

# UC Berkeley

## UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

### Title

"Come to the Street!": Urban Protest, Brazil 2013

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7x14t8n5>

### Journal

Anthropological Quarterly, 87(3)

### ISSN

0003-5491

### Author

Holston, James

### Publication Date

2014

### DOI

10.1353/anq.2014.0047

Peer reviewed

# “Come to the Street!”: Urban Protest, Brazil 2013

James Holston, *University of California, Berkeley*

When street demonstrations overtook Brazilian cities in June, critics from Left to Right were quick to assert what they were not: they were not organized by recognizable, tried-and-true forms of social protest (social movements, political parties, labor unions, churches, professional associations, human rights groups, NGOs); they were leaderless; they lacked political articulation; they had no consolidated agenda; they refused the Press; they disdained elected politicians and rejected a decade of ruling Workers' Party (PT) megapublicity about Brazilian successes. In short, they were splintered, anarchic, unrepresentative, unverifiable, ungrateful, and apolitical. Yet, by mid-June, more than a million people were participating in street demonstrations, clearly mobilized by something rather than nothing. Their sustained force rendered the regularly-consulted media pundits, politicians, and political scientists, usually so confident, shocked if not clueless. Every day and night massive numbers of citizens in all of Brazil's major cities and many smaller ones accepted the riotous invitation “*Vem pra rua!*” (Come to the street!) that was distributed through social media, held high on cardboard posters, and stamped on t-shirts (Figure 1). Often emblazoned on a clenched fist, the invitation became a hortatory “take the street” that individuals felt compelled to extend and multitudes to heed.

Given this massive response, the call for insurgence, though suddenly answered, could only have developed out of a deep popular sense of what and how to protest. To find this “sense of the people,” one needs to



Figure 1: “Come to the street!” São Paulo, June 17, 2013.

look at the street itself as the domain of urban insurgency. As in Occupy and Indignado movements elsewhere, the Brazilian protesters voiced their grievances under a tide of posters, overwhelmingly handwritten and individually carried, rather than collective banners or flags of political parties (the latter often aggressively repressed by the protestors themselves). The initial spark was a 20-cent fare increase (approximately \$0.10 USD) for public buses in a number of cities. The Movimento Passe Livre (the Free Fare Movement, MPL) called for a protest march in São Paulo on June 6, 2013. Founded in 2003 to challenge a fare increase in Salvador, Bahia, MPL has ever since demanded that public transportation be considered a fundamental constitutional right, campaigned for massive investments, and developed economic models to justify its battle cry—*“tarifa zero”* or “zero fare”—as a radical measure to address Brazil’s public transportation nightmare.

The first march in São Paulo mobilized around 6,000 protestors focused on public transportation. Their marching chant was “if the fare doesn’t go down, the city will stop” (which rhymes in Portuguese and challenges the famous slogan “São Paulo never stops”). By the sixth march on June 20, many cities including São Paulo had indeed stopped, as a million and more people took to the streets of Brazil to publicize their revulsion at current conditions (Figure 2). Many were moved initially to protest the

egregious police violence against demonstrators in São Paulo. By mid-June, their anger had mushroomed far beyond “20 cents” to target a hive of issues displayed individually, brilliantly, countless on posters: “stop police violence; urban mobility is a right; a teacher is worth more than [soccer star] Neymar; if there is money for the World Cup, there is money for health and education; housing is a right—stop evictions; the vandals are the politicians; freedom of expression; say no to the ‘gay cure’; justice delayed is justice denied; where is Amarildo? [who disappeared while in police custody]; and so on and on. Transportation, infrastructure, health, education, housing, women-gay-indigenous-black-citizen rights, corruption, political reform (parties, elections, congress), justice, security, environment, specific legislation, energy (nuclear, hydro, oil), and violence.

