

Urban vulnerability from the other side of the street

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Abstract:

The focus of the São Paulo based M'Boi urban research field station is on the micro level impacts of social, urban and institutional vulnerabilities present in big cities and multi-city conurbations that are aggravated by: precarious processes of high density land occupation and habitation deficit; changes in patterns for sustaining livelihoods; failures in the distribution of basic services and local consequences of global patterns of climate change. Through consolidating links with community, social and faith based territorial organizations and taking part in their multiple forums, we have seen the importance of an alternative analytic approach to much of the current street level analyses which tend to favour the policy role of the public sector actor. From the "other side of the street" the picture is one of disconnection and absence where community based organizations have sought to reply to everyday demands not only through advocacy and mobilization, but also through direct and collective service provision. Concern may at times be about what government doesn't do, or should do, or does badly, but it is also about invisible cities and absent states. This has led to us to give more attention to a public action framework with multiple and at times conflicting and disconnected languages that involves not only the actions of governments for citizens, but also the actions of society to both pressure government and to act directly in response to public needs.

Introduction

There is an underlying tendency in much applied social science to see democratic public policy processes as normatively guided by notions of participation and deliberation. Hence controversies should lead to consensus or at least acceptance and where policy fields are not level, attempts should be made to make up the differences. Translated into public sector service provision and governmental action, this leads to the further assumption of overall service provision as seeking to build a good fit between the many different ways of providing and or regulating services and the different demands present in society. Seeking to build a good fit does not mean the search for a perfect match, for as Stafford Beer pointed out in his cybernetic approach

to service provision (Platform for Change, 1975), demands change as societies and services themselves change. Nor does it imply that there is widespread agreement about what is being offered and what is being required. Indeed elections, polls, newspapers, processes of open and continuing consultation and protest marches are all examples of disagreements in terms of issue, scale and focus. However, when we talk about consolidated democracies we usually refer to polities in which some kind of hybrid middle ground has been established through which a minimum balance is possible. This is also the case when the discussion turns to policy implementation; adjustment may be necessary and policy-implementation may often be implementation-policy, muddling through (Lindblom, 1959) or groping along (Behn, 1988), but it will work out in the end. Very much present here is what Colebatch, Hoppe, and Nordegraaf have critically called the narrative of “authoritative instrumentalism”:

In the narrative of authoritative instrumentalism, governing happens when ‘the government’ recognizes problems and decides to do something about them; what it decides to do is called ‘policy’. The narrative constitutes an actor called ‘the government’ and attributes to it instrumental rationality; it acts as it does in order to achieve preferred outcomes. (p.15, 2010)

As they went on to say: “This is not necessarily the way that practitioners experience the policy world, however”. The focus of this paper is to take this on further and to say, nor is it the way that the people on the other side of the street see it.

The argument that I wish to present is an outcome of the result of four years of research into questions of urban vulnerability in a highly populated area of the outer ring of the municipality of São Paulo being undertaken by a group of research workers from different São Paulo Universities. Both São Paulo and, especially, what is called its extended periphery is on the surface a very different place to many of the large conurbations in the developed world and it may be that our conclusions are limited and best dealt with within the field of development studies. However I do think it is worth debating their potential relevance in other settings.

The argument is the following. The many social languages that are found around governments in action and which play a major role in performing public affairs, including policy and many others that have been around much longer (Spink, 2016), tend to follow the view that there should be a “general” or “overall” (plan, policy,

budget, program, decision, directive etc.) that will later be adapted to “specific” circumstances; that is, the route is from the former to the latter. Our tentative conclusions suggest that this is a proposition and not a logical conclusion. On the contrary, we need to be paying much more attention to the implications of at least the reverse relationship, from the specific to the general (see work in human geography and social theory about place, Hubbard and Kitchin, 2011 and in economics about development as locally situated, Boisier, 2005); or, more radical still, follow arguments by Latour about the flat social (1996) and by Marston, Jones and Woodward, 2005, about a non-scalar geography and stay with a heterogeneous network of connected and disconnected specifics.

