Citizenship and the social in contemporary Brazil

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Along the three last decades, the notion of citizenship has become increasingly recurrent in the political vocabulary in Brazil as well as in other parts of Latin America and the world. In Latin America, its emergence has been linked to the experiences of social movements during the late 70's and 80's, reinforced by the efforts toward democratization, especially in those countries with authoritarian regimes.

In Brazil, increasingly adopted since the late 80's and 90's by popular movements, excluded sectors, trade unions and left parties as a central element in their political strategies, the notion of citizenship spread as a common reference among a variety of social movements such as those of women, blacks and ethnic minorities, homosexuals, retired and senior citizens, consumers, environmentalists, urban and rural workers and those organized around urban issues in the large cities, such as housing, health, education, unemployment, violence, etc. (Forewaker, 1995; Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar, 1998). These movements, organized around different demands, found in the reference to citizenship not only a useful tool in their specific struggles but also a powerful articulating link among them. The general claim for equal rights, embedded in the predominant conception of citizenship, was then extended and specified according to the different claims at stake. As part of this process of redefining citizenship, a strong emphasis was put on its cultural dimension, incorporating contemporary concerns with subjectivities, identities and the right to difference. Thus, on the one hand, the building of a new citizenship was to be seen as reaching far beyond the acquisition of legal rights, requiring the constitution of active social subjects, defining what they consider to be their rights and struggling for their recognition. In addition, on the other hand, such a cultural emphasis asserted the need for a radical transformation of cultural practices that reproduce inequality and exclusion throughout society.

As a result of its growing influence, the notion of citizenship soon became an object of dispute. In the last decade it has been appropriated and re-signified by dominant sectors and the State to include a variety of meanings. Hence, under neo-liberal inspiration, citizenship began to be understood and promoted as a mere individual integration to the market. At the same time and as part of the same process of structural adjustments, consolidated rights are being progressively withdrawn from workers throughout Latin America. In a correlate development, philanthrophical projects from the so-called Third Sector, which convey their own
version of citizenship, have been expanding in numbers and scope, in an attempt to face poverty and exclusion.

Today the different dimensions of citizenship and the dispute among its various appropriations and definitions largely constitute the grounds of political struggle in Latin America. Such a dispute reflects the trajectory followed by the confrontation between a democratizing, participatory project of extension of citizenship and the neo-liberal offensive to curtail the possibilities it announced. In what follows I will examine this dispute and the different versions of citizenship as they have emerged in the Brazilian context of the last decades.

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The process of democratic construction in Brazil faces today an important dilemma whose roots are to be found in a *perverse confluence* of two different processes, linked to two different political projects.¹ On the one hand, a process of enlargement of democracy, which expresses itself in the creation of public spaces and the increasing participation of civil society in the discussion and decision-making processes, related to public issues and policies. The formal landmark of this process is the Constitution of 1988², which consecrated the principle of the participation of civil society and extended rights. The main forces behind this process share a participatory project constructed since the 1980's around the redefined notion of citizenship mentioned above and the deepening of democracy. Such a project emerged from the struggle against the military regime led by sectors of civil society among which social movements played an important role. Two developments are relevant to our argument and should be mentioned here. First, the reestablishment of formal democracy, with free elections and party reorganization, made possible for this project, which had been configured inside civil society and which guide the political practice of several of its sectors, to be

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¹. With different degrees of intensity, considering the different specific timings and modes of neo-liberal measures and democratizing processes, this scenario is clearly present in most Latin American countries today.

². The Brazilian Constitution of 1988, known as the “Citizen Constitution,” included mechanisms of direct and participatory democracy, among them the establishment of management councils for public policy, with memberships equally divided between civil society and government, at city, state, and federal levels to develop policies on issues related to health, children and adolescents, social services, women, etc.
taken into the realm of State power, at the level of the municipal and state executives and of legislatures, and, more recently, to the federal executive. Thus, the 1990s were the scene of numerous examples of this transit from civil society to the State. Second, during the 1990s the confrontation that had formerly characterized the relations between State and civil society has been largely replaced by a bet on the possibility of joint action between them. The possibility of such joint actions has to be understood within a context where the principle of participation of society became central as a distinguishing feature of this project, underlying the very effort to create public spaces.