Many posters advanced moral positions. Some appealed to principles such as “for a life without turnstiles; ideas are more lethal than guns; don’t accept what bothers you.” Others used comparison to argue about acceptable standards of urban life. The June 2013 protests occurred during the FIFA Confederations Cup, an international soccer competition and run-up to the World Cup which Brazil hosted during the summer of 2014. Given that Brazil is obsessed with soccer and that its national team played brilliantly and won the Confederations Cup, it was truly extraordinary that the protests not only shifted attention away from the matches but also used the games to make points of negative comparison, seething with



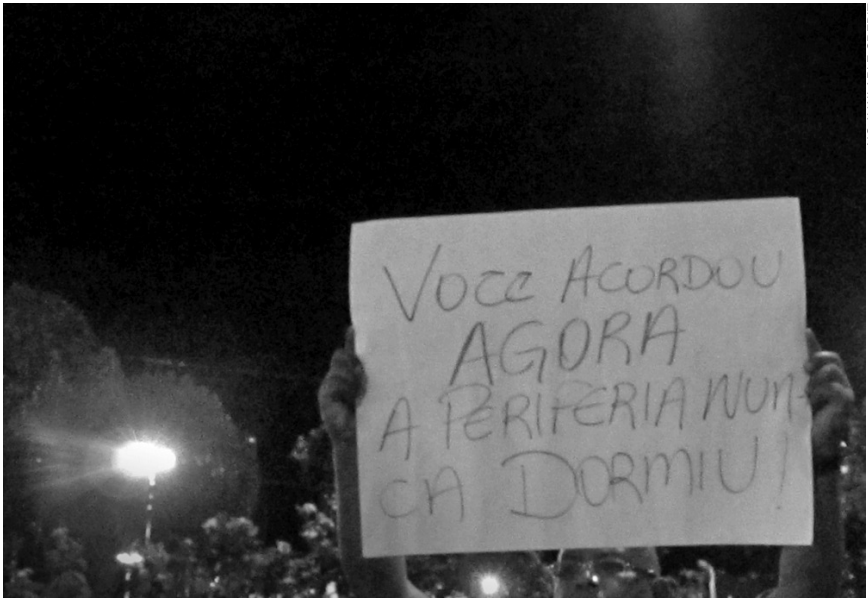
Figure 2: Mass protest. Recife, June 2013.

SOURCE: FLICKR.COM, PHOTO BY SEMILLA LUIZ

anger about misplaced resources and corruption: "billions for stadiums, nothing for [health, education, translation, housing, etc.]; international standards of health care for FIFA athletes but not for Brazilians."

A remarkable aspect of the street demonstrations was that protestors of all classes came together around many common issues. This is not to say that class-based friction was absent, as I discuss in a moment. It is rather to observe that commentators from Left to Right initially missed the production of a new body politic of multiple socio-economic affiliation because they claimed that protestors were overwhelmingly "middle class." As evidence, they pointed to the ubiquitous use of smartphones during the demonstrations to text, post, tweet, photograph, and video, assuming that only members of the middle class have them. While probably true just a year ago, smartphone use is no longer a reliable indicator of class because the phone market changes so quickly. Among residents I worked with in July in the decidedly non-middle class favela of Maré in Rio de Janeiro, for example, just about everyone had a cell phone on a prepaid account. Of these, I was surprised to find that around 30 to 40 percent had smartphones or tablets. Some had them for show and ease of texting, but never used them to access the Internet. However, many others connected to the Internet, paying a daily fee of 50 Brazilian cents that recently became available. Thus, smartphone use is no longer a reliable indicator of class.

