



Revealing Curitiba's flawed sustainability: How discourse can prevent institutional change



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 October 2015

Received in revised form

8 December 2015

Accepted 10 December 2015

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Urban sustainability

City planning

Discursive institutionalism

Institutional change

Brazil

ABSTRACT

The city of Curitiba, Brazil, is considered an exceptional model of sustainable urban planning. It has received praise for its invention of the Bus Rapid Transit System and numerous awards identify Curitiba as one of the world's greenest cities. Controversial elements have, however, been left out of this hegemonic city discourse, along with inevitable new challenges. The aim of this article is two-fold. First, we assess whether Curitiba is living up to its reputation as a leading sustainable city by analyzing three areas of urban sustainable development: green spaces, water bodies and public transportation. We show how Curitiba experiences problems ranging from social exclusion resulting from green space policies, to polluted water bodies and hampered planning in the area of public transportation. Second, we examine how the Curitiba discourse as a leading sustainable city is able to endure in this changed material context. We demonstrate how this hegemonic discourse prevents institutional transformations: the discourse becomes reproduced by powerful networks and propaganda, masking new unsustainable realities and by the same token preventing fast and successful institutional renewal.

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1. Introduction

Curitiba, capital of the southern Brazilian state of Paraná, is recognized regionally, nationally and internationally as an exceptional model of sustainable city planning: an “archetype of urban development, the ideal image of what a livable city should be” (Macedo, 2004: 537). Such storylines, illustrating its sparkling trajectory, are reiterated as hymns of praise and translated into epithets by itself and by others (Editorial, 2011; Marchiori, 2014). Curitiba has been referred to as, among others, the ecological/green capital, social capital, model city, the city for all, and the human city.

Its refined status is also reflected in at least 53 awards over the last 25 years, the majority acknowledging environmental and broader sustainable development efforts (IPPUC, 2015a). Among these are: the *Global Sustainable City Award 2010*, recognizing Curitiba's “maturity in their understanding of sustainable city development” (Globe Award, 2015); the *Global Green City Award*

2012, organized by the Global Forum on Human Settlements and supported by the United Nations Environment Program; and the *World Habitat Award* for Urban Management, to which it was a winner and a finalist on different occasions. These awards have praised Curitiba on a number of topics, ranging from social housing and policy efforts to create and protect green spaces for a livable city, to innovations in public transport and waste management.

The 1970s was a critical decade influencing Curitiba's city planning trajectory. The Curitiba Master Plan was implemented, after years of discussions and research carried out within the Curitiba Research and Urban Planning Institute (IPPUC, hereafter the Planning Institute), resulting in major infrastructural works. Transportation and land use were jointly-addressed, changing the city's growth orientation from radial to linear: mixed-use arterial corridors concentrated settlement along structural axes (see Fig. 5), reducing overpopulation in the city center. The planning structure also prescribed areas exclusively for pedestrians, the creation of public green spaces and renewed the urban landscape to support social projects. After the 1970s though, a different urbanism was pursued, with isolated projects emphasizing form over function. This second wave saw several city landmarks constructed (e.g. Botanical Garden, Wire Opera House) contributing to local identity, attractiveness and publicity.

However, while Curitiba has earned its reputation through these

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developments, they are handpicked aspects of a wider reality: controversial elements, along in which new challenges were left out of the hegemonic city discourse. From the 1970s through the 1990s, Curitiba and its wider metropolitan region underwent one of the highest population growth rates in Brazil (COMEC, 2015). In 2015 nearly 1.8 million inhabitants reside in Curitiba; this doubles when its wider metropolitan region is included. Curitiba thus went from being a provincial mid-sized city in the 1960s (circa 360,000 inhabitants) to the eighth largest municipality in Brazil. It also has the highest rate of motorized vehicles per capita in the country and an alarming projection states that in five years its traffic will collapse if changes are not made (Prates, 2014; Santana, 2014).

