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# Theory, Practice and ‘External Actors’ in the Making of New Urban Social Movements in Brazil

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**Abstract** — Spontaneity and authenticity have often been key words in the analysis of the ‘new urban social movements’ that emerged in Brazil in the course of the 1970s. The movement discourse was often taken at face value and the involvement of other than ‘popular’ institutional and social actors tended to be concealed. Though in some analyses attention has been directed to the role of the Catholic Church and other institutional actors, very little has been said about the personnel involved and their class position. This article focuses on the latter aspect and in this manner draws attention to the role of segments of the emerging new middle classes in the social construction of the movements. It is argued that processes of professional affirmation in the context of the political conjuncture of the democratisation process contributed to a radical politicisation of segments of the emerging new middle classes. Such processes were related to the theoretical reflection on the new movements and the emergence of a ‘militant perspective in research’ which imbricated with the development of grassroots activism, amplified its impact, and furthered expectations over its role in the democratisation process. It thus contributed to the shaping of the movements. With the return to civilian rule and the changing configuration of state-society relations the relations between middle class and popular grassroots activism changed and this initially reflected in disenchanting accounts of the new movements and their failure to live up to expectations. Analysis of such processes provides an insight into the epistemo-politics of research and theory production on social movements. © 1999 Society for Latin American Studies. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

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## INTRODUCTION

In the Brazilian studies on urban movements only a few contributions have given attention to the variety of social and institutional actors involved in the social construction of these movements. Especially in the early studies we find a high valuation of spontaneity, authenticity and autonomy which were regarded as the distinctive features of the new urban movements that emerged in the 1970s, succeeding an earlier generation of neighbourhood organisations that had disappeared or become paralysed in the wake of the 1964 coup (Singer, 1980). This assessment derived from a rejection of populist manipulation and cooptation as well as of the instrumentalisation of movements by vanguardist left-wing parties. For populist politicians the urban population had only served as a ‘mass of manoeuvre’ whereas the vanguardist efforts of the 1960s to stir the masses into revolutionary activity had floundered. The new neighbourhood associations proclaimed themselves different and were viewed as such. The fact that the Catholic church functioned as an

umbrella for oppositional activity, in conjunction with the search by the left for a new, non-vanguardist relation to the masses, exerted strong pressure to adopt a discourse of spontaneity and autonomy. This contributed to the dissimulation of the roles of various 'external actors' actually involved in the social construction of the new movements. Students of the movements not only tended to adopt and reproduce the 'official language' of the movements, stressing the 'spontaneous' and 'genuinely popular' character of mobilisations (Durham, 1984: 30) but, as I shall show, played a role in developing movement discourse.

The few contributions to the debate that mentioned the role of external actors, such as the Catholic church, NGOs or political parties, mostly did so from an institutional perspective (e.g. Barreira, 1986). Even so, as Doimo (1989: 4) notes in relation to the Church, such references are often limited to remarks about its role as an 'external agent', a 'mediator', a 'social articulator' or an institution that 'provided a space' while its role as a — peculiar — political subject in its own right tends to be concealed. The claim by NGOs to be merely 'at the service of the popular movement' (Landim, 1988) may be considered another example of the dissimulation of the role played by external actors.

In this article, I shall briefly discuss the institutional perspective on external actors. While such an approach provides important insights, in this article I would like to draw attention to another aspect, namely the class dimension of the role of external actors and some of its implications. I will pursue a remark by Gohn (1991: 13) who noted that the first half of the 1980s saw an 'intense cross-fertilisation' of activities of segments of the middle strata and the popular classes. Gohn's remark can be related to Machado da Silva's (1993: 44) observation that in the case of the urban social movements we can observe particularly strong feedback mechanisms between political practice and academic reflection, though the dynamics of this feedback have hardly been studied. I propose to explore some of these dynamics and the ways they contributed to the social construction of the new urban social movements. I shall argue, illustrating the argument with examples mainly drawn from my research in the city of Recife in northeast Brazil, that the role of external agents should be viewed against the backdrop of the conservative modernisation that took place under Brazil's authoritarian regime. This process included the emergence of a new type of middle class, segments of which went through a particular process of politicisation. This included efforts to theorise the newly emerging neighbourhood associations in new ways and to contribute to their political efficacy. The dynamics of the 'cross-fertilisation' can be gauged from the Brazilian literature on 'urban social movements' which in the mid-1970s started off on a 'wave of optimism' (Mainwaring, 1987: 132) that eventually gave way to 'disenchantment'. While disenchantment may be proper to the scientific enterprise, it has been noted that, in the Brazilian debate on urban social movements, it often was accompanied by a 'barely disguised disappointment in the face of an unrealised promise' (Telles, 1988) and a tendency toward self-criticism on the part of authors who would disavow their earlier studies and qualify them as ingenuous (Gohn, 1988: 332). Considering class dynamics in their political context may contribute to an understanding of the emergence and subsequent fading of a 'militant perspective in research' (Banck, 1990: 84) and thus shed light on the 'epistemo-politics' (Escobar, 1992: 64) of research and theory production in the area of social movements research in Brazil (Assies, 1994a).

## INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES

The role of 'external actors' may be approached from an institutional viewpoint. Such an approach can, for example, show how the Catholic church initially provided much of the organisational and discursive framework for the new movements (Doimo, 1995). The Church played an important role in articulating and providing space for opposition to the authoritarian regime. Its politics, however, consisted of an 'infrapolitics' of communitarian action on the one hand, and an ultrapolitics of 'ethical appeal' on the other. The relation to partisan politics, electoral politics and the consolidation of democratic institutions would be much more controversial, as became clear when parties, notably the PT (Workers' Party), started to play a more prominent role from the early 1980s onward and provided alternative frameworks. At the same time, the post-Puebla reaction against Liberation Theology contributed to a turn against the political involvement of the 'Popular Church' (Lehmann, 1990: 144).

Minding its institutional interests in the context of the changes brought about by the democratisation process, the Church sought to dissociate itself from the movements that tended to become entangled in partisan politics (Della Cava, 1988). The tensions between the movements that initially had been promoted by the Church and its institutional interests resulted in a contradictory and often traumatic 'emancipation of the social movements from the pastoral' (Doimo, 1986: 112). In a similar way, such tensions help to explain the distancing between the NGOs and the Church and the emergence of new NGOs from the late 1970s onward. The 'typical trajectory' (Fernandes, 1988: 9) of the NGOs in that particular conjuncture was one which led from organisations closely associated with the Church toward increasing secularisation, and from 'assistentialist' work to a more socio-political outlook. While such institutional dynamics merit attention, we should take into consideration that if 'external agents' belong to specific institutions, they also constitute segments of a specific class.

## THE CONTEXT FOR RECURSIVE THEORISING

The above considerations suggest that developments in the study of and debate on urban movements in Brazil, and elsewhere, cannot be understood solely in terms of 'internal development' or 'progress' in the social sciences. Social sciences are characterised by their particular relation to the 'object' of their concerns, that is by their 'recursive' character. Social theorising may 'enter' the object of its concerns and thus may contribute to the reflexive transformation of the object (Giddens, 1984: 384; Taylor, 1983). Putting things this way, however, still amounts to a reification of the social sciences. It obscures the role of the practitioners of those sciences, the social scientists, and the way they interact with their surroundings.

The trajectory of the concept of 'urban social movement' in Brazil is suggestive of a rather strong relationship between theoretical reflection and social-political practice. In the course of the 1980s, the concept entered common political discourse. Neighbourhood activists had come to think of themselves as being part of a social movement and politicians might appeal to 'the organised social movements of civil society'. Such an assimilation of a notion from the social sciences into day-to-day political discourse deserves attention and requires further reflection as it suggests a rather strong case of recursiveness. How can we account for this type of feedback and can we elucidate some of its dynamics?

I would suggest that this phenomenon should be viewed against the backdrop of the process of conservative modernisation that took place under the authoritarian regime. This entailed what has broadly been characterised as ‘the bureaucratisation of Brazilian society’ (Diniz *et al.*, 1989: 39) and the emergence of a new type of middle class in the course of the 1970s (Oliveira, 1988: 287). The tertiary sector expanded rapidly and this included a significant increase in employment in public administration and collective consumption services (Boschi, 1987: 61). The development of a Brazilian version of welfare-state arrangements, distorted and inefficient as they might have been, and an expansion and institutionalisation of the social sciences and social work were part and parcel of this broader process.

The years 1964–1981 have been characterised as a period of institutional consolidation and massive expansion of a Brazilian welfare state. They saw the effective organisation of federal and state public systems in the areas of basic collective goods and services (education, health, social assistance, social security and housing) and a massive expansion of coverage in the context of rapid urbanisation. By the mid-1980s, when the system was already affected by the general economic crisis, the social sector absorbed about 18 per cent of the national income (Draibe, 1989, 1990). Though results of this expenditure were disheartening in terms of welfare, it meant employment for an emerging welfare bureaucracy.

The expansion of the social sector was paralleled by a dramatic growth in the quantity and quality of social science education (Abranches, 1982; Pakenham, 1986: 151; Sorj, 1991). The social work sector also developed rapidly (Netto, 1990). It should be noted that this trend included the sociologisation of pastoral work. The education of lay pastoral workers as well as clergy came to include an important component of social analysis, particularly where it was related to liberation theology, and this contributed to the politicisation of the essentially ethical humanist view that informed pastoral work. With respect to NGO personnel, a survey in 1991 (Fernandes and Carneiro, 1991) shows that philosophy — often combined with theology — and sociology were the most important forms of education, which is indicative of their background and trajectory.