On the other hand, with the election of Fernando Collor in 1989 and as part of the State strategy for the implementation of the neo-liberal adjustment, there was the emergence of the project of a minimal State\(^3\) that progressively exempts itself from its role as guarantor of rights through the shrinking of its social responsibilities and their transference to civil society. It is thus our argument that the last decade is marked by a **perverse confluence** between the participatory project and this neo-liberal conception. The perversity is located in the fact that, pointing in opposite and even antagonistic directions, both projects not only require an active, proactive civil society, but also coincide in the use of a number of common references. Notions such as citizenship, participation and civil society are central elements in both projects, in spite of the fact they are being used with very different meanings. This “coincidence” at the discursive level hides fundamental distinctions and divergences, resulting in their obscuring through a common vocabulary and institutional mechanisms that present a significant although apparent similarity. Through a set of symbolic operations, or discursive shifts, marked by a common vocabulary which obscures divergences and contradictions, a displacement of meanings becomes effective. Hence, this perverse confluence increasingly installs an apparent homogeneity, concealing conflict and diluting the dispute between these two projects.

The implementation of the neo-liberal project which requires the shrinking of the social responsibilities of the State and their transference to civil society is

\(^3\) It should be clear that this State is only selectively minimal: it is minimal regarding social policies towards the poor but not with respect to the protection of capitalist interests at risk, as it is the case
determining a deep inflection in the political culture in Brazil as in most countries of Latin America. Less recognized and discussed than the restructuring of the State and of economy that has been resulting from this project, there is a redefinition of meanings in the cultural sphere that integrates the recent transformation of our countries. What is specific, perhaps, of the Brazilian case, is that that implementation confronts a consolidated participatory democratic project matured for more than 20 years. During that period it has been able to find significant support within a civil society which, differently from other countries, presents today an unquestionable complexity and density. It was through this support that such a project was able to inspire, as mentioned, the creation of democratizing participatory settings such as the Management Councils, Participatory Budgets, Sectorial Chambers, and a vast array of Fora, Conferences and other societal public spaces and articulations.

In other words, the neo-liberal project found in Brazil a relatively consolidated contender, evidently not hegemonic but able to constitute a field of dispute. The existence of this contender and this dispute determined, from our perspective, specific directions to the strategies and forms of action of the forces linked to that project. If these directions do not part from those adopted globally, they acquire their own specificity to the extent in which the neo-liberal project is forced to establish a ground for the interlocution - relações de sentido - with the adversary field. The need for this interlocution is accentuated within the public spaces, where these two projects meet face to face. Given the bet on the possibility of joint action between State and civil society, already mentioned, that determined what has been called the “institutional insertion” of social movements (Carvalho, 1997, GECD, 2000), a large part of the interlocution between the neo-liberal project that occupy most of the State apparatus and the participatory project takes place precisely through those sectors of civil society who engaged in such a betting and became active in the participatory settings and in joint actions with the State. That is to say, largely those sectors of civil society supportive of the participatory project.

The notion of citizenship offers perhaps the most dramatic case of this process of displacement of meanings. Dramatic, first, because it has been precisely through this notion that the participatory project had been able to obtain its most important
political and cultural gains, to the extent in which it has been able to produce an innovative definition of the contents of citizenship that has penetrated deeply the political and cultural scenario of Brazilian society (Dagnino, 1994, 1998). Second, dramatic because such a displacement is linked to the handling of what constitutes our most critical issue: inequality and poverty. The extent of the displacement of meaning of citizenship can be better understood if we examine briefly the recent history of this notion and the role it played in the democratization process in Brazil from the mid-70s and along the 1980s.