My own sense is that residents of the lower-class peripheries had a strong and, at times, specifically provocative presence in the demonstrations throughout June 2013, though I cannot put numbers to class participation. This assessment is based on my work in Rio, on the research of Teresa Caldeira in São Paulo,<sup>1</sup> and on three kinds of class confrontation that happened during the protests and appeared repeatedly as contrasting images in photographs, videos, and posts about them. One image portrays a person (deemed middle-class by formulaic associations of dress and physiognomy) carrying a poster that says, "Brazil [or, the giant] has awoken." Juxtaposed to it is an image of another person who carries a sign that refutes this claim directly by asserting, "You woke up now. The periphery never slept" (Figure 3).<sup>2</sup> In another set of images, a banner reads, "It's not about 20 cents, it's about rights." Juxtaposed to it is the sign "it's the fucking 20 cents damn it" (*É os 20 centavos pôrra*), carried aloft by an enraged (often brown) body. It is difficult to make class, race, and space correlations on the fly in Brazil, but not impossible. The third set of images compares exceptional police violence against middle-class



NO AVAILABLE CREDIT

Figure 3: “You woke up now. The periphery never slept.” São Paulo, June 2013.

demonstrators—the use of pepper spray and rubber bullets especially—and everyday police violence in the peripheries: “Why do rubber bullets against white skin outrage more than real bullets that kill black people everyday.” It is also the case that many posters were lettered in the “runic script” developed by São Paulo taggers, who overwhelmingly come from the peripheries and who have aggressively imposed their messages on the building skin of Brazilian city centers in recent years.

These images all point to the segregation between “center and periphery” (shifting and complex terms, to be sure) in urban Brazil that perdures, not only in terms of life chances and basic services but also in terms of knowledge. The upper classes in the center do not know what goes on in the peripheries that “have not been sleeping.” They do not know its cultural production (music, poetry, theater, design—except when imposed or commercialized), experience its intense sociality, suffer its violence, endure its infrastructure, or understand its life conditions. The lower-class demonstrators were telling the upper-class demonstrators as much in these dueling images of protest.

So why should they share demands? Why should residents of the peripheries who suffer the absurdities of public transportation every day

be joined in demanding "zero fare" by middle-class residents who use cars? A plausible explanation lies in the everyday bodily experience of the city itself: given the low quality of urban life in Brazil (which looks especially bad in the light of gigantic expenditures on sport stadiums), different classes of people suffer the city's injuries and indignities in their own ways, but that amounts to a discontent that is strongly shared. Commuting to work, periphery residents spend a shocking average of almost three hours a day packed like cattle in buses, vans, and trains that are always late because of snarled traffic. But residents who commute in cars are also stuck in traffic for hours. All are immobilized. With an average increase of 78 percent in the urban fleet of cars between 2001 and 2011 in Brazilian metropolitan regions—the result of Workers' Party (PT) emphasis on automobile production and consumption over investment in public transportation—city arteries are now clogged. Especially for young people of all classes, mobility has become not only a style of life and aspiration but also something of a right. The MPL understands this urban dilemma and states it clearly in one of their principal slogans: "A city only exists for those who move around it." Hence, "jump the turnstile" and "zero fare" are compelling for all protestors.

The middle classes may generally turn a blind eye to police violence in the peripheries, but when the police gassed, sprayed, and beat their own in the first June 2013 demonstrations, they poured into the streets to protest. All are victims. Given the wealth of Brazil, public education and health care are pathetically endowed, and the upper classes avoid them like the plague (as do the lower, if at all possible). But private education and health care now cost a fortune. All but the wealthiest one percent are squeezed. All pay the price of the unrelenting scandals of corruption that corrode the political system. Politicians of all parties thumb their noses at the public because they have effectively achieved impunity in a justice system that is obviously unjust. The PT spent a decade convincing Brazilians that consumption based on increased salaries and credit/debt is the mark of social progress and of the party's success in leading the nation to it. Few would say that they are not important factors. But consumer protection is ineffective and deeply frustrating. For example, cell phone service and Internet access—both now necessities of urban life—are exasperatingly unreliable for everyone everywhere. Moreover, while the national government focused on salary improvements and increased consumption as proof that Brazil has joined the league of middle-class nations and that periphery residents have

become “the new middle class,” Brazilians have their experiences of the city to show them that the actual quality of basic conditions does not correspond to the claim. In effect, the protests refuted this model of social development.