The education and professional consolidation of the sectors of the new middle class involved in welfare policies (social workers, architects, doctors, teachers, lawyers, pastoral workers, etc.) were strongly influenced by the political process. In many ways they were the ‘front line personnel’ that was directly confronted with the consequences of the prolonged period of exclusionary economic development under military rule. In the course of the democratisation process, the urban crisis, urban policies and social policies became important arenas of contestation and political competition (Castro, 1993).

Entanglements between broad social processes and political conjunctures created the environment for the politicisation of professional groups. In the social sciences this resulted in an extraordinary prominence of certain themes, among them that of urban social movements (cf. Sorj, 1991: 371), and the rise of what has been called ‘a militant perspective in research’ (Banck, 1990: 84). I will first outline this theoretical perspective and then examine more concretely how it served to orient the activities of professionals in their role as social and political militants that contributed to the shaping of local neighbourhood associations and to an amplification of their societal and political impact.

## A MILITANT PERSPECTIVE IN RESEARCH

The ‘militant perspective’ in the research on neighbourhood associations which emerged in the 1970s rested on a new interpretation of urban conflicts and neighbourhood associations.

It provided them with a new name, now labelling them urban social movements, and thus gave them a new significance. While neighbourhood associations had existed for some time, the 'urban social movement' perspective enhanced their (potential) significance for a transformation of Brazilian society that was expected to be the virtually inevitable outcome of the eventual demise of the authoritarian regime. As Ribeiro (1989: 106) noted, the transformative potential ascribed to neighbourhood associations derived from theoretical and political perspectives that took urban life and the sphere of consumption to be the locus of a second front of struggles alongside those that develop in the sphere of labour. I shall briefly examine some of the main ingredients of this new view of urban conflict.

The analytical framework that underpinned the early 'optimistic' assessments of neighbourhood activism can be characterised as the 'paradigm of the 1970s' (Assies, 1990: 73; Machado da Silva, 1993). The urban social movement perspective was adopted from the work of Castells (1972), Borja (1975) and Lojkin (1977). It was adapted to the Brazilian situation by linking their concepts to theories of late dependent industrialisation and the political regimes that accompanied this process, namely populism and the new authoritarianism that flooded the continent from the 1960s onward (see Moisés, 1982; Evers *et al.*, 1979; Machado da Silva and Ziccardi, 1980).

The notion of urban contradictions, as worked out by Castells (1972) and other marxist urban sociologists, was central to the new theorising. Urban (social) movements are generated by urban contradictions, notably by the failure of the capitalist state to invest sufficiently in collective consumption equipment required for the reproduction of the labour force in an urban environment. While capitalism contributes to the concentration of the labour force in urban areas, investment in collective consumption lags behind as it relies on taxation and thus tends to depress the profit rate. Eventually, the insufficient investment in means of collective consumption would trigger urban protests which might develop into true social movements demanding a radical restructuring of society. Pursuing this line of argument, and verging on 'catastrophic optimism', it was contended that urban contradictions would be aggravated under the conditions of peripheral capitalist development where accumulation takes place on a 'poor basis' (Moisés and Martinez-Alier, 1977).

Taking up a line of argument that had been developed in theories of Latin American populism (e.g. Weffort, 1978), it was furthermore argued that peripheral capitalism does not contribute to the constitution of a working class as in the central capitalist countries. Instead, it would be characterised by (structural) class heterogeneity. In such a context, neighbourhood (rather than shopfloor) solidarities would play a key role in the formation of a popular (rather than class) consciousness, focused on issues of reproduction and collective consumption (rather than production and wages) and addressing the state (rather than the employer).

Characterisations of the state as having been captured, in 1964, by the international associated bourgeoisie (Oliveira, 1977) or perspectives focusing on State Monopoly Capitalism, which implied a virtual fusion of the state and internationalised monopoly capital, provided additional flavour to the argument. Contrary to the expectations of modernisation theorists that capitalist economic development would lead to democracy, as they supposed had happened in the central capitalist countries, peripheral capitalist growth seemed to be accompanied by increasingly authoritarian political regimes. Such arguments underpinned the idea that outright confrontation between urban movements and the state was inevitable and that a fundamental transformation would be the only possible solution.

Neighbourhood associations thus came to be viewed as an alternative to or an extension of the trade union struggle. In this way the potential significance attributed to neighbourhood struggles was greatly enhanced and the orthodox marxist disqualification of these struggles as secondary to the class struggle was dismissed as Eurocentric. Latin American societies have their own dynamics, it was argued. If before, the urban masses had often been characterised as somehow 'marginal', they now came to be viewed as highly relevant actors. The *pobladores* movement in Chile, discussed by both Castells and Borja, could serve as an example of the potential contribution of urban movements to a fundamental transformation of society. These theoretical approaches served to cement the imagery of autonomy, confrontation and radical exteriority of the — authentic — movements in relation to the authoritarian capitalist state.