Citizenship and democratization

As social movements and other sectors of civil society appropriated the notion of citizenship as a political strategy (Wiener, 1992), the general demand for equal rights embedded in the predominant conception of citizenship has been extended and specified in accordance with the demands in question. A substantial part of the attraction of citizenship and of its core category of rights lies in the dual role it has been able to play in the debate among the various conceptions of democracy that characterize the contemporary political struggle in Latin America. On one hand, the struggle organized around the recognition and extension of rights has helped to make the argument for the expansion and deepening of democracy much more concrete. On the other hand, the reference to citizenship has provided common ground and an articulatory principle for an immense diversity of social movements that have adopted the language of rights as a way of expressing their demands that helped them escape fragmentation and isolation. Thus the building of citizenship has been seen as at once a general struggle--for the expansion of democracy--that was able to incorporate a plurality of demands and a set of particular struggles for rights (housing, education, health, etc.) whose success would expand democracy.

Citizenship has become a prominent notion because it has been recognized as a crucial weapon not only in the struggle against social and economic exclusion and inequality but also in the broadening of dominant conceptions of politics. Thus, the redefinition of citizenship undertaken by social movements sectors in Latin America through their concrete struggles for a deepening of democracy has aimed, in the first place, to confront the existing definition of the political arena - its participants, its institutions, its processes, its agenda, and its scope (Alvarez,
Dagnino, and Escobar, 1998). Adopting as its point of departure the conception of a right to have rights, this redefinition has supported the emergence of new social subjects actively identifying what they consider their rights and struggling for their recognition. In contrast to previous conceptions of citizenship as a strategy of the dominant classes and the state for the gradual and limited political incorporation of excluded sectors with the aim of greater social integration or as a legal and political condition necessary for the establishment of capitalism, this is a conception of noncitizens, of the excluded—a citizenship “from below,”

The concern of Brazilian social movements with the need to affirm a right to have rights is clearly related to extreme levels of poverty and exclusion but also to the pervasive social authoritarianism that presides the unequal and hierarchical organization of social relations as a whole. Class, race and gender differences constitute the main bases for a social classification which has historically pervaded our cultures, establishing different categories of people hierarchically disposed in their respective "places" in society. Thus, for excluded sectors, the perception of the political relevance of cultural meanings embedded in social practices is part of their daily life. As part of the authoritarian, hierarchical social ordering of Latin American societies, to be poor means not only economic, material deprivation, but also to be submitted to cultural rules that convey a complete lack of recognition of poor people as subjects, bearers of rights. In what Telles (1994) called the incivility embedded in that tradition, poverty is a sign of inferiority, a way of being in which individuals become unable to exercise their rights. This cultural deprivation imposed by the absolute absence of rights—which ultimately expresses itself as a suppression of human dignity—becomes then constitutive of material deprivation and political exclusion.

The perception of this cultural social authoritarianism as a dimension of exclusion additional to economic inequality and political subordination constituted a significant element in the struggle to redefine citizenship. First, it made clear that the struggle for rights, for the right to have rights, had to be a political struggle against a pervasive culture of social authoritarianism, thus setting the grounds for the urban popular movements to establish a connection between culture and politics which became embedded in their collective action. The experience of the Assembléia do Povo (People’s Assembly), a favelado movement in Campinas,
state of S. Paulo, organized from 1979 to the early 80’s, shows this connection. At the very beginning of their struggle for the "right to the use of the land", favelados knew that they would have to struggle first for their very right to have rights. Thus, their first public initiative was to ask the media to publicize the results of their own survey of the favelas, in order to show the city that they were not idle people, marginals or prostitutes, as favelados were considered to be, but decent working citizens that therefore should be seen as bearers of rights. 4

Such a connection has been a fundamental element in establishing a common ground for articulation with other social movements—more obviously cultural, such as ethnic, women, gay, ecology and human rights movements—in the search for more egalitarian relations at all levels, helping to demarcate a distinctive, enlarged view of democracy. The reference to rights and citizenship grew to constitute the core of a common ethical-political field where a large part of those movements and other sectors of society were able to share their struggles and mutually reinforce them. For instance, the emergence of the “Sindicato Cidadão” (Citizen Trade Unions) in the early 90s indicates the recognition of that reference within the Brazilian labor movement (Rodrigues 1997), traditionally inclined to more strict class-based conceptions.