Hence, what brought people together was the general demand for a different kind of city, one free and just. Most important for mobilization, people understand the failure of urban conditions in terms of rights. That is, they share the sense that they have a right to better conditions of life which have not been realized; a right to the city that they have made and that they should

be able to live in ways worthy of their efforts; a right that has been violated. Hence, protestors of all kinds talked about rights of all kinds. The sum of this rights-talk was, moreover, something greater than a list of individual demands, as indicated by a poster at a street demonstration in mid-June 2013 that offered a more general assessment amid a sea of specific demands (Figure 4): “The class today is here. The subject? Citizenship.” It speaks to the discovery by a new generation of Brazilians of the city as the site of insurgence (the “here”) and of the life of its streets as the agenda of democratic citizenship (“the class”).

In this light, the June 2013 protests indicate the development, after a decade of patience with PT national government, of new forms of the movements of insurgent urban citizenship that transformed Brazil from the 1970s to the early 2000s.<sup>3</sup> These mobilizations were grounded in right-to-the-city demands that led to a global sense that all Brazilians have a right to rights; they created significant innovations in participatory democracy; and they brought the PT to national power in the 2003. They arose in the urban peripheries that working-class Brazilians began to build in the 1950s as they moved to cities. Excluded from urban centers, they were forced to build homes and neighborhoods for themselves in the hinterlands through

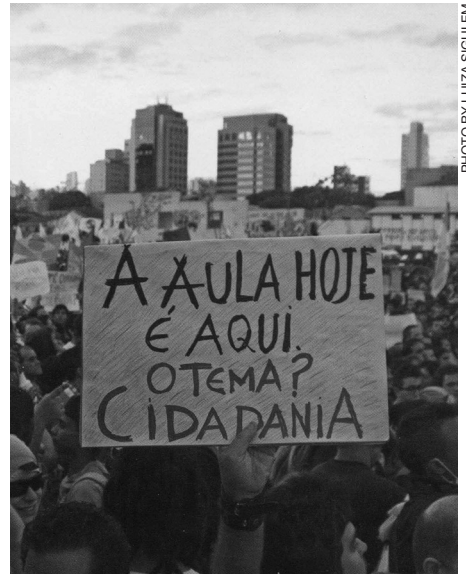


Figure 4: “The class today is here. The subject? Citizenship.” São Paulo, June 2013.



a process they called "autoconstruction." They did so on land which was available because it was occupied illegally in one form or another. This city-making through the appropriation of the very soil of the city entailed various kinds of autoconstruction: of houses, selves, communities, and institutions, as well as of new kinds of political relations, conceptions of rights, uses of law, and modes of governance. The charge of change went from local to national as the urban working classes gained political rights, became home and land owners, made law an asset, became modern consumers, instituted new state-citizen relations, pioneered legislation, and achieved personal competence *through their experiences of the city*. In short, they autoconstructed new formulations of citizenship that surged against the centuries-old and entrenched regime of a citizenship based on the distribution of legalized privileges and legitimated inequalities. In their struggles for housing, land, infrastructure, and dignity, residents transformed the idea of rights from one based on privilege to one based on their indispensable contributions to making the city and, by extension, the nation to which they claimed an equal share.

The June 2013 demonstrations remobilized the collective forces of this insurgent citizenship, reclaiming them for a new generation and for the contemporary streets of Brazilian cities. Social movements invariably demobilize. In the 2000s, we heard repeatedly that the citizen movements of the 1970s through 2000 had subsided, in part usurped by the national government and the NGOs they had helped to create. However, the important question is whether and to what extent movements can remobilize by drawing on collective foundations. Remobilization can happen in a neighborhood association when residents are faced with new threats of eviction. Organizations with greater geographical reach such as the MPL or the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem-Teto (Movement of Homeless Workers, MTST), the latter also important in the June protests, can also burst to life with popular support. The process is one in which some event or crisis re-energizes foundational concepts with new forms of expression, organization, and politics. The crisis of urban mobility (20 cents), police violence, and evictions (especially in Rio due to demolitions for World Cup and Olympic facilities) revived the conceptual foundations of insurgent citizenship as protestors demanded radical equality (zero fare) and right to the city. These propositions created a cascade of associations for equality, access, security, transparency, quality of urban life, and

liberty (freedom of movement and expression), and against privilege (corruption) and violence (police).

