want better service and better governance (a basic service they can afford, an understanding administration, etc.). And Stephanie mentioned the slogan "Revolution" used by RWAs – it is to be taken seriously, since it is indeed a form of revolution in terms of change of the power balance between the City (officials and representatives) and the residents... not a revolution in the social sense though!

c) Methods vary according to both culture and opportunity (Tarrow 1994). But it would be wrong to assume lower-class and more confrontational movements as the SECC does not also use institutional channels, sidelining powerless councillors to target decision-makers at the Metropolitan or Provincial level, officials and party members. The repertoire is not the same but some modes of action are overlapping.

So I would not be two quick in discarding ALMs as non social movement, or not quite, not the real thing, etc... Why not?

2) Stephanie, p.7, argues that these middle class residents associations are "undemocratic"

a) "Because they are not adopting internal democratic procedures (but this is changing thanks to the institutionalisation of participation imposed by the state, so I won't develop on this)";

b) "Because they are not representative of the whole area";

c) "Because they are side-lining the elected councillors and therefore weakening the legitimacy of democratic institutions".

For the 2 last points, we can revert the arguments by replacing the RWA by low-income residents movements, just as I did with MH:

b) The lack of representativity of a movement is in the nature of community mobilisation and local participation: unlike representative democracy based on 'one man one vote' principle, mobilisation is uneven even in the same area, same class or category of people. And it is usually the less marginal and the already more empowered who get to participate.

Another matter is if these RWA are excluding (explicitly or implicitly) local residents because of their social or caste category; another matter is if the state participatory institutions are excluding some categories of residents in the platform they propose. If, as Stephanie mentioned, local government sets up obstacle preventing low income residents from being registered as RWA (or simply formalises it too much); if it says explicitly (even informally) that these participation modes are not for the poor / informal dwellers; if it invites RWA in decision making processes regarding budget without looking for their equivalent in poorer areas, then

. it needs to be stressed! It is incredible (at least to a SA eye)...

. it is the state which has "undemocratic" practices, not the RWA... and this could be challenged probably if there were organised movements in the lower income areas.

c) Side-lining dysfunctional democratic institutions is probably the most important instrument of participation, I would not call it undemocratic. That is what all the SA "progressive" social movements and even less politically engaged civics are doing, after having tried in vain to use the "normal" channel – the ward councillor. If participation is about complementing representative democracy and trying to make dysfunctional governance work better, it is problematic to consider it undemocratic. It is actually the argument of the ANC when trying to discard social movements asking for access to free basic services or fighting evictions – the movements are called criminal, anti-democratic, etc.

The question to me is more: why are councillors sidelined? Why are they dysfunctional? Why are they not given any power? Elaborating on our discussions there seem to be also a 'delegitimation from the top' (from the State of Delhi keeping all powers from the municipality; from the judiciary openly mentioning its contempt for councillors: Dupont et Ramanathan U. 2007; Tawa Lama Rewal 2007, etc.): this is probably having a bigger impact in terms of delegitimising councillors and the municipality.

So, is this middle class mobilisation 'undemocratic'? I would say, no, it is not 'undemocratic':

a) It is promoting active citizenship and fighting voting apathy which is high in this income category (as both of you mention); it is empowering and helps residents address dysfunctional urban services.

b) Interacting with officials and high-rank elected representatives (MLAs etc), which can be equated with the practice of lobbying, is usually not considered 'undemocratic' (I do no know the literature in this regard). Nothing compels the officials/representatives to comply with the middle class demands.

c) They have the potential to become undemocratic if they try to 'exit' the democratic system and establish an elitist form of government or voting pattern. So far it does not seem the case.

But are these participatory movements leading to a fairer, more equal and just society? Probably not, and this leads me to the second point:

II – Middle class political strategies: a closer look at the articulation between representative and participative democracy

I would like to develop more on the middle class political strategy, as it is complex, shifting and according to me potentially contradictory. Two questions here:

1) What has led to the rise of this form of mobilisation?