One contribution to a seminar on urban growth illustrates the theoretically informed optimism generated by the 'paradigm of the 1970s'. It discusses the new attitude adopted by state agencies in Recife in the early 1980s when, in the aftermath of the authoritarian regime, communitarian action policies were launched to combat and outflank oppositionist influence in the neighbourhood associations. This new policy, it is argued, gives rise to the question of whether localised concessions serve domination and strengthen ideological control. The answer is that such outcomes can be avoided through organisational work and consciousness raising. Topical struggles may converge and amplify, and merge into broader movements. By way of conclusion, it is argued that 'furthermore, we should take into consideration that infrastructure and superstructure are dialectically related and that contradictions generate "movements" and that these generate new contradictions in turn' (FUNDAJ, 1987: 402).

The perspective on neighbourhood associations outlined above emerged in the 1970s in the context of the rise of a new opposition to the authoritarian regime. The new valuation of urban movements, which in the context of political 'distension' and the 'reawakening of civil society' proliferated in any case, gave it an additional dimension and served as an orientation for political practice, as I shall show in greater detail below. It is, for example, not purely coincidental that PT-leader Lula's reference, in 1979, to neighbourhood associations as one of the bases for the new party is viewed as signalling an important departure from PT's exclusive focus on the trade unions (Keck, 1991: 85). The debate on urban social movements, as Jacobi and Nunes (1983: 62) noted, was intimately linked to the search for political alternatives and new ways of action 'between "populism" and "insurrection" or between "social democracy" and "bureaucratic socialism".'

As I shall later show in some more detail, the views on urban movements changed in the course of the debate. The 'paradigm of the 1970s' served to enhance the importance of urban struggles. In her critical review of the early studies, Ruth Cardoso (1983: 224) noted that they nearly all ended in a reaffirmation of the belief that an expansion of the movements would contribute to a fundamental transformation of society, even if the case material presented hardly justified such a hope (see also Kowarick, 1994: 40). Expectations were subsequently adjusted and the initial radically confrontationist assumptions about the relation to the state were attenuated and then criticised (e.g. Machado da Silva and Ribeiro, 1985) with the development of new views on strategies for the transformation of Brazilian society. The important thing for the moment is to note the rather pervasive influence of the theoretical views outlined above and to examine the ways they came to have such influence.

## CIRCUITS OF PROPAGATION

The interpretation of neighbourhood activism through the 'paradigm of the 1970s' rapidly propagated through networks of social scientists, social workers, pastoral workers, architects, lawyers, health workers, teachers, etc. In this way, it came to exert a pervasive, if sometimes diffuse, influence. The meetings of the National Association of Postgraduate Studies and Research in the Social Sciences (ANPOCS), created in 1977, played a key role in the nationwide diffusion of this perspective. Its workshop on Urban Social Movements provided a platform for discussion and propagation of ideas (Gohn, 1985: 32; Doimo, 1989: 43; Machado da Silva, 1993). Key participants in its sessions also were active in the Workers' Party (PT) and as such the workshop can be considered a sort of informal think-tank for the Brazilian left. The Center for Study of Contemporary Culture (CEDEC), uniting an important group of left-wing intellectuals, further contributed to the diffusion of this perspective.

The new perspective on urban struggles also made itself felt in pastoral work and in the activities of Church-related and secular NGOs. In the changing political environment of the late 1970s these organisations sought to redefine their position and assess the ways they could contribute to the process of social and political change or the 'transformation of Brazilian society'. Urban movements emerged as an object of special attention as a result of the observable proliferation of conflicts, such as those over land, reinforced by theoretical considerations.

The Justice and Peace Commission in Recife, for example, asked the Faculty of Urban and Regional Development of the Federal University of Recife to draw up a report on the situation in the city where neighbourhood associations and land conflicts were mushrooming at the time. The report (Fagundes, Lacerda, Zancheti and Pontual, 1981) reflected the 'paradigm of the 1970s' in a rather classical fashion. It was argued that, if in the relatively industrialised cities of southern Brazil neighbourhood associations already played a prominent role alongside the trade union struggle, in a backward region like Pernambuco their role might be all the more important. Under these conditions, the land issue and 'urban latifundism' also would have particular weight, a view that meshed nicely with the more theological approach to the issue (CNBB, 1982). Though neighbourhood movements might not directly address the principal contradiction — between capital and labour — they could take on particular significance in specific conjunctures since they could lead to questioning the political power of the state. The report noted that the demands put forward by the organisations existing in Recife at the time were mostly of an immediatist nature and did not challenge the system. It suggested that therefore a unification of the movements with a broader political movement was needed. The authors were quite optimistic about the future development of the neighbourhood movement and its future unification.