Secondly, that perception underlay a broadening of the scope of citizenship, whose meaning became far from restricted to the formal-legal acquisition of a set of rights, which would be limited to the political-judicial system. The struggle for citizenship was thus presented as a project for a new sociability: a more egalitarian format for social relations at all levels, new rules for living together in society (negotiation of conflicts, new sense of a public order, of public responsibility, a new social contract) and not only for the incorporation into the political system in the strict sense. A more egalitarian format for social relations at all levels implies the recognition of the other as a subject bearer of valid interests and of legitimate rights. It also implies the constitution of a public dimension of society where rights can be consolidated as public parameters for the interlocution, the debate and the negotiation of conflicts, making possible the reconfiguration of an ethical dimension

of social life. Such a project unsettles not only social authoritarianism as the basic mode of social ordering in Brazilian society but also more recent neo-liberal discourses which erect private interest as a measure for everything, hence obstructing the possibilities for an ethical dimension of social life (Telles, 1994).

Thirdly, as the notion of rights is no longer limited to legal provisions or the access to previously defined rights or the effective implementation of abstract, formal rights, it includes the invention/creation of new rights, which emerge from specific struggles and their concrete practices. In this sense, the very determination of the meaning of right and the assertion of something as a right are themselves objects of political struggle. The rights to autonomy over one’s own body, to environmental protection, to housing, are examples (intentionally very different) of this creation of new rights. In addition, this redefinition comes to include not only the right to equality, but also the right to difference, which specifies, deepens and broadens the right to equality.5

An additional important consequence of such a broadening in scope was that citizenship is no longer confined within the limits of the relationship with the State: the recognition of rights shall regulate not only the relationships between the State and the individual but it has to be established within society itself, as parameters presiding social relations at all levels. This may be more evident in the struggles of social movements such as, for instance, women, blacks or homosexuals since a significant part of their struggles is directed towards fighting discrimination and prejudice embedded within social relations they engage into in daily life. But it is also clear, as the Assembléia do Povo’s first public initiative shows, in popular movements whose more “material” claims such as housing, health, education, transportation, sewage, etc. are directed towards the State. The process of building citizenship as the affirmation and recognition of rights was seen as a process of transformation of practices rooted in the society as a whole. Such a political strategy implies a moral and intellectual reform: a process of social learning, of building up new kinds of social relations, which implies, on the one hand, obviously, the constituting of citizens as active social subjects. But, on the other hand, for society as a whole, it requires learning to live on different terms with these emergent citizens who refuse to remain in the places which were socially and

5 For a discussion on citizenship and the connections between the right to difference and the right to equality, see Dagnino, 1994a.
Participants of social movements, both of popular sectors, organized around claims such as housing, water, sewage, education and health, and those of a more wide character such as women, blacks or ecological movements have placed a crucial emphasis on the constitution of active social subjects, able to become political agents, as a central dimension of citizenship. In some definitions, sometimes citizenship is even thought of as consisting of this very process. Thus consciousness, agency and the capacity to struggle are seen by them as evidence of their citizenship, even if other rights are absent. Among 51 civil society activists we interviewed in Campinas, S. Paulo, in 1993, such a view was a distinctive feature in the answers of members of those movements and of workers’ unions, when contrasted with the views of members of middle class and entrepreneurs organizations. (Dagnino, Silva, Ferlim and Teixeira, 1998)

