Brazilian NGOs and the urban management: the role and the impacts of civil society in the sustainable cities

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Abstract

This article discusses the impact of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) on the strategies of urban management of Brazilian cities. The author analyses the characteristics of the non-profit sector (Third Sector) in Brazil and its role in the modernization of public politics in big cities. Dilemmas and perspectives of diffusion of the citizenship through the action of NGOs are discussed in connection with the nature of the non-profit and voluntary activities. The analyses indicate dilemmas in the relationship among NGOs governmental agencies, private organizations and non-profit institutions. In some cases, partnerships among these three spheres can bring about advances to sustainable cities. In other cases, there is a capture of non-governmental organizations by the State and the private corporations.

1 Introduction

The recent discussions in the fields of political science, in the academic sphere and in the ambit of concrete social practices, have been giving prominent place to the so-called Third Sector. There have been a lot of publications, seminars and debates whose focus is the relevance, the characteristics and the nature of the organizations that act in this field.

The concepts associated to the idea of Third Sector are wide, imprecise and even contradictory to each other, as it will be discussed further ahead. However, it is important to get a minimum definition of the term. Thus, Third Sector is understood as a varied range of organizations that includes entities without profitable,
aims, philanthropic institutions, foundations, social projects, linked to companies, among others, in which the NGOs play a major role (Carrion [1]).

Nevertheless, for those most interested in this discussion – those involved with social projects – the term Third Sector remains vague and not very precise. The solutions that come from the new approaches about Third Sector would be basically linked to the world of the management, creating an easy and fast way to reach the social goals, the financial balance, a precise evaluation of social projects, an organizational durability, among other virtues of public politics.

Actually, Third Sector became a kind of phrase that explains everything and then doesn’t explain anything, carrying a lot of contradictions in itself. One of them, perhaps the most important, is that Third Sector turned out to be a synonym of a modernization of social action. At the same time, however, what is most discussed is exactly the need of managerial modernization of the Third Sector itself. Considering all this euphoria with such a new concept and having in mind that such “fever” does not only appear in Brazil, but also in the central capitalist countries, especially the United States, we can recall the words of Nelson Rodrigues, a great Brazilian journalist: “The Brazilian has a soul of a ‘platoon’ dog; as soon as a new word appears everybody goes after it”.

Therefore, it is urgent to discuss the myths, dilemmas and perspectives that can be found in the action of the civil society engaged in the articulation, implementation and management of public politics, based on a Brazilian scenario.

2 Third Sector: a search for a typology

It is noticed that one of the characteristics of the Third Sector is its extreme heterogeneity. There is a lack of consensus related to the concept and the terminologies adopted to refer to its organization (Costa Jr. [2]).

Third Sector can be understood as something that is public, however private or then, something that is private, however public, Fernandes [3]. That play of words demonstrates that the Third Sector resembles the State (First Sector) since they both have as their targets and objective the public space. It differs from the Government considering that it is an initiative of the society itself. On the other hand, Third Sector is not the same as the private initiative (Second Sector), because in spite of not being governmental, it has social benefits as a goal.

This extremely generic definition denotes the complexity and ambiguity of the concept, since the public however private can be closer to the private than to the public, as it happens with many social projects linked to big companies. Or then, the private however public can be closer to the public, as is the case of many philanthropic organizations whose resources, methodologies and support come from the State, in almost their totality.

Actually, inside of the spectrum of the Third Sector there are organizations of different complexities. Here there are examples of organizations that can be defined as belonging to the Third Sector: community associations; Non-
Governmental Organizations (NGOs); philanthropic institutions; Foundations; churches and other religious factions; social organizations (according to definition of the proposal of reform of the Brazilian State; social projects developed by private companies; labor unions.

For authors such as Paula [4], Third Sector and the NGOs are neologisms which appeared during the process of the neo-liberal logic of the Governments of the central capitalist economies. Behind the intense discussion about the importance of NGOs, it would be implicit that the social and economical problems should be solved starting from the logic of the market, or better saying, from the encounter and action of the several actors during the economical exchanges. The State has a restricted role in regulating this sphere.

Within the idea of Third Sector there are both organizations which are judicially formalized and those which are informal; organizations with a structured management as well as non-structural and less professionalized management; big organizations as well as medium and small ones; supra-national, multinational as well as local organizations; organizations receiving state founds and/or big companies with no regular financing, among other differences.

The converging point among the several organizations that would compose the Third Sector seems to be the absence of the profit as the central purpose in its managerial orientation and the objectifying of benefits for the whole community or specific social groups. Among the articulating factors of those groups/organizations there are non-excluding ones such as geographical location, ethnia, ideology, socioeconomic condition, economical, political and social interests, religious orientation, sexual options, among others.

For the purpose of this work Third Sector is assumed to be organizations that are characterized by non-profitability and which build strategies in order to search for improvements for the community as a whole or for specific groups of the population. That means that the organization of the Third Sector, similar to the one discussed by Costa Jr. [2], comprise not only foundations with rigid formal structures related to the State and big enterprises but also less-structured social movements, including religious groups and associations of residents.