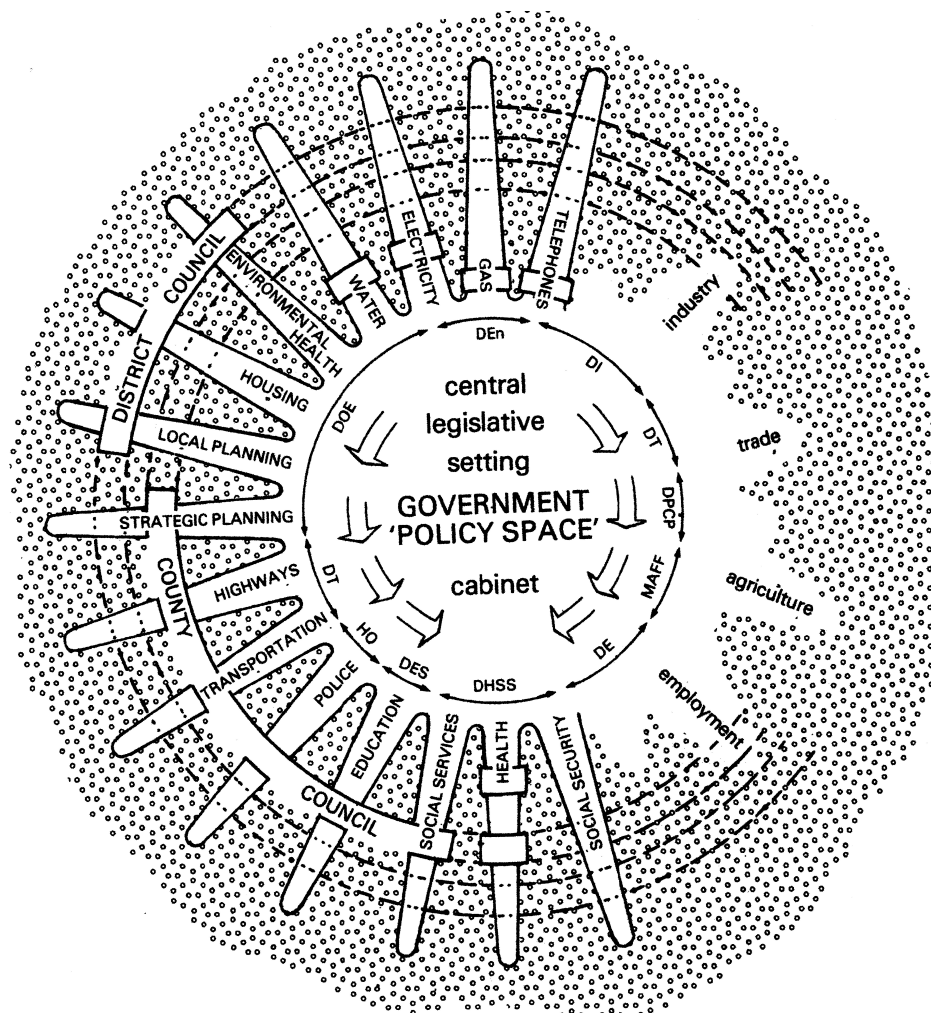
The paper starts by returning to some earlier work on the tensions between the general and the specific arising from an important program on inter-agency coordination in planning here in the east midlands during the nineteen seventies (Friend, 1977) and a similar approach in the development arena from Friedmann (1992) on poverty and empowerment. It then goes on to describe the setting of the M’Boi Urban Research Field Station and the approach it is taking to studies on urban vulnerability before looking at some early conclusion from the other side of the street about the importance of specifics.

Between the general and the specific – earlier approaches

Governments may develop programs that affect a wide range of issues and territories, but their results do not happen in a place called “everywhere”; they will always be applied “by someone somewhere”. Whilst planners, program managers and policy analysts might recognise this and also be concerned about the implications, the sheer weight of expressions that flow through the different ways of doing government, the organization of data in tables and diagrams, the reports and diagnosis will all favour the normal procedure of assuming that the variety of “somewhere” can be accommodated by the flexibility of a well designed “everywhere”. They will see like a state (Scott, 1988) even though they might not feel like a state.

The tension between the two was well described years back by Friend and colleagues (1977) who pointed to the differences in the point of view of the major representative,

for example mayor, and the point of view of the citizen in the day to day. For the former concerned with the implementation of programs and policies, the different services are like the different parts of a fan, each of which spreads out towards different groups or populations. When the members of the executive (ministers, secretaries, program managers) gather together, concern is with the coherence of these different activities as part of a government platform or action agenda; the “government policy space”. The structure of local government has changed since the diagrams were drawn, as have some of the agencies, but the overall message remains the same.