The role of the social movements of the 70’s and 80’s in the shaping of this redefinition of citizenship is obviously related to their own struggle and rooted in their practices. If, on the one hand, they were able to rely on the previous history of rights, ensured by the regulated citizenship, they reacted against the conception of the state and of power embedded in that history. They also reacted against the control and tutelage of the political organization of popular sectors by the State, political parties and politicians that had for so long sustained populism. They reacted as well against the favor relations that permeate their clientelistic relations with these political actors, which outlive populism as the predominant political arrangement in the relations between the civil and the political society. The adoption of a redefined conception of rights and citizenship expressed a reaction against previous notions of rights as favors and/or objects of bargain with the powerful (citizenship by concession (cidania concedida) Salles, 1994)). In this sense, the struggle for rights, also influenced by the human rights movements that emerged in the 70s in the struggle against the authoritarian military regime, carried

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6 Answering the same question ("Why do you consider yourself a citizen?") the latter emphasized the fact that they “fulfill their duties” and “have rights”, whereas the middle class activists stressed their “position in society”, derived from their professional activities, as indicators of citizenship. It is also interesting that a large majority of both participants of social movements of both kinds and workers’ unions’ members does not consider themselves treated as citizens, while the proportion is inverted in the answers of the two other sectors interviewed. (Dagnino, Silva, Ferlim and Teixeira, 1998: 40-41)

7 It is not by chance that Getúlio Vargas, also known as “the Father of the Poor”, is still a powerful positive reference in the memory of Brazilian popular sectors.
with itself not only claims for equality but the negation of a dominant political culture deeply rooted in society as a whole.

The rise of the neo-liberal versions of citizenship

The dissemination of this notion of citizenship and its correlate, the participation of civil society as a mechanism for the extension of citizenship, the two central principles in the democratic participatory project, achieved its formal recognition in the 1988 Constitution. In the next year, Collor’s election marked the beginnings of the implementation of the neo liberal project, which reached its peak during Cardoso’s government, from 1994 to 2002, and installed what we have been referring to as a perverse confluence between the two projects in dispute.

A recent research focusing on several spaces of participation of civil society existing today in Brazil found more than a few examples of this perverse confluence (Dagnino 2002, 2004). It can be seen in the frustration of many representatives of civil society within the Conselhos Gestores, and members of social movements and non-governmental organizations who have engaged in partnerships with State sectors for the implementation of public policies. Emphatically called on to participate under very familiar appeals, such as the importance of the participation of civil society and the extension of citizenship, these people soon found out that their role was very different from what they have expected, as different was the meaning now assigned to those familiar appeals.

A particularly important ingredient in such perverse confluence is precisely the notion of citizenship, now redefined again through a series of discursive shifts to make it suitable to its new use by neo-liberal forces. This new redefinition, as mentioned above, is part of the struggle between different political projects and attests the symbolical power of citizenship and the mobilizing capacity it has demonstrated in organizing subaltern sectors around democratizing projects. The need to neutralize the features assumed by citizenship, while trying to retain its symbolical power, made its appropriation by neo-liberal forces necessary.

Neo-liberal redefinitions of citizenship rely upon a set of basic procedures. Some of them recuperate the traditional liberal conception of citizenship; others are innovative and address new elements of the contemporary political and social
configurations in Latin America. First, there is a reduction of the collective meaning entailed in the social movements’ redefinition of citizenship to a strictly individualistic understanding of it. Second, neo-liberal discourses establish an alluring connection between citizenship and the market. To be a citizen becomes the individual integration to the market, as a consumer and as a producer. This seems to be the basic principle subjacent to a vast number of projects to enable people to “acquire citizenship”, that is to say, to learn how to initiate micro-enterprises, how to become qualified for the few jobs still being offered, etc. In a context where the State progressively withdraws from its role as guarantor of rights, the market is offered as a surrogate instance of citizenship.

It is well-known the current process of elimination of social and labor rights, in the name of a free negotiation between workers and employers, “flexibility” of labor, etc. Hence, social rights ensured in the Brazilian Constitution since the 40s e reaffirmed in 1988, for example, are now being eliminated under the rationale that they constitute obstacles to the free operation of the dynamics of the market and therefore restrictive to economic development and modernization. Such rationale, in addition, transforms bearers of rights/citizens in the new villains of the nation, privileged enemies of political reforms intended to shrink State responsibilities. Formerly ensured rights such as the access to education, health, and even to security, are increasingly transformed in commodities that should be acquired in the market by those who can afford it.