Is Curitiba still the prototypical exception of sustainable city development, specially chosen by those eager to find flawless role models? Hence our first question asks whether Curitiba still lives up to its reputation. To explore this, we investigate three areas linked to sustainable city planning in Curitiba: green space, water bodies and public transportation. Our analysis shows that while Curitiba's image as a sustainable city endures, its material reality of sustainability has changed. Secondly, we question how Curitiba has been able to maintain its reputation as a role-model city, while its material reality has diverted from its sustainability reputation. To answer this, we engage discursive institutionalism, which centers on the role of ideas and discourse to account for institutional flux and change (Schmidt, 2010, 2008).

The article is divided into four sections. First, as a theoretical perspective, we engage with the school of discursive institutionalism and discuss how discourses can trigger and obstruct institutional change. Second, we assess three key domains of urban sustainable development in Curitiba. Third, through the lens of discursive institutionalism, we discuss how Curitiba has maintained its sustainable city image, while in reality its efforts towards achieving this are deteriorating. It closes with conclusions.

1.1. Institutionalism and social change

The central argument we develop in this article is that Curitiba's image as 'a role model sustainable city' has become so powerful and widely accepted, that the city has largely lost grip of its material reality. As we will demonstrate in the next section, Curitiba's performance on sustainable development is becoming increasingly flawed. Meanwhile, Curitiba's sustainable city discourse continues to become reproduced. To explain why Curitiba and the international community have not yet acknowledged the deteriorating state of Curitiba's performance on sustainability and taken action to address the problems at hand, we draw on the school of discursive institutionalism to show how ideas and discourse about Curitiba can prevent institutional change.

In the social science literature, institutionalism is increasingly used as a perspective or theoretical lens to study continuity and change in social systems. Usually three so-called neo-institutionalist schools of thought are distinguished (Schmidt, 2010:2): rational choice institutionalism focusing on the logic of calculation, historical institutionalism focusing on the logic of path-dependency, and sociological institutionalism focusing on the logic of appropriateness of socially-constructed and culturally defined norms and rules. While there are clear differences between the three, they share a focus on institutions that constrain change and explain continuity in social systems; meanwhile change is primarily seen as exogenous, coming from outside these institutions. In the institutional domain of sustainable development, such an exogenously triggered change could entail, for example, environmental institutions facing budget cuts and structural reorganization due to an economic crisis (Mol, 2009).

More recently, a number of institutionalists have started to

explain the origin of, and shifts in, institutional change endogenously, concentrating especially on ideas and discourse. The argument is that institutions themselves are "the carriers of ideas or 'collective memories' which make them objects of trust or mistrust and changeable over time as actors' ideas and discourse about them change in tandem with changes in their performance" (Schmidt, 2010:9). Again applied to the case of sustainable development, this could imply, for example, environmental institutions obtaining a central role in urban planning because their underlying discourses and reproduced storylines provide policy-makers and politicians with the conviction that environmental policy-making is central to achieving urban sustainable development (e.g. Rana, 2009).

Scholars in this line come from various traditions, use distinct concepts, focus on different aspects (ideas, discourse, discursive practices) and use different labels (e.g. ideational turn, ideational institutionalism, constructivist institutionalism, discourse analysis, deliberative democracy, argumentative turn; e.g. Dryzek, 2000; Hay, 2006; Fisher, 2003; Blyth, 2002). Nevertheless, they are increasingly linked via a new fourth neo-institutionalist school: discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2010). Discursive institutionalism moves beyond the limits of the three other neo-institutionalisms by explaining change in modern institutions as being rooted in ideas, discourse and discursive practices endogenous to these institutions (e.g. Panizza & Miorelli, 2013; Schmidt, 2008). The analysis centers on the substantive content of normative and cognitive ideas, the representation of ideas through frames, narratives, collective memories, storylines and the like, as well as on the interactive, communicative and coordinating processes by which ideas are conveyed and exchanged through discourses, discursive practices and discursive communities. While highly varied, discursive institutionalism unites these