Other concepts associated to the Third Sector concern the new postures that would be demanded from the considered modern companies, such as “Social Responsibility of Companies” or “Managerial Responsibility”, “Managerial Citizenship” and “Managerial Philanthropy”. They would include managerial actions in many different ways, such as social projects close to the community, managerial managerial anti-discrimination in the work, control of sexual harrassment or corruption in the companies, among others.

3 Third Sector as the “utopia” of modern social politics

Behind the growing attention of the media and of academics in relation to the Third Sector it can be found some modernizing conceptions of social politics.
Sometimes being closer of the citizen, and others providing public politics with larger efficiency and effectiveness, the organizations of the non-governmental public sphere would present the following virtues.

- Being closer to the citizens, with larger chances of supplying the services and public benefits that the population wants and not those that the State wants to offer them (Ioschpe [5]).
- Having more agility without bureaucracy, because the operation structures are presented as agile and they are not submitted to the legal rigidities that control the state public sphere (Morales [6]).
- Improved use of the budgets, considering the fact that they would not spend resources with very extensive payrolls, technological sophistication or huge physical facilities, directing all the money to the "top" of the social projects (Barreto [7]).
- Deeper development of the citizenship, due to the involvement of some people of the community, mainly as volunteer workers, in the solution of the social problems, breaking up with a convenient, fatalist and stagnant attitudes of the society (Álvares [8]).
- Valorization of solutions of the community itself, that would be not only cheaper and easy to apply, but often, more efficient than the great idealized and implemented solutions through centralized public politics (Teodósio and Santos [9]).
- Rupture of the "protectionism", in other words, the break of a paternalism position towards the poor people because the social projects in the Third Sector always look for some kind of "counterpart" by the benefited citizen (Melo Neto and Frôes [10]).
- Employment and income through the social projects. For many people the Third Sector would be the exit for the unemployment, when incorporating the labor that is expelled from the First and Second Sectors by the processes of organizational restructuring implemented by great private corporations and by the State (Salomon [11]).
- Control over the State, demanding a direct performance on the social problems, cohabiting the corruption, demanding the modernization of the public politics and evaluating the results of the social programs (Barreto [7]).

Actually, it is noticed that a lot of times analytic and prescriptible perspectives of reflection on the Third Sector penetrate themselves, in other words, the desire and the proposals/strategies of modernization of public politics mix with the evaluation of the effective role of the non-governmental public sphere in the contemporary scenery. The fact of the sector can be extremely heterogeneous is forgotten. It can subsist in its interior from modern practices of public management and promoting of the citizenship to "conservative modernizations", capable of altering more the speech than the paternalistic and archaic practices of several organizations and social projects.
Besides, it should be understood that the space of the modernization of the public politics is made by the political, economical and symbolic collision among different currents and groups of interests. That demands a more necessary and incisive observation concerning the possibilities that come from the emergency and/or larger centricity of the Third Sector in the conduction of social politics. However, it is noticed as a truly mystery the role of this sector in the Brazilian social development, as it will be seen further.

4 Role of the organizations of the Third Sector

The organizations of the Third Sector can perform different roles in their relationship with the State, the society and even the big companies. Further, there are some kinds of action that are developed by those organizations. Before examining these different perspectives of interventions in the social problems, it is important to stand out that they are not excluding. In other words, in certain moments, it is possible to act in the control of the execution of public politics, and in other occasions, in the execution of those politics, as well as to perform them simultaneously.

4.1 Control of the execution of public politics / diffusion of values

It is an important role that several organizations of the Third Sector have been developing and it is very present in institutions that defend human rights or struggle against the corruption. This approach is also found in international NGOs, acting in the Brazilian scenario. The main objective is to demand from the government, companies and even society, the postures and proposals initially negotiated among them, the execution of the laws, or then, the adoption of positions that are considered more compatible with organization aims and social coexistence. One of the most used resources for that control has been the Internet, seen as a way of democratization of the social controls over public machine and private organizations. The role of the so-called “New Information technologies” in contemporary democratic regimes has been an object of intense debate, showing the initial vision of linear relationships among microelectronic diffusion in the governmental management and construction of the public space (Grau [12]).

According to Azevedo and Prates [13], the called “New Brazilian Social Movements” can be differentiated starting from two basic perspectives of articulation and social action: the enlarged participation and the restricted participation. For enlarged participation it is understood the articulations and movements of the civil society turned to the diffusion of values and the reach of goals that are linked to deep social transformations and accomplished in over a long period. The social articulations around the restricted participation refer to the reach of specific goals, usually materials and accomplished in a short period.

A central subject that is placed for analysis of the Third Sector, according to Azevedo and Prates [13], refers to the predominant action strategies among the
non-governmental public organizations. Behind the emphasis in the adoption of
the managerial techniques by the NGOs – an idea that is constantly transmitted by
the media and defended by several academics as a privileged way for the mod-
ernization of the Third Sector – typical presuppositions of the private management
are diffused, such as pragmatism, constant calculation among means and ends,
financial disciplines, focus on efficiency, among others.