In this sense, a peculiar inversion is taking place: the recognition of rights seen in the recent past as an indicator of modernity is becoming a symbol of "backwardness", an “anachronism” which hinders the modernizing potential of the market (Telles, 2002). Here we find a decisive legitimating factor of the conception of the market as a surrogate instance of citizenship, as the market becomes the incarnation of modernizing virtues and the sole route for the Latin American dream: the inclusion into the First World.

An additional procedure in the building of neo-liberal versions of citizenship is evident in what constitutes a privileged target of democratizing projects: the formulation of social policies towards poverty and inequality. A large part of the struggles organized around the demand for equal rights and the extension of citizenship have focused on the definition of such social policies. In addition, and consequently, the participation of social movements and other sectors of civil society
has been a fundamental claim in the struggles for citizenship, in the hope it would contribute to the formulation of social policies directed towards the ensuring of universal rights to all citizens. With the advancement of the neo-liberal project and the reduction in the role of the State, those social policies are increasingly formulated as strictly emergency efforts directed to certain specific sectors of society whose conditions for survival are at extreme risk. The targets of these policies are not seen as citizens entitled to rights but as “needy” (carentes) human beings to be contemplated by public or private charity. Confronted with this view, reinforced by the shortage of public resources destined to those policies and by the gravity and urgency of the situation to be dealt with, many sectors of civil society, called to participate in the name of the “building of citizenship”, often subordinate their own universalistic views of rights and surrender to the concrete and immediate possibility of helping a handful of destitute.

A number of consequences derive from this. All of them have important impacts on the dispute between the different conceptions of citizenship at stake. A first consequence relates to a displacement of issues such as poverty and inequality: as they are dealt with strictly as issues of technical or philanthropical management, poverty and inequality are being withdrawn from the public (political) arena and from its proper domain, that of justice, equality and citizenship, and reduced to a problem of ensuring minimal conditions for survival.

Moreover, the solution of such a problem is presented as a moral duty of every individual in society. Thus, the idea of a collective solidarity that underlies the classical reference to rights and citizenship is now being replaced by an understanding of solidarity as a strictly moral private responsibility. It is through this understanding of solidarity that civil society is being urged to engage in voluntary work and philanthropical actions, under the appeal to a re-signified notion of citizenship now embodied in this particular understanding of solidarity. It is not by chance that voluntary work is becoming the favorite hobby of the Brazilian middle class, when not one additional therapeutic alternative for individual afflictions.\(^8\)

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\(^8\) An analysis of the underlying motivations of voluntary work in Brazil would probably reinforce our argument and show the emergence of privatist, individualist and self-centered conceptions which tend to orient the practice of voluntary work all over the world. See Leslie Hustinx e Frans Lammertyn (2003).
This understanding of citizenship is dominant in the action of entrepreneurial foundations, the so-called Third Sector, which multiplied their numbers in countries like Brazil over the past decade. Characterized by a constitutive ambiguity between market-oriented interests to maximize their profits through their public image and what is referred to as a “social responsibility”, these foundations massively adopted a discourse of citizenship rooted in a moral individual solidarity. As in State sectors occupied by neo-liberal forces, such a discourse is marked by the absence of any reference to universal rights or to the political debate on the causes of poverty and inequality.

Such a re-signification of citizenship and solidarity block their political dimension and erodes the references to a public responsibility and a public interest, so hardly built through the democratizing struggles of our recent past. As the targeted distribution of social services and benefits tends to occupy the place formerly held by rights and citizenship, the claim for rights is obstructed since there are no institutional channels for it as that distribution depends only on the good will and competence of the involved sectors. Even more dramatic, the very formulation of rights, their enunciation as a public question, becomes increasingly unable to be realized (Telles 2001). The symbolic efficacy of rights in the building of an egalitarian society is thus being dismissed and the consequence has been a reinforcement of an already powerful privatism as the dominant code orienting social relations.