Again, this seems to me a very original form of middle class mobilisation, and the papers maybe are not assertive enough on what has led to their emergence. They mention all of these factors but without paying much attention to their respective weight and consequences:

a) Is it the political opportunity opened by the state decentralisation policy? It seems to be, in the 2 papers; if it is, it could be stressed more strongly (see MH p.13, "the rise of NA *accompanied* state decentralisation (*my emphasis*)"), along the lines of the importance of state institutions and mechanisms in shaping civil society movements. Indeed, there is a whole debate opposing 'invited' space of participation (Cornwall 2002) to 'invented' ones (Miraftab 2004) – the emphasis being currently on the efficiency of the latter and

uselessness of the former (to be quick). Without going far into this debate, this opposition can be useful to analyse the relationship between the state and residents' movements and how this relationship impacts the forms and outcomes of residents' mobilisation.

b) Is it a shift (a decay) in service delivery that led to the multiplication of local urban problems (from which so far the elite could be preserved somehow)? MH mentioned the Mumbai deluge, which probably knew no social boundaries... can this be elaborated further? In this case the rise of middle class mobilisation would be a response to perceived decaying governance and would be more in line with 'invented' spaces of participation – before being formalised and transformed thanks to the state decentralisation policy.

c) There is a suggestion in both papers that the broadening of democracy to Backward Castes is threatening the middle class that feel deprived of a voice in representative democracy (see also Tawa Lama-Rewal 2006). Is this also what triggered the rising mobilisation of residents? This is interesting, but simultaneously the papers state that the benefits of government resources and programmes have been captured mostly by the middle class since independence.
Is this shifting thanks to democratic transformation? IS the shifting balance of powers within representative institutions (quotas etc.) leading to a shift in resource allocation? Is it perceived as shifting with the emergence of Backward Caste elected representatives?

2) The second question on middle class rising mobilisation is the articulation of the different forms it takes and their possible internal contradictions.

a) Using participation as a form of lobby (direct contact between an interest group and officials / MLAs to impact either decision-making or project implementation) makes perfect sense and seems quite successful so far.
IN this direction, the scaling up strategy adopted (from the building to the street level to the neighbourhood to the admin ward to the metro, to national etc.) presented by MH is very rewarding. She could probably get more from the literature on scale (mentioned by Purcell 2006, that she quotes), considering scale as a political construct emerging in an attempt to gain power against other stakeholders: for instance see Marston 2000 for a stimulating (even though debatable, and to be updated) review on this literature. Then you could elaborate more on what is the most relevant scale for middle class action, what are the objectives of each scale, how does it gain legitimacy in the eyes of the state, etc. It would be also help to differentiate more radically what is maybe too timidly mentioned in the text:
- scaling up – stopping being parochial in a geographic sense, going out of the neighbourhood;
- broadening/ opening up to other classes interests (working for the 'common good') : which is not happening, unless their governance reform agenda ends up benefiting to all classes and groups in society (I'll come back to this in c).

b) The engagement with representative democracy (presenting residents associations candidates as independents) appears more problematic, and this could be stressed more. Independent candidates with only a middle class constituency are unlikely to be elected, given the spatial and social composition of wards in Indian cities (and their 'weak' score in local elections is not surprising, as they clearly represent a –minority- class interest).
In this sense the victory of the NA candidate in ward 63, presented by MH, might be exemplary and meaningful; but it is also exceptional (she did not stress it enough in the oral presentation), due to the specific design, carving, of the ward boundaries in order to exclude

as many slum dwellers as possible. This, probably more than the personality and charisma of the candidate, is a primary cause for his electoral success: and this cannot be reproduced anywhere...

Wards spatial and social structure in SA and Indian Cities – what opportunity for independent councillors?

It is very interesting in this regard to compare SA and Indian spatial and social urban structures. As already stressed by Dupont (2004), the segregation pattern is very specific in Indian cities, as there is relatively little segregation at the metropolitan level – social contrasts occur at a very local level, and space appears more socially mixed than in South African cities where apartheid has made sure that all socially and racially mixed spaces were destroyed. Even if this is shifting with the growing eviction of slums in central Delhi, the contrast is still sharp with South African cities.

As a consequence, wards in South African cities (encompassing about 30.000 residents; not that much smaller than in Indian urban wards, that cover about 50.000 residents) are also socially much more homogeneous than wards in Indian cities - it would be useful in that regard to map the part of slum dwellers for each ward, if it is possible. The scope for electing an independent councillor on the base of a shared class / local interest seems *a priori* much broader in SA cities (and appears very exceptional in the Indian case).

What happens in SA cities? Very few independent councillors are elected in local elections: one in Johannesburg, zero in Cape Town (true: middle and high income neighbourhood vote for the DA, which can be understood as the representative of the economic elite's party, and often play the game of arguing for more power to local participation). Why? Because it is impossible for a councillor to have access to public resource, decision making (regarding policy or implementation), without going through the party structure. As no power is given to councillors in Council, the only power they have is through their party caucuses.