These conceptual foundations are precisely evident, re-articulated, in the following “forum” broadcast on the MPL website on July 1, 2013 under the heading “Action against evictions in the East Zone [of São Paulo].”<sup>4</sup> It is one example of the countless actions that made up the multitude of June protests:

Next Tuesday (July 2), residents of the East Zone are mobilizing against the evictions and criminal flooding in Jardim Pantanal, Chácara 3 Meninas, and Vila Itaim. The demonstration, called by the Movement Free Land and other groups in the region, will begin at 5:00pm...We are the ones who built the city and make it work every day. But today we don’t have the right to use [*usufruir*] it: the turnstile stops us from using transportation, evictions and floods take our houses. It is necessary to retake the city, and this means to fight not only for a transportation that is truly public—without fares or private initiative—but also for dignified conditions of residence! This is a single struggle, for the right to the city, and for this the MPL will once again be in the streets. AGAINST EVICTIONS, FOR ZERO FARE!

Both the conceptual elaboration and the language of equality, city-making, and right-to-the-city that the forum advances as legitimating its fight for dignity and against eviction come directly from the insurgent citizenship movements of the 1970s through 2000. Common to both are the following: 1) the focus on urban space, its conditions, qualities, development, access, and specifically the failures of governments at all levels to prevent the erosion of common goods and services in urban space, including housing, transportation, education, and health care; 2) protest over the failures of representative electoral democracy and attempts to invent new forms of more direct and participatory citizenship; 3) disgust with capitalism, with its commodification of money, nature, labor, and social goods and its reduction of people (especially youth) to insignificance and precariousness through neoliberal reforms; 4) outrage over government perpetration of violence, corruption, and injustice, with police violence often being the trigger that provokes the explosion of protest. In this light, it is crucial to know what is significantly new about these revolts that may contribute to the construction of a new urban commonwealth, a new citizenship.

First, we see that the protests articulate their arguments through new identity politics and through the medium of the Internet. These links refuel the stock of insurgent citizenship with new political resources. Particularly important is the digital mobilization of the collectives (*coletivos*) that today organize youth—especially students, but not only—around thematic issues such as black identity, LGBT, poetry, graffiti, justice, and environment. They may be place-based, but the place is the city as a whole and generally not specific neighborhoods (in terms of which the previous generation of insurgent urban citizens often organized). The collectives are relatively new as a mass phenomenon in Brazil and emphasize horizontal and leaderless association. They coalesced into a body politic during the June 2013 protests through the Internet, though without formal or hierarchical confederation. Through social media, the collectives gained a sense of commonwealth in united participation, and individuals affiliated with them became energized with a sense of greater legitimation as protestors. This same vitality also energized pre-existing organizations and social movements important in the protests, such as the MPL, MTST, and hip-hop.

When the sparks of zero fare and police violence lit up the Internet, the ignition expanded the concepts of equality and right-to-the-city dramatically by catalyzing new publics in common cause. In this manner, a new generation of Brazilians—we could describe them as habitual Internet denizens—is innovating its forms of *political expression* through use of the Internet, social media, and cell phones; through online forums and digitally-assembled face-to-face assemblies, forums, and marches; and through new styles of deliberation; all of which directly nourish a new cultural production of youth. Assemblies, marches, and multitudes do not require digital media. But social apps and digitalization contribute a new dimension to their democratic organization, namely, that of the promise—if not yet the realization—of new forms of direct democracy.