Such studies provided a rationale for the Justice and Peace Commission as well as for other NGOs in efforts to promote, politicise and unify the neighbourhood movements. The Justice and Peace Commission and the Social Work Division of the Archdiocese, in cooperation with the local range of ecclesiastical-base communities (CEBs), played a key role in the emergence of the Assembly of Neighbourhoods. The meetings of the Assembly were meant to provide a space for the exchange of experiences among neighbourhood militants which was expected to lead to concerted action (Assies, 1992: 174–194).

Pastoral circuits played an important role in the formation of cadres for the newly emerging movements, often promoting the rise of new groups of young activists that

tended to replace older leaders. Various new cadres in Recife, for example, participated in courses at the Theological Institute (ITER) which was part of the network of institutions and commissions that developed in the Archdiocese during the 1970s. This 'great structure' (Salem, 1981: 177) provided a breeding ground for a new generation of neighbourhood activists who would later play an important role as spokespersons of the movement. In later years, as the Church stepped back, the task of cadre formation would increasingly be taken over by NGOs organising seminars and meetings to discuss the strategic issues of the neighbourhood movement.

The 'paradigm of the 1970s' thus served to motivate an investment in neighbourhood activism by pastoral workers, NGOs and the like. If the option for neighbourhood activism in the early 1970s may have been a choice forced by circumstance, which made partisan or trade union activism difficult, the new interpretation of these struggles put things into a different perspective. At the same time, the new perspective on neighbourhood activism contributed to the self-understanding of local militants and filtered into their discourse. At a seminar organised by NGOs in Recife in 1983, a participant activist contended that the 'movement of residents' associations, in contrast to the trade unions, works in direct confrontation with state agencies' and, though he admitted that the movement was rather dispersed, he added that it was also 'really revolutionary, since we are in direct confrontation with power' (FASE, 1983: 16).

While the 'urban social movement' perspective thus came to inform the activities of Church-related agencies and NGOs and filtered into the discourse of neighbourhood movements, it should be stressed that its impact was not confined to institutional spaces clearly belonging to the field of opposition to the authoritarian regime. It cut across institutional frameworks. From the mid-1970s onward, the regime had started to promote social policies ever more clearly designed to combat oppositionist influence among the low-income population. After 1979, in particular, communitarian action programs increased significantly (Arcoverde, 1985: 85). These efforts were part of the manoeuvring that accompanied the 'political opening' and the run-up to the 1982 elections which would be crucial for the process of transition to a civilian government. However, they entailed a politicisation of state apparatuses and of the front-line personnel that were to implement the new social policies.

Some aspects of this process are indicated in Arcoverde's (1985: 154) assertion that 'In the midst of the authoritarianism that informs the programmes in which they act, the social worker learns of the conflictive reality in the general context of social relations.' The reluctance to become involved in the organisation of adherence to government policies, instead of making people aware of the need for structural solutions, triggered a concern over the 'cooptation of professional practice'.<sup>1</sup>

The environment in which such concerns flourished has been outlined by Sposati (1988: 275). She noted that, during the 1970s in the city of São Paulo, the municipal social work bureaucracy sought bases for social recognition. This was the 'fundamental feature of the period' and it involved basic questions as to the identity of the agency as well as of the social worker in the context of governmental action in a historical period marked by the rearticulation of the forces of Brazilian civil society. Such dynamics can also be observed, for example, in the case of the Health Movement in São Paulo. Popular and base community-related initiatives found an echo among a new generation of health workers and imbricated with efforts at professionalisation of the State health service and the rejection of clientelist recruitment of personnel (Jacobi, 1989: 130–137; Sader, 1988: 266–268).



In Recife, similar dynamics became known as the 'identity crisis of planning mechanisms'. Technicians employed by these agencies participated in extensive debates on urban policies, formulating much of the informed criticism of the agencies that employed them. In this manner they contributed to an amplification of the impact of neighbourhood association action by providing information and other support and by influencing public opinion. In some cases, such options for oppositionist movements led to dismissal and in any case they contributed to a gradual 'paralysation' of the planning agencies set up by the authoritarian regime (Assies, 1992: 160–162).

Professional organisations of social workers developed a view on professional practice that included a clear commitment to the cause of social movements (ANAS, 1987; Netto, 1990: 267). Other professional organisations, such as those of architects and sociologists, expressed similar concerns and promoted public discussion in the context of the 'reawakening of civil society'. Santos (1981) has provided an early and insightful account of the encounter between the municipal architect, familiar with social movement theories, and the really existing social movements of Rio de Janeiro.