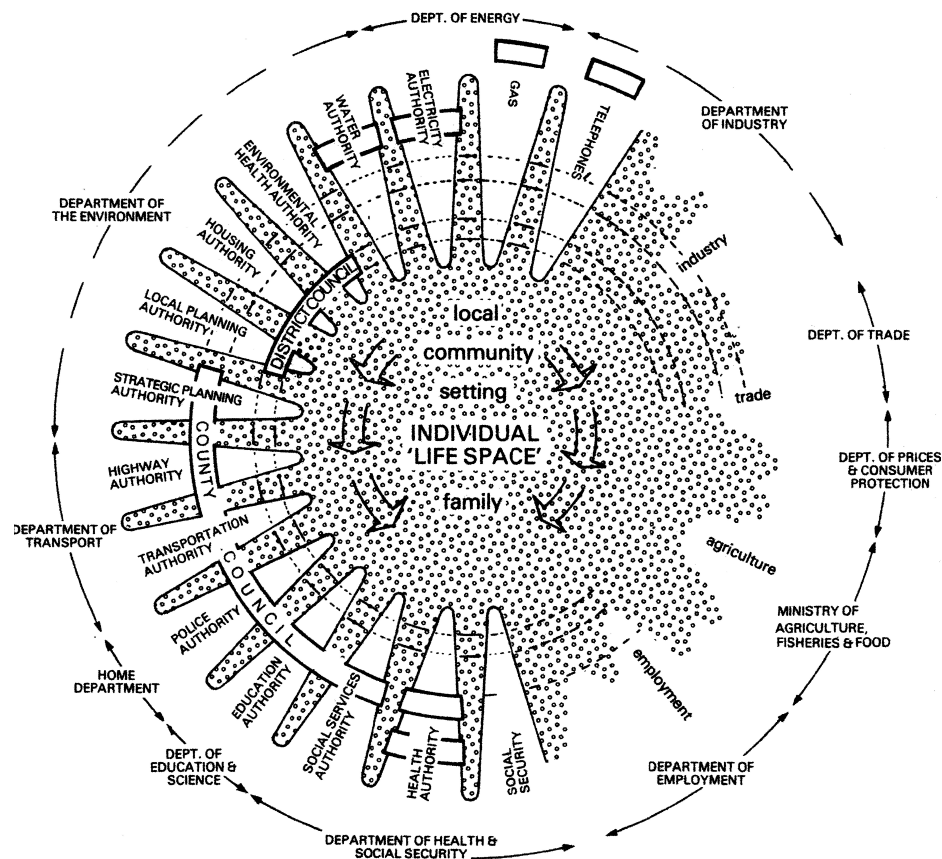


*A GOVERNMENT CENTRED VIEW OF COMMUNITY SERVICE PROVISION
for an English Shire County.*

For the citizen in the day to day, the situation is the reverse. Her or his social reality, the “individual life space”, is made up of very concrete questions and issues linked to different demands and rights. A single mother with a young baby who needs to work; an elderly person who needs to move around; a youngster looking for books that aren’t in her school library. For them, the day to day in relation to state action is made up of bits of different questions and social and material solutions, which are treated and delivered by different bits of the various organizations whose actions fan outwards toward everyday life. The executive or cabinet or policy committee is concerned with “implementation”; the citizen, family, friends and neighbours are concerned with where things are, how to get to them and how to put the bits together.

Friend was concerned with the implications for coordination and in doing so provided an important and earlier questioning of the tendency to seek the “general” rather than the “specific”.

Whenever the provision of services to the public seems to be becoming fragmented among too many specialized departments or agencies, people tend to seek better co-ordination by moving to another level where things can be seen in a more rounded, less blinkered way. But should this [level] mean moving closer to the level of the individual citizen for whom the service is intended or towards the heart of the government system through which control is exercised, or are there ways of making progress in both directions at once? (1977,p.4)



*A CITIZEN CENTRED VIEW OF COMMUNITY SERVICE PROVISION
in an English Shire County.*

LINKAGE TWO 1977

Friedmann (1992), used a similar approach in referring to those aspects of the day to day that are key to social power and the important role played by state agencies in helping or hindering their acquisition: financial resources; social networks; appropriate information; surplus time over subsistence requirements; instruments of work or livelihood; social organization; knowledge and skills; and a defensible life space. He started from the point of view of a household to look at these dimensions in the day to day of what we could call sustainable livelihoods.