Emphasizing the expression of this promise—I'll come to substance in a moment—is crucial because the June 2013 protests revealed a nearly complete failure of interlocution within the existing scheme of representative politics. They showed that the social movement networks and the channels of communication that brought the national PT to power for more than a decade are arthritic. Bureaucratized, governmentalized, and nationalized, they are largely irrelevant to a younger generation for whom they have been replaced by networks of digital social media that the Party establishment does not understand and generally discounts. As a result,

the people's party was deaf to the people's rage and has been for some time. Hence, the protests denounced the collapse of vertical channels of communication with elected politicians. In doing so, they are also themselves enactments of new forms of horizontal communication via social media and digitally-driven forms of assembly, forum, and mass occupation of space. Especially important in this regard are the new forms of deliberation that the collectives (including the MPL) use in their assemblies to attempt non-hierarchical decision-making. These derive directly from the models of assembly deliberation developed in Occupy movements globally that are leaderless, open, and reiterative and that should be seen as experiments in direct democracy. As such, they consolidate a new and now proven resource of political organization in Brazil capable of both expressing and producing vast horizontal solidarities, if not yet conceptually or practically effective deliberation.

How soon will this mobilization fade; what will remain? To a significant degree, the answers depend on the institutions that these new expressions of and resources for insurgent citizenship may develop. Occupy, Indignados, M-15, Tahrir and Taksim Squares, and now Brazil all suggest both that these kinds of urban protest soon fade as street activity and that much remains to re-ignite another day. Both outcomes derive from a paradox that all these new forms of insurgent citizenship share: they demand that the political system produce substantial change, but reject existing politics and have thus far been unable to sustain the invention of new political institutions. Without the last, it would seem difficult either to maintain engagement or to develop and implement alternatives (proposals) for a different city/society.

What are the new organizations invented as a result of the June protests? In comparison with the many that Brazilians created during the insurgent period of 1970 to 2000, I would say few—though the horizon of invention is not featureless. The June protests showed that Brazilians massively reject political parties and their sponsored unions as interlocutors. Though energized by the protests, the MPL, MSTs, hip-hop, and the collectives predate June 2013 as organizations. The same is true for some professional associations that got involved, such as the Brazilian Order of Attorneys (OAB). The participatory innovations of the 1990s—namely, the municipal councils in health, education, and housing—had no presence in the June demonstrations. One could argue that their popular political efficacy has been eviscerated by being absorbed into

the national PT machine. Thus nationalized, they lost their place-based urgency and insurgency to address substantive local issues. Similarly the great participatory innovation of the 1970s and 1980s—the neighborhood associations in the peripheries—also had little organized presence in the protests, even though they remain effective locally.

In this sparse political landscape, one political lesson from the earlier period of innovation is that a new local institutionalization of collective action and organization is necessary. The protests reveal a basic problem of the political in contemporary Brazil: most protestors were *asking* the state to respond to their demands. Claims like "Citizens have a right to education" and "We want better healthcare" direct requests to the (national) state to provide more resources for public education and health. However, most people know that, for many reasons, the state is unlikely to do so in meaningful ways. Moreover, such demands offer no developed proposal, no autoconstructed alternative, that could replace the dilapidated present or oblige the state to negotiate for a new future. Hence, the state can and will deflect them. The MPL is the exception that demonstrates the point: it backed up its demand for zero fare with extensive research and well-argued proposals that obliged the state and its planners to concede. However, the MPL is in many ways a classic kind of urban political organization. It has a defined and even exclusive membership (in São Paulo, there were only 40 members at the time of the June protests); principles of organization; specific problems rooted in specific places and constituencies even if it also transcends them; deep research, knowledge, and expertise; distribution of roles; and so forth.

No other organization developed, no new group, collective, movement, or front emerged with a similar profile and/or efficacy, with two possible exceptions. The so-called anarco-punk Black Blocs are new to mass Brazilian protests. But their violent confrontations with police and their destruction of urban infrastructure quickly alienated most Brazilians, as the state successfully managed to brand them as "vandals." Granted that it is difficult to tell who is "really" Black Bloc because anyone dressing in black with a mask at a rally gets identified by the media and the police as such and anarchists are not likely to demur. Moreover, Black Bloc is much more of a tactic in which anyone can participate than a group. It may evolve into a vanguard with defined and constructive local projects—perhaps, like the Black Panthers without guns—but at this point it is too early to tell. Its fury remains destructive. Internet reporting

via cellphones—especially by the collective Media Ninja—managed to replace market-based news services as the primary source of information during the protests, particularly for video footage and live coverage. As a means to achieve greater freedom of expression and to force the established media to change, these alternatives are indeed interesting. The extent to which they might be able to articulate a new political agenda or an alternative politics remains to be seen.