The foregoing provides us with a sort of mapping of the circuits or networks through which 'urban social movement' discourse propagated and filtered into the activities of various groups. This mapping is reminiscent of the way the NGOs have been 'located' by Fernandes (1988). He describes the NGOs as moving within a 'triangular field of reference', constituted by the universities, the churches and the left-wing parties. Within this field of reference the NGOs provide a 'space' for the development of alternative professional practices (see also Fernandes and Carneiro, 1991). The implication is that the NGOs can be viewed as embedded in broader circuits of activity of segments of the Brazilian new middle classes.

The 'field of reference' as presented by Fernandes (1988) seems to be truncated, however, as he fails to consider the changing role of the state in the course of the democratisation process. Whereas in the early 1980s the Church, the universities, the left-wing parties and the NGOs constituted the breeding grounds for alternatives, state apparatuses tended to become another space for trying out alternatives as the opposition gradually gained ground. Views on the cooptation of professional practice obviously had to be readjusted from the moment professional practice within state apparatuses did not necessarily imply the organisation of adherence to the authoritarian regime. And even before that time, particularly in the context of the community development policies launched after 1979, low-level state agencies would often provide some degree of freedom for experiments that occasionally ended in conflict and dismissal of the employees involved. Therefore, rather than speaking of a triangular field, one should speak of a quadrangular field, with state apparatuses constituting a 'fourth pole'. Discussing the role of NGOs in Brazil, Oliveira Neto (1991) notes that members of the new middle classes easily pass from one institutional space to another. Political conjunctures may provoke massive migration of NGO personnel to administrative posts and, vice versa, public officials may be temporarily assigned to NGOs; equally, technicians may dedicate part of their time to NGOs while employed by state agencies.<sup>2</sup>

## THE ECLIPSE OF A PARADIGM

Such 'massive migrations' occurred with increasing frequency in the course of the Brazilian democratisation process and contributed to the decreasing appeal of the 'paradigm of the

1970s' with its emphasis on autonomy, understood as radical confrontationism with a somehow revolutionary perspective. Not only had the theoretically sanctioned rhetoric and imagery of 'radical exteriority' dissimulated the actual interrelations and interaction between urban movements and state policies, which was particularly notable after 1979, the paradigm also obstructed the development of strategies for democratic social change (Assies, 1993, 1994a; Cardoso, 1983; Machado da Silva and Ribeiro, 1985). If initially the perspective had been enabling, it was now increasingly felt as a constraint.

Cunha's (1993) account of the policy shift that took place in Belo Horizonte, after PMDB-opposition came to power in 1983, illustrates some of the issues involved. He attributes this policy shift directly to the influence of the 'paradigm of the 1970s' among the new administrators. In the four preceding years the last regime-related administration had launched a communitarian action programme of slum urbanisation. After 1983, this programme was abandoned by the new progressive administration. In social policy, emphasis shifted to 'pedagogical' and 'mobilisatory' functions at the expense of urbanisation programmes that, in the view of the new policy makers, and often former movement advisers, only served to coopt and demobilise the movements. The new priority in municipal policy became the legalisation of illegally occupied areas, which was viewed as a 'fundamental' issue.<sup>3</sup> According to Cunha (1993) this policy shift contributed to the demobilisation of the neighbourhood movement as it failed to advance the legalisation of landholding while the concrete results of urbanisation programmes became scarce. In turn, this development and the accompanying political disputes marginalised and undermined the legitimacy of a generation of 'old and respected' neighbourhood leaders and contributed to a disarticulation and demobilisation of the movement.

In the case of Recife, by contrast, it was a younger generation of neighbourhood leaders, who had become involved in citywide articulations, that strongly clung to a discourse framed after the 'paradigm of the 1970s'. They sought to defend the movements autonomy from the new policies launched by a left-wing municipal administration elected in 1985 which aimed at 'participation of the organised social movements of civil society' (Prefeitura, 1987). This stand alienated the emergent municipal-level leadership from the local neighbourhood associations who felt such an attitude to be unproductive. At the same time the municipal administration and the local NGO community questioned the autonomy posture arguing that it failed to make use of the political opening provided by the left-wing municipality (Assies, 1992).

The actual process of democratic transition brought an increasing number of experiences with local government which in practice as well as in theory undermined the old paradigm. Conceptualisations of autonomy as radical confrontation and condemnations of any relation with state apparatuses as cooptation were felt to be self-marginalising under the new constellation and became increasingly problematic. Within the PT, which considered itself the exponent of the social movements, the issue of 'facing the institutional challenge' and devising practical strategies for progressive and democratic local government, providing space for the 'social movements', became more urgent with each new victory in municipal elections (Assies, 1993, 1997; Bittar, 1992; Kowarick and Singer, 1994).