In this regard it is useful both to look at the ward spatial structure; at the power councillors have and do not have; at the channels of access to public resources; and at the politics of the cities and states.

So this electoral strategy for me does not make real sense (maybe it just shows the candidates political inexperience??). On the contrary, bargaining the elite vote in front of different existing, party candidates in exchange for certain deliverables seems much more relevant, since it can represent a significant proportion of the voters. But again, it all depends on the tightness of the political competition at the ward level. Again, some attention to the local political context (at the ward and MLA ward level) would be useful.

c) Third strategy, which seems to me contradictory and almost suicidal: the middle class agenda for local government and decentralisation reform.

If ward committees are to be elected by all voters at a ward level, it is likely that they won't be the middle class' representatives, as this group still represents a minority of voters. So the middle class interests seem to be better sustained through a lobbying strategy than through a democratic voting process, where they will always be a minority.

Unless...

1. Lower income residents are prevented to vote in these ward committee elections: Asha Gosh (2005) for instance presenting the ward committees in Bangalore states that only property owners can vote! This is a way of protecting the middle class interests in the voting process. It reminds me of the residential City Improvement Districts in Johannesburg and Cape Town (where a supplementary tax, above the municipal taxes, is raised and given to a board of representatives elected by all the property owners in the area – their voting rights being proportional to the value of their tax contribution to the CID – that is to say, proportional to the value of their property).

2. Lower income residents are unable or unwilling to use the participatory instruments opened thanks to the middle class lobby, the ward committee.

Indeed, the question needs to be addressed in both texts: why aren't lower income residents using the participatory schemes (Baghidari in Delhi, Local Area Management Schemes in Mumbai), as does the middle class?
- is it there inability to scale up and organise beyond the neighbourhood level?
- is it an inability to link up with decision maker?
- is it the decision of the state not to recognise such residents associations as considered illegitimate?
- is it because of the use of other participatory channels and instruments (as suggested by Harris 2005, Zerah 2007)? But why would this prevent them from using this other, supplementary instrument?
I am convinced that in order to measure the impact of residents' association participation on democratisation processes, you need to give some more clarity of what is going on at the other, lower end of the social spectrum, even if it is not your central object. The fact that the middle class and lower classes often share (and conflict over) the same urban space makes it an even more pressing question. Although it can be argued that different planning and policy instruments are necessary to manage different (socially contrasted) areas (Jaglin 2005, Zérah 2007), the fact that there seem to be no common platform (ward based for instance) for participation raises huge question on the meaning of participation, urban citizenship and democracy in Indian cities. Reflecting more along these lines would help understanding participation as part of an urban governance system.

III – On Indian "exceptionalism"

Third (and last) short point, on the exceptional character of Indian democracy. This is not the focus of the papers but for me it was illuminating.
Indian democracy is considered exceptional because unlike anywhere else the poor have higher voting turnout than the rich. Indeed, it is not following the international (western?) model that says the more educated, the richer, the higher the turnout in elections (actually it is a reversed U curve).
One of the researchers of our SA programme also spoke of a "South African exceptionalism" (Fauvelle-Aymar 2006) when looking at Johannesburg voting patterns:
- the rich vote more than the poor on average;
- but when one considers only the Black population in Soweto, the more educated, the highest income, the lower the turnout, whereas the poorest have a higher turnout.
My colleague saw in this a SA exceptionalism – so it was extremely interesting for me to read about your (probably well know) indian exceptionalism.
This leads me to question (rather naively, I have not read on the topic and am not a political scientist) this notion of exceptionalism:
1) Is it 'exceptional' only in comparison with the theories of voting patterns derived from observation from the Western, developed countries? Or is it also exceptional compared to other developing countries? In any case, for the SA exceptionalism, what this comparison with India shows is the importance of shifting the reference model from the developed countries to other developing ones.
2) Is this exceptionalism recent? Is it true at all scales (national, state, metropolitan, ward)? At all types of elections? How do researchers analyse and explain this exceptionalism?
In Johannesburg, I tended to explain this exceptionalism (higher electoral turnout for the poor voters, amongst ANC voters) by the patronage/clientelist strategies of the poor, for whom a close link to their councillor constitutes a meaningful resource; and where social control (of who votes, who does not, and who votes for whom) is high, allowing for clientelism to play an important role in redistribution of public resources. This is actually the research direction I am taking in the years to come.

9

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