It is also important to emphasize that many collectives used social media to mobilize assemblies during the protests at which they attempted new (Occupy-inspired) methods of deliberation as counters to the verticalized communication they denounce. In this regard, the most promising political innovations of the recent urban protests are those that attempt to create new conditions for direct democracy: the general assemblies and the use of digital social media to convene if not yet to run them. To evaluate them politically, we need to ask if the latter creates **associational forms** that support what may be called new digital (or net) memberships. A key question, it seems to me, is to ask whether these means are merely new “conveniences.” In other words, are they more like “kitchen helpers”—like the Cusinart that makes chopping lots of onions so much easier? Or does a digital method of peer-to-peer urbanism (Web 2.0) engage the stored streams of open city data (Web 1.0) to produce a new rhetoric of political life—rhetoric in the 5th century Athenian sense as the means to turn “idiot” citizens (*idiotai* were people viewed as absorbed in private life) into citizens who find self-fulfillment in the life of the polis.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to a rhetoric that converts private concerns into public, we must also consider the extent to which crowdsourcing direct democracy generates not only temporary, amorphous, festive, and/or mutinous crowds but also the sort of corporate, collective, and public bodies that sustain membership and therefore define a citizenship—that create a digital *demos* (as in *demokratia*) rather than merely a digital *hoi polloi* (the many). This is not to say that temporary, amorphous, festive, and/or mutinous crowds are unimportant in public life and its citizenship. However, without the formation of a more cohesive digital *demos*, digital *hoi polloi* are generally not sufficiently motivated to do things together to sustain the *development* of projects.

Thus, the digitally-mobilized June protests pose the (at this point, utopian) political project that digital social media may be a means to turn self-absorbed citizens into public and political ones. Will it make

possible effective city assemblies among citizens who are fed up with representative politics? Will mobile apps provide digital resources to organize horizontal solidarities and facilitate new forms of democratic argument and decision? Will they enable, in other words, direct democracy in mass society, producing new forms and agendas of city council? This is a compelling possibility, one previously considered unachievable given the scale of contemporary cities and societies. The June protests suggest that these new forms of insurgent citizenship are indeed effective for the mass mobilization and thematic elaboration that direct democracy at an urban scale would require. However, they also demonstrate the limitations of the current crop of social apps which are useful for calling an assembly around specific issues but not for structuring the deliberation itself. Nevertheless, if the street—in Brazil, Turkey, Madrid, Oakland, and elsewhere—has not yet developed digital forms of deliberation that could promote better democratic arguments, it has at least posed the problem for us to investigate. ■

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>See her essay at <http://kafila.org/2013/07/05/sao-paulo-the-city-and-its-protests-teresa-caldeira/>.

<sup>2</sup>I thank Teresa Caldeira for pointing out this juxtaposition to me.

<sup>3</sup>See Holston (2008).

<sup>4</sup>Accessed from <http://saopaulo.mpl.org.br/2013/07/01/ato-contra-remocoes-na-zona-leste/> on July 11, 2013.

<sup>5</sup>See Ober (1989).

**References:**

Holston, James. 2008. *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ober, Josiah. 1989. *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

**Foreign Language Translations:**

"Come to the Street!": Urban Protest, Brazil 2013

"Venham para a Rua!": Protestos Urbanos, Brasil 2013

"到街上去": 巴西2013年的都市抗争运动

«Выйди на улицу!»: Городской протест, Бразилия-2013.

“تعالوا للشارع!” الاحتجاج الحضري، البرازيل ٢٠١٣