The eclipse of the 1970s paradigm meshed with international trends in the social sciences, and with the theoretical and practical reevaluation of democracy by the left (Dagnino, 1998). Bernardo Sorj (1991: 369), for instance, directly links the abstract structure/agency debate in the social sciences to local political processes in his remark that, as the democratic transition got under way, structuralist approaches that called into question a model of

society gave way to actor-oriented approaches (see also Kowarick, 1994). The renaming, in the early 1980s, of the ANPOCS workshop on 'Urban Social Movements' to 'Urban Struggles, the State and Citizenship' was suggestive of another emerging agenda of analytical intentions (Machado da Silva, 1993; Assies, 1994) and the development of a new view of the state and democracy. Public policies, democratisation of public policies, and local democracy became increasingly important themes of debate (Assies, 1998). While the term was retained, 'urban social movements' increasingly were viewed as client groups of not necessarily clientelistic state apparatuses.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The interpretation of neighbourhood associativism through the 'paradigm of the 1970s' has contributed to an 'internalisation' of the perspective on the movements (Machado da Silva and Ribeiro, 1985: 327). Through its emphasis on the spontaneous, nearly mechanistic, emergence of movements out of urban contradictions and its stress on authenticity and autonomy, it screened out the dynamic, interactive relational aspect. Reinforcing radical Catholic *basismo* and the left's renunciation of vanguardism, it contributed to concealing the variety of actors actually involved in the social construction of these movements.

An institutional approach of 'external actors' is an important corrective to the somewhat ingenuous forms of *basismo* but, as argued in this paper, it should be complemented and broadened by examining the class dimension of their role and taking into account that the personnel of such institutions belong to the new middle classes that emerged in Brazil in the course of the 1970s. In an essay on these new middle classes, Francisco de Oliveira (1988) characterised them as translators and articulators of social demands. Their role has become that of active mediators, principally in relation to the distribution of public funds that regulate the reproduction of both private capitals and of the labor force. Their position in society is no longer given by their social position, but more importantly by their new political role which was consolidated in the course of the 1970s.

The role of certain segments of these new middle classes in relation to neighbourhood associations can be interpreted within this broad framework. Their role reminds one of the debate over the distinction between 'practical' and 'strategic' interests in women's studies. The distinction suggests that popular women's struggles revolve around practical interests and involve a politicisation of prevailing feminine roles, whereas feminism, which predominantly involves middle class women, seeks to transform women's roles and advances strategic interests on the basis of an analysis of women's subordination and the formulation of alternative, more satisfactory arrangements (Alvarez, 1990: 24–25; Molyneux, 1985). Did the 'militant perspective' not graft strategic interests onto the ongoing practical struggles of the neighbourhood associations? Was the transformation and shaping of neighbourhood struggles in terms of 'social movements' not an outcome of this process? Perhaps it was the encounters and disencounters between 'practical' and 'strategic' interests that provide a clue to the dynamics of neighbourhood struggles. But then we should also consider that those who formulate strategic interests may have practical interests of their own. De Oliveira (1988) argues that the role of the new middle classes makes them prone to a certain 'ventriloquism', a tendency to substitute the dominated classes in political relations.

This points to the ambiguities of a relationship which at the same time is one of dynamic interplay. Neighbourhood associations were not simply taken into tow, but a shared discourse served to cement coalitions while at the same time concealing them. Practical

pursuits may, for example, be subsumed under certain discourses under specific circumstances, depending on the addressee and the institutional context. A shared discourse may serve to cement a coalition, but at the same time the acceptance of common symbols is no guarantee that the meaning attributed to the symbol is the same for all involved. Such a strategic interplay could be observed, for example, in the struggles over land in Recife. Whereas the 'external actors' involved tended to interpret such struggles as the expression of an authentic popular concept of property rights, absolutely distinct from that consecrated in the Brazilian Civil Code, and proposed communitarian ownership as an end in itself, squatters rather regarded communitarian constructions as a step toward full proprietorship. While diverging on the long term perspective and 'strategic' aims, when needed they could join forces in the defence of squatter settlements under the banner of the 'struggle for land' (Assies, 1994b).

The ambiguities of coalition-making were pointed to in Cunha's (1993) analysis of urban policies in Belo Horizonte. The preoccupation with 'macro issues' of movement advisers and the progressive policy makers who came to power after 1982, and the more pragmatic approach of neighbourhood militants constituted a source of tension. However, the awareness on the part of neighbourhood militants that the support of middle class sectors had played an important role in some of the achievements of the movement prevented latent conflicts turning into open confrontation. At the same time, the focus on 'fundamental issues' and the neglect of more immediate benefits led to an impasse, and contributed to the wearing out and the eventual decline of the movement.