The remaining inquiry concerns the diffusion impacts of the managerial ration-
ality on the Third Sector, that can lead the social organizations to concentrate
intensely in the restricted participation and in the reach of short-term goals, losing
their connection with the wider social transformations. Actually, the strategies of
the organized social movements don’t concentrate exclusively in the enlarged par-
ticipation or in the restricted participation. The basic problem comes from the
extreme focus on the reach of pragmatic goals as alternative to strengthen the
organizations, in the measure they get a concrete profit in a short-term and with
direct positive repercussion on the image that was built close to the community.

4.2 Execution of public politics

Another perspective of action that is pretty defended, so much in organizations of
the Third Sector with more restricted geographical reach as in those the action is
national or international, is the articulation with the State in the execution of pub-
lic politics. Besides, many of them act in partnership system with great private
companies or even other organizations of the Third Sector.

That partnership among State, private companies, international NGOs and
organizations of the Third Sector is constituted starting from continuous changes
of financial and human resources, knowledge, technology and information among
the partners. However, it could be stated that a lot of times the so-called partner-
ship in not more than a “capture” of the organization of the Third Sector by the
State, great companies or organisations and international NGOs. So, a partnership
relationship isn’t settled down, but there is a submission relation of the Third
Sector to the State, to the private companies, to the international organisms and/or
to the strongest NGOs.

The partnership with the State can become a outsourcing of public politics, in
other words, the government is exonerated of the execution of its social programs,
expecting the organizations of the Third Sector solve all the community problems.
Or then, the State, demonstrating little opening to dialogue with the social move-
ments, imposes rules, procedures, methodologies, etc., that should be precisely
followed by the Third Sector. In this way, great possibilities of mutual growth and
democratic interaction with the society are lost.

The relationship with the private initiative can’t be less problematic, because a
lot of the Third Sector organizations, as great part of the foundations, for instance,
aren’t more than a part of the company close to the society. In this relationship,
sometimes, social problems are attacked at company than important subjects and
values, ideas and approaches are diffused. They represent more a desire of the great company than important subjects of the community. It is obvious that the social action of the companies will not be totally disinterested, but there is a very big distance for the company in getting profit with its social projects or imposing its values, philosophy and approaches to the community (Teodosio and Santos [9]).

The relationship among the strongest and more structured NGOs and less prepared organizations of the Third Sector in political, administrative or financial ways can also result in a “capture” of the weakest by the strongest. This phenomenon is very frequent in Brazil, when it is observed the action of financing organs and/or NGOs of planetary reach. A lot of times, priorities are imposed in the solution of the social problems and action methodologies that are suitable for the called First World, but that little represent for countries in development as Brazil (Grau [12]).

4.3 Autonomous execution of social projects

That is the most difficult kind of performance in a pure state, because the organizations of the Third Sector have a lot of difficulties in obtaining resources for their operations, demanding the establishment of partnerships. However, the organizations that have larger credibility close to society usually get to have an autonomous performance in the execution of their social projects. They are usually organizations that get to solve one of the great dilemmas of the Third Sector: the reception of resources.

Among the strategies to get regular provision of resources are those from the commercialization of products that are linked to the undertaken social fight, until the withdrawal of donations. However, those strategies of reception of resources can incur in the loss of focus in the main objective of the organization or social movement, expending energies and resources more for its own survival than the attack to the social problems. The tendency to turn more to the survival organizational, independently of the demands of the community base is one of the central categories of analysis of the social movements, having in mind the Robert Michel’s dilemma about the called “Iron Law of the Oligarchies”.

4.4 Influence in the deciding processes of the Legislative and Executive Powers

Another way of action found in the organizations of the Third Sector is the influence attempts in the deciding processes, even in the Legislative or the Executive Powers. It is noticed that the universe of the Third Sector is quite heterogeneous related to this action capacity. There are some NGOs with significant power of intervention in the definition of international calendars – a common fact among some organizations of planetary reach (Weiss and Gordenker [14]), as well social movements without capacity of political articulation.
Another important point of reflection concerns to the exaggerating focus of public politics due to the action of groups representing the interests of Third Sector organizations. Although the dispute for public resources can be inherent to the democratic process, the invigoration of the Third Sector can produce a real "law of the jungle", in which only the best politically and "gerencialmente" organized ones will obtain resources, in detriment of the important social projects, with less structure for the political/economical dispute.

5 Conclusions

It does not mean that the Third Sector discards or disqualifies the role of the organized social movements in the modernization of Brazilian social politics. On the contrary, penetration of its myths and dilemmas is a means to open new perspectives of reorganization of the relationships between State and Civil Society, considering the complexity of the processes of social transformation.

In this context, it is worth researching the configuration that the modernization of the Third Sector acquires to face to the incorporation of popular participation, social control of state management and the decentralization of public politics. The macro-social and economical researches on the non-state public sphere that have been multiplying in Brazil, as well as the studies about specific projects will help to clarify the impacts of the voluntary work, the company and the NGOs social projects on the progress of the citizenship and in the social justice.

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