A second set of consequences relates to the idea of participation of civil society, which has constituted the core of the democratizing project held by social movements and progressive sectors of society. At its ascending period in Brazil, this project has been able to ensure the creation of public spaces for citizen participation, including those destined to the formulation of public policies. With the advancement of neo-liberal forces and as part of the political dispute between these different projects, the notion of participation has also been appropriated and re-signified. As mentioned before, in the perverse confluence of these projects, neo-liberal forces are requiring the participation of civil society. However, such participation increasingly means for the organizations of civil society to assume functions and responsibilities restricted to the implementation and execution of these policies, providing services formerly considered duties of the State itself. The effective sharing of the power of decision, i.e. a full exercise of citizenship as
conceived of by democratizing forces, is being carried out in most of the cases within the limits of a framework presided by the dominant neo-liberal project. The role of the so-called “social organizations”, the denomination used in the State Reform implemented by then Minister Bresser Pereira in 1995 to designate the participation of civil society in the formulation of public policies, is reduced to that function and clearly excluded from decisional power, reserved to the “strategic nucleus” of the State (Bresser Pereira, 1996).

The political meaning of participation is thus radically redefined and reduced to management. The managerial and entrepreneurial emphasis is imported from private administration to the realm of the State, with the consequent depoliticizing implications. Those meanings contradict the properly political content of participation as conceived by the democratic project, characterized by the objective of an effective sharing of power between State and civil society (Dagnino, 2002), through joint deliberation in the new public spaces created in the years following the 1988 Constitution.

The relations between State and NGOs appear to constitute an exemplary field of this perverse confluence. Endowed with technical competence and social insertion, "reliable" interlocutors among the various possible interlocutors in civil society, they are frequently seen as the ideal partners by sectors of the State engaged in transferring their responsibilities to the sphere of civil society or to the private sector. Paralleling this effort there is an additional governmental tendency towards the “criminalization” of social movements that remain combative and effectively articulated, such as, in Brazil, the Landless Movement (MST) and some trade unions. This selective operation, reinforced by the mass media and international financing agencies, is resulting in a growing identification between "civil society" and NGOs, where the meaning of the expression “civil society” is more and more restricted to designating only these organizations, when not just as a mere synonym to "Third Sector". Under neo liberal hegemony, “civil society” has been thus reduced to those sectors that have an “acceptable” behavior according to Government standards, therefore limited to what an analyst referred to as “the five-star civil society” (Silva, 2001).

These attempts to reconfigure civil society and to redefine participation are intimately connected to emerging versions of neo-liberal citizenship. Their central
focus seems to be the de-politicization of these two notions, which have been central references in the democratizing struggle for the extension of citizenship. The effort towards such de-politicization represent a counteroffensive to the advances in the redefinition of the political arena, which in Latin America have derived from that struggle. The emergence of the notion of a "Third Sector" (the others being the State and the Market) as a surrogate for civil society is particularly expressive of this attempt to implement a "minimalist" conception of politics and to nullify the extension of public spaces of political deliberation opened up by democratizing struggles.

The scenario produced by that perverse confluence composes today a “mined field”, where sectors of civil society, including NGOs not supportive of the project of the minimal State, feel deceived when, motivated by an apparently shared discourse of citizenship, they get involved in joint actions with State sectors committed to that project. Several social movements participating in some of the public spaces destined to formulating public policies share the same reaction. Some of them define this situation as a dilemma and several consider the possibility of rejecting altogether any further projects of joint action or being extremely selective and careful with respect to the correlation of forces present within these spaces and the concrete possibilities opened by them (Dagnino 2002).

Under an apparent homogeneity of discourse, what is at stake in these spaces is the advancement or retreat of very different political projects and conceptions of citizenship in dispute.

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