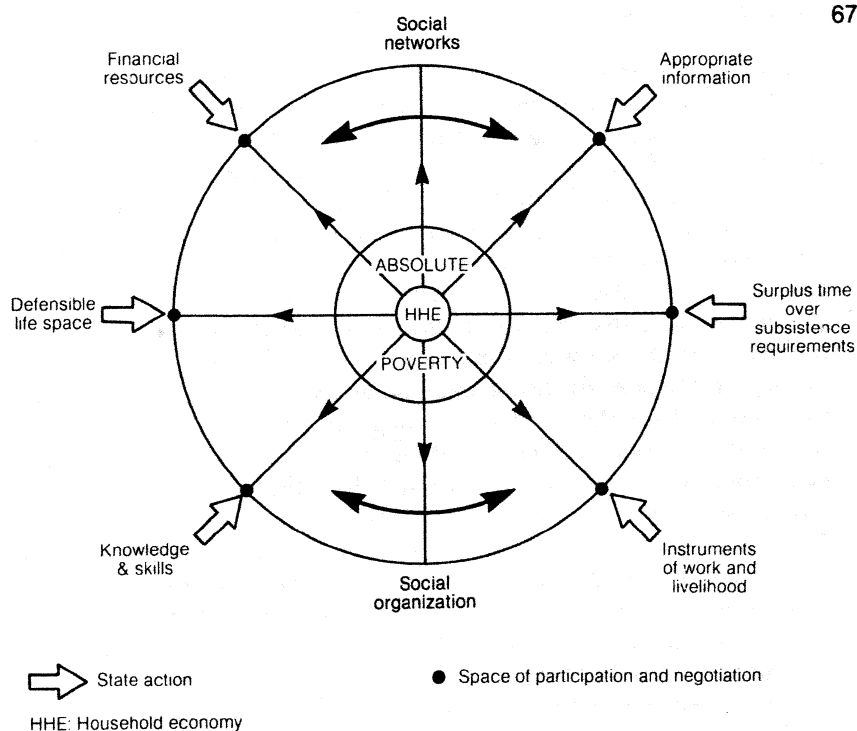


Figure 4.1 Poverty as lack of access to bases of social power

When the variety of “somewhere” is limited and the mismatch between the general and the specific can be adjusted in one way or another through resources, opportunities or social and organizational innovations, such as participatory planning or budgeting, the principle of adaptation in implementation tends to hold good for practical purposes and tends to hold center stage, for example, in much of the discussion on urban affairs. But what happens when the mismatch becomes too much for the fragile settings in which Friednmann’s households may be seeking to sustain some kind of livelihoods? When social vulnerability is not only aggravated by material vulnerability but also by institucional vulnerability.

The M’Boi Urban Research Station

The São Paulo based M’Boi Urban Research Station grew out of a series of research projects on the micro level impacts of social, urban and institutional vulnerabilities present in big cities and multi-city conurbations that are aggravated by: precarious processes of high density land occupation and habitation deficit; changes in patterns

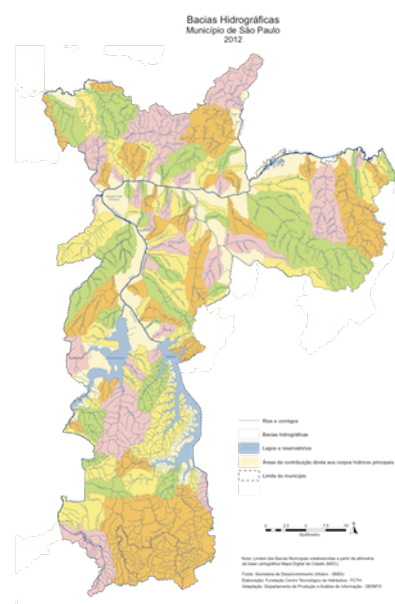
for sustaining livelihoods; failures in the distribution of basic services and local consequences of global patterns of climate change. Together with colleagues from other São Paulo Universities, we had the idea of carrying out our different studies in the same territorial area and, in doing so, look for ways in which our resources could be combined and results be more useful to those directly involved in local affairs. This very simple starting point of linking research, public service and a more equitable use of university resources is one that colleagues in urban affairs are assuming in various parts of the world. It has echoes of urban outreach, of field stations (Sommer, 1990) and of community based action research – to name but a few traditions – but is perhaps better located within the current discussion of the civic university (see Goddard, 2009). The research in action program draws on two applied traditions: action research and the field station approach to institutional engagement in community life. Where possible, it seeks not only to learn but also to contribute to the communities, their territorial base organizations and related public actors through mutual agendas of work.

This approach to urban research – different studies taking place in the same territory – helped us to open up some of the questions posed by the tensions between Friend's two positions. On the one hand, we were looking at different areas of government action, where those involved take the implementation route through the "government policy space". The studies were on people living in areas of risk; relations between government and civil society in service provision; youth and culture; and inter-agency coordination. But at the same time, being in similar places, comparing data and information, we became more aware of the specificities of the day to day and the tensions and conflicts present between Friend's different positions. Neighborhood residents and local activists that we talked to about one thing would also talk about other parts of their day to day and their communities. Street level service workers were also part of the story (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Mosheno, 2000), as people who walk and talk the interfaces, but what about the other side of the street, where people are trying to make ends meet. Were the different position merely perspectives or, are they performatively, parts of different discursive and ontological communities (Mol, 1999).