The relationship of middle class professionals to popular movements often is viewed as a pedagogic one. While such a relationship certainly involves a transfer of cultural discursive resources or symbolic capital and can contribute to empowerment, the often tenuous relationship between practical pursuits and 'strategic interests' should not be lost from view. In this article I have sought to outline and analyse this ambiguous relationship by way of contextualising the emergence of a 'militant perspective in research' within a particular social process, broadly outlined in terms of the 'bureaucratisation of Brazilian society' and conservative modernisation, and the political conjunctures of the demise of bureaucratic authoritarianism and democratisation. This constellation produced the cross-fertilisation of activities of segments of the middle strata and the popular classes (Gohn, 1991: 13). It was an ambiguous relationship where the construction of the strategic interests of the urban social movements imbricated not merely with the practical interests of the popular sectors involved, but equally, and this point merits stressing, with the practical interests of the professional consolidation, in the context of a specific political conjuncture, of segments of the new middle classes.

As Boschi (1987: 137) indicates, the redefinition of the political role of the middle classes was often accompanied by radical politicised militancy. In relation to neighbourhood associations, the 'paradigm of the 1970s' provided a framework and vehicle for such militancy and contributed to orienting the activities of pastoral workers and NGO personnel as well as broader sectors of militant middle class professionals (lawyers, city planners, architects, social workers, etc.). The effervescence of the 'cross-fertilisation' engendered the feedback mechanisms that contributed to the social making of the new urban social movements and served to amplify their social and political impact, even if this happened by attributing to them a potential that eventually would not be realised. The eclipse of a paradigm was accompanied by a certain disappointment. Eventually, new perspectives on neighbourhood associations and the role they could play in democratising urban policies

developed. The focus of attention shifted to the interface between state and civil society in contrast to the earlier exclusive focus on civil society represented as the site of an alternative in radical opposition to the state. The shift in emphasis among NGOs from militancy toward professionalism and 'concrete results' and a reconceptualisation of their relation to popular movements in terms of training rather than mobilisation and consciousness-raising, can be regarded as emblematic of the development that underlies a shift in knowledge interests. The epistemo-politics of research and theory production are partly related to the changing role of segments of the new middle classes.

This article examined the 'cross-fertilisation' of activities of segments of the Brazilian new middle classes and the popular classes in the making of 'new urban social movements' in the context of a particular conjuncture of societal and political development in Brazil. It thus sought to highlight the class dimension of this process and its imbrications with the production of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> In a recent article Veronica Schild (1998) discusses similar issues in relation to the women's movement in Chile. She argues that the superficially solid alliances among feminist professionals and poor and working class women have unravelled in the context of democratisation in conjunction with neo-liberal policies aiming for a reconfiguration of the relations between state and civil society. Under the new constellation, feminist professionals have increasingly become involved in the implementation of social programmes, whereas poor and working-class women tend to be marginalised and turned into clients of those programmes. While earlier alliances become undone, a confluence thus seems to have been established between sectors of the women's movement and the neoliberal state. In its recodification of the relations between state and civil society the neoliberal project relies on important cultural resources from civil society itself and provides employment opportunities for particular groups of professionals 'engaged in the production of knowledge, including categories that become part of the moral repertoires used by the state' (Schild, 1998: 93). Notions of empowerment and participation thus blend into a strategy of neoliberal reform where empowerment loses its radical charge and acquires connotations of self-advancement and self-reliance to participate as economic subjects. Her analysis of the new relations between professionals and grassroots activists leads Schild to the conclusion that 'class does matter' (Schild, 1998: 107). Once again this highlights the interplay between grassroots activism and strategies of professional affirmation and its impact on the production of knowledge that should be taken into consideration in reviewing the analyses of and theoretical perspectives on social movements.

## NOTES

1. In some cases, sociologists and social workers had actively participated in consciousness-raising activities during their education, for example, by conducting surveys at the request of neighbourhood associations in order to reveal the real needs of the local population. As noted, the Recife Faculty of Urban and Regional Development elaborated an influential analysis of land conflicts for the Justice and Peace Commission as well as other critical analyses of urban policies and urban conflicts.
2. Hence, NGOs are characterised as a 'channel for participation of the middle classes in the public sphere' (Oliveira Neto, 1991: 166) which suggests their embeddedness in the Brazilian class structure.
3. In the Brazilian social formation, the land-issue, it could be argued, takes on particular importance (Fagundes *et al.*, 1981). Focusing on the issue would confront the capitalist appropriation of land in Brazil and serve consciousness raising. Liberation Theology assimilated this view and it also had strong echoes – and was sanctioned – in official church policy documents (CNBB, 1982). In the pedagogics of local base communities,

passages on the 'promised land' could serve as a starting point for reflection on the injustices of the capitalist system and the ways to remedy them.

4. Comparison with views (Eder, 1985; Offe, 1985) on the role of the new middle classes in European 'new social movements' could be interesting and might be linked to the theorising of the reconfiguration of class relations in 'informational societies'.

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