São Paulo, the periphery and M'Boi Mirim

São Paulo (11 million inhabitants) and the São Paulo metropolitan region (21 million inhabitants) is located in a broad water basin some 800 meters (2,500 feet) above sea level and surrounded by mountain ranges. Even though it is only 35 miles (55km) from the port of Santos on the coast, its many streams and lakes push water inland to form the Parana River, which will pass Paraguay and Uruguay before reaching the sea at Buenos Aires, Argentina. Unlike most of the big cities of the world that can be found near the outlets of their rivers or at least considerable downstream (Cairo, Rome, Paris, London, New York to cite but a few), São Paulo is not just upstream, but sits on top of its catchment area.

Despite the photographs which suggest that São Paulo is a flat maze of high rise buildings, it is in fact a city full of hills and valleys, from which and through which emerge and flow numerous small streams and rivers; nowadays running through concrete channels under major roads, many of which constructed in former river valleys. The following figure shows the many different water sub basins that are within the municipality of itself.



With a somewhat chaotic urban history in which major infrastructure investment was often left for a later date, preservation of watercourses and responding to housing demands normally moved in opposite directions. This is well summed up by the two major and extremely polluted rivers that zigzag their way through the municipality at the same time as its population suffers the effects of a drinking water shortage. District by district, these contradictions bring dangers of flash flooding (high density occupancy without proper drainage) as well as land slippage (due to precarious construction along the sides of river valleys).

The south zone of São Paulo can be divided into three areas: the first is what those in the more wealthier central regions call the south zone (*zona sul*) which starts at the Paulista Avenue and goes out past the Ibirapueira Park and the well urbanized houses and flats toward the national airport at Congonhas. The second starts more or less at the airport and covers what used to be part of the municipality of Santo Amaro, founded some 400 years ago and annexed to São Paulo in 1935. The rest of the old municipality crosses the Pinheiros River where it splits into two parts, one on either side of the Guarapiranga reservoir. As it crosses the river (over three different bridges) it materializes expressions that are often heard when discussing the differences in distribution and quality of public services and the way the police act: this side of the bridge; the other side of the bridge. This is where the third area begins and where the Urban Field Station is located.

For the planners in the city hall, this is part of the periphery (*periferia*) of São Paulo; an expression that is used to talk about the outer zone of the city, towards its limits with adjoining municipalities. But it is also an expression that positions people as being working class, which in Brazil is often synonymous with having low incomes, with substandard housing, not very good education, with a higher percentage of afro-descendents and often being seen as problematic.

If the visitor to São Paulo were to talk to most people in the first of the three southern areas about the third, the impression would be that yes there are some

people out there, but not that many and that is the periphery of the town, which is a bit complicated (periphery being the outward fringe). Even the portal of the Municipal Government will say on the page introducing the sub-prefectures: “few people know, but São Paulo has 31 small ‘municipalities’ distributed throughout the city”(the commas around municipalities are from the original text).

Jardim Ângela and Jardim São Luís form one of these small “municipalities”: they are the two districts that make up the sub prefecture (now termed regional prefecture) of M’Boi Mirim with a population of over 600,000 and some 25 kilometers away from city hall in downtown São Paulo. The sub prefecture is a fairly recent institutional development designed to replace the previous regional administrations basically charged with road cleaning and minor repairs. If they were a municipality they would be the ninth largest in the State of São Paulo. Each district is almost the size of Leicester (pop. 330,000). Whilst the change in terminology suggests a greater role in coordination, they remain very much involved in very basic maintenance, with a very low budget and little authority. The two districts together are like an invisible city without any jurisdictional institutionality, like a number of others in the municipality. São Paulo has a single municipal chamber for its 11 million population, with 55 members voted on at large lists. (As a way of comparing, imagine Leicester without any autonomous jurisdictional structure, wards, councils, meetings etc. and where health, education, social welfare, roads, buses and police, amongst others, are controlled by central offices located in Loughborough. To continue the comparison, given that Leicester is 73 Km² and M’Boi is about 62Km², imagine Leicester with twice its existing population in a little less than its current space).

Together the two districts border one side of the Gurapiranga Reservoir . They went through a housing explosion from the 1960’s onwards fueled by restrictive legislation on agriculture in the catchment area, which led to small farmers selling out and moving away, and the industrial boom in São Paulo which brought may thousands in search of work to a city without any plans for the necessary housing. As a result, people bought formal or semi-formal small plots

of land roughly carved out of the former agricultural small holdings or in the impossibility of payment, occupied public land alongside rivers or on hillsides. When people tell their histories they describe very similar processes. 'We first dug a well to get down to the water, then we built a room and then bit by bit we carried on, when we had the money, the time and as the family expanded'.

The landscape of Jardim Ângela and its co-district Jardim Luis is highly undulated and today it is marked by high-density housing that seems to occupy all available possibilities – and impossibilities – of location. Despite the heavy subtropical rainfall in summer months, there are no sloped roofs. The tops are flat and unfinished and are very key parts of the property: either for holding social gatherings or for, when necessary, building more rooms: (social) space is indeed a (social) product. The photos that follow are very typical of the region including parts of its neighbouring regional prefecture of Campo Limpo which together cover an area some twelve kilometers from north to south and around nine kilometers from east to west.







Self-building did not only apply to housing but also to most everything else. These were areas of the outskirts of São Paulo that were largely ignored by the municipal government in the 1970s during military rule and those present had to fend for themselves. Many of them were religious people – Brazil has a large catholic population – and were used to the church playing an important role in the community. They built their own places for worship that in turn strengthened the communities and were key elements in the São Paulo Catholic Church's 1970's option for liberation theology. With municipal government absent, social mobilization, through the ecclesiastical base communities and also the trade unions was the route to providing basic services and pressuring for place based public investment. Water, electricity, sewage, schools, health, transport amongst others were many of the themes that people recall.

Little by little the state and its organizations began arriving but the communities in their different ways had already been active and as well as mobilizing had also been creating community services. A recent document (2013) published by the Municipal Secretary for Social Assistance and Development (SMADS) analysing the different regions of the municipality of São Paulo states that in the region of M'Boi Mirim,

some 36% of the population can be classified as being in high and very high vulnerability, which rises to 50% in Jardim Ângela. The description continues with an appraisal of social services:

“In relation to the network of social services, the area of the sub prefecture has 79 different service units capable of attending together 16,610 clients and is the most well equipped of the southern zone 1. Of these units the Municipality directly runs three (2 CRAS and 1 CREAS). Amongst the services that are contracted, the major part is focused on children and adolescents.....”

The three service units that are run directly by the municipality are the coordinating units for social welfare (known as reference centres in the terminology of the Unified Social Service System - SUAS). A simple calculation shows that the remainder – seventy-six – are run by other organizations in the region; many of them faith-based and many which were there long before the effective arrival of the local state and the new social welfare system as a result of the 1988 constitution.

Despite the many positive aspects of community mobilization, this remains an area that is faced with very complicated social, material and institutional issues. The two districts and their near neighbour (Capão Redondo) were classified during the 1990s as being the most dangerous places on the planet. Even today police violence and the violent death of young people is still at a frightening level. There are over fifty areas that have identified as being in serious risk of land slippage and flooding and probably many others still to be identified. Most of the formal and semi-formal plots that were sold back in the 1960s and 1970s do not have officially registered land title deeds and, whilst there are a number of public services there is very little inter-agency coordination and often the different agencies use different map coordinates. There is some sub-municipal service coordination, but each of the agencies uses a different approach.

When we first started to move around the area we were often told that the state was absent, which seemed a bit strange given that we were aware that the region was big, but we also had knowledge of some of the services. Indeed, one of the reasons for seeking to work in this area were contacts we had made previously with social service organizations. We knew about the difficulty in turning the sub-prefectures, recently renamed regional prefectures, into effective bases for coordination as a few of us had

been involved in earlier attempts at decentralization and were well aware that the large main service providers (education, health and welfare) were very zealous of their budgets and their own internal coordination processes.

In order to discuss this better with community based organizations and forums, we built up a simple 60cm x 90cm map out of a street guide which we then photocopied in order to work on each service. We could stick coloured markers and place maps side by side to discuss distributions of services. We could also take them with us and tape them on walls to stimulate discussion about the region. In the first phase of the work we looked at the region as a whole and drew up maps for child-care and infant education; primary school, middle school and high school (different colours for the municipal and state schools as well as the private schools; the social welfare centers and different service agencies; the basic health units, specialised attention points and the two hospitals of the unified health system; cultural and sports facilities; basic institutional services (police, subprefecture, a few citizens advice agencies, registry offices and formal street markets organized by the municipality, as well as the parishes of the catholic churches, still key features in community life with their different chapels spread around the parish.

Yes, there were services spread around the region and yes they could be better distributed. The tendency was to find more services in the top northern half of M'Boi – which was the first area to be settled – and some clear distribution problems in parts of the souther part, known locally as the big bottom end (*fundão*). In taking the maps to meetings and forums to discuss the findings, we began to get a better understanding. This increased as we began to follow the different services around in the day to day and got clearer still in the different forums where local community leaders and activists would talk about specific issues. It was there that the term connectivity began to emerge along with the idea that simply doing your basic job in settings of vulnerability was not enough, for the issues were not single issues, but complicated issues involving different services. If health services don't connect to education, or education to social services, or any other of a myriad of connections that are necessary to deal with everyday issues, this can seriously limit what people can do on their own. The often voiced impression on the wealthier side of the bridges about the importance of creativity and drive of the social and cultural movements of the

periphery is increasingly being criticized by those on the M'Boi side of the bridges, who see this as an excuse for not responding to the size and scale of the demands. As a community leader commented, "we can do a lot, but if the state doesn't do its part there is a tendency to give up". The state, in other words is not the services but the connective presence of being together in a supportive manner. In the Forum in the Defence of Life, one of the oldest forums in Ângela, people argued against proposals to return to early experiences of community policing saying that with the current state of police community relations and the excessive levels of aggressive racial profiling and police violence, that was the last thing they wanted. (We are now trying to understand how connectivity breaks down by working in one neighborhood mainly linked to one parish, with parts of three basic health units, schools and other services and where the territory as lived in relational space can be brought in as a key non-human actor, (Latour, 2005) and focussing on one specific issue: children and young people with disabilities).

The other side of the street

It took a long time for us to get to the other side of the street, for it wasn't a question of crossing the road. It required moving from the ubiquitous state centred presumptions about the general and the specific which we all fall into – despite how critical we may be – and understanding more clearly the two different sides in the Friend model. Sometimes the two would connect and sometimes they would end up being so limited in their interconnections that it is almost as if they were worlds apart. We have learned that this is may be called a region or Jardim Ângela and Jardim São Luís may be called districts, but that they are much more like a maze of different heterogeneities shaped by different small communities, criss-crossed by hills, roads, and walkways going on and on with many different names.

Methodologically we had to do a lot of rethinking; it was slow and difficult. As academics, we are used to developing and evaluating programs of research with a broad objective, separated into sub objectives, which are then spread into projects, with goals all of which are well articulated in academic terms. In our case, the reverse is happening. The coherence is territorial. Bits of questions from place to place, with their different socialities and materialities (Law & Mol,1995). Each connects in

someway to the other but there is no hierarchy, just bits of connections. We do carry out interviews at times with recorders and informed consent, but most often grab the opportunity for conversations in the coffee break of the forums we take part in, or on visits to different service providers. We gather lots of documents, many of which we make public through our website so that other can read them. Sometimes events just happen – sometimes everyday and sometimes critical – and we have found that it is not the research that sets the pace, but the places themselves, all bits and pieces of them with their multiple connections and as we also found out, disconnections. We have no intention of doing ethnography and we are working much more in the applied social research tradition, where whatever can be found helps and conclusions need to be fed back and discussed. We have also, to follow on from scholars working in the complexity field, learned to tell stories, leaning towards Rorty's literary tradition of redescribing events instead of looking for redemptive truth (Rorty s/d).

Here are two of many other tales that tend to confirm the dilemma of the specifics. The first is from a meeting in the very southern part of the region (the already mentioned *fundão*) where different groups were meeting at one of the few multipurpose schools that have a medium sized auditorium to discuss the tensions between housing and water management. The title was: "The waters and the community: what should we be doing". (The waters, plural, referred to the reservoir, the streams, the natural springs that are very visible in this part of M'Boi). In the morning there were presentations of some final year studies by students of architecture who had been working in the area and in the afternoon other experiences by local groups followed by a debate of actions. This has now become the Forum of the Waters (*O Forum das Aguas*). The second is a result of many different bits of conversation that came together over time following the publication of the current municipal governments plans to streamline the bus services. Both point to the need to rethink current approaches to the relationship between the general and the specific.

"The final year architecture students and their tutors started off their different presentations by first discussing the southern region of the city as a whole. This included the broad south zone on both sides of the reservoir and the rural area of its southern catchment zones. They emphasized the importance of the water catchment issues versus housing, as had the professor from the other university's water resources program who had talked before. They then, as they put it, scaled down to the M'Boi region running beside the reservoir on the west bank. It was a very good analysis with data and maps, but the maps looked like those of the municipal planners with linear parks running along the reservoir when everybody there knew that those

are areas currently being slowly invaded and the parks don't exist. They had picked up the issues of mobility but tended to see this as a question of getting people out of the region to work in the morning and back at the end of the day. It included using cable cars – echoes of Rio de Janeiro and Medellin – but they hadn't picked up everyday mobility in and around services, shops and schools. If you see something as a dormitory region you will treat it as a dormitory region, an empty territory that is only filled at night (echoes of Fritz Lang's Metropolis). Then they moved again to little pieces of neighbourhoods with a few streets, different houses mapped out, with streams and what few green mini-areas existed, or at least mini-squares. Then they moved to their individual projects of specific individual installations and it seemed like the rest suddenly all faded away into a background blur. I turned to a colleague who said, why didn't they start with the little pieces of neighbourhoods as did the architects from the "cities in movement" group who were working on the importance of the walkways and stairways that go up and down the hills and which people use as a way of cutting kilometres off their routes to the buses along the roads that zigzag up the hillside like a mini version of the roads up to an alpine pass." (Diary notes from an open forum meeting on housing and the water held in the southern part of Jardim Angela (PKS. May, 2017)

The municipal government has developed a plan to take the bus conductors off the buses and leave them with just the driver. After all nearly everybody uses the plastic rechargeable tickets and the turnstile ticket gates have electric card readers. This is a discussion that started probably in the Secretary of Finance, or in the discussion about the new bus contracts and also possibly with the bus companies. It may have also found its way through those who use buses in the central region especially during the less busy part of the day when the bus conductor, sitting in his or her seat by the turnstile doesn't seem to do anything. There are probably also maps, spread sheets on costs and other bits of arguments. In M'Boi in the discussions in intervals, in eventual conversations, the discussions with women of all ages about mobility, including the students from the local universities and the FGV, the discussion is different. The conductor provides safety and security. At night on the long BRT bi-articulated buses, the women stay close to his chair to avoid sexual advances; the conductor knows where to get off when you are looking for somewhere you haven't been before; you can also chat to them, say good morning, thank you; they make the signal to the driver to let you get off at the entry door if you are elderly or have children and bags and don't want to cross the turnstile; they also let people without a ticket or money get on through the back door where there is more room; a whole host of little bits of daily negotiation. Indeed it is very difficult to talk about the buses in São Paulo without the turnstile and without its faithful companion, the conductor. (PKS, notebook, April, 2017.)

Heterogeneous networks of humans and non humans and a flat social

As pointed out at the beginning there are a number of lines that can be taken as a result of our work to date. We can fall back into a comfortable position and say as democracy strengthens it will work itself out somehow with better management coordination. Or we can say that there is a role for the general, but only after the specifics and join the pressure for local neighbourhood plans. The third is to say it's all about places and some are connected and some are not; there is nothing but places, different places, all of them specifics. This third position is what Latour, 1996 referred to as the flat social.

“If you set yourself the task of following practices, objects and instruments, you never again cross that abrupt threshold that should appear, according to earlier theory, between the level of “face-to-face” interaction and that of social structure; between the “micro” and the “macro”. [.....] Social worlds remain flat at all points, without there being any folding that might permit a passage from the “micro” to the “macro”. For example the traffic control room for Paris buses does indeed dominate the multiplicity of buses, but it would not know how to constitute a structure “above” the interactions of the bus drivers. It is added on to those interactions. The old difference of levels comes merely from overlooking the material connections that permit one place to be linked to others and from belief in purely face-to-face interactions.” (Latour 1996, p. 240)

To Latour’s practices, objects and instruments we could add the different social languages that connect and disconnect the bus drivers and the traffic control room; or in our two examples the architects and the local community, or the city transport planners and the women of M’Boi. The local community of the “fundão” must wait to hear about the importance of various levels of general before they get to their specific street and find themselves powerless to do anything. How should they talk to the architectural students? There is connection but it is far from democratic in result, even though it may be in intention. Somebody, somewhere will take a decision about the bus conductors and maybe there will be protests and issues will get raised and maybe things will stop; without anybody really understanding the other; because transport planners are often men and the engineers who design buses are also nearly always men, or study in universities dominated by men and “everybody knows” what a BRT bi-articulated bus looks like. But if you are one metre fifty woman, the grab rails on the bus designed for a one metre eighty man are not the best ways of maintaining yourself upright in a dignified position and having large areas for people to stand and push into one another can become highly problematic. The dynamics of different public action languages crisscross these different places in different ways. As pointed out at the beginning of the paper, our conclusions from the Urban Research Station may seem a bit to stark for many other urban settings but, perhaps they suggest that it is time to rethink our approaches to how we go about democratically governing public affairs in a world of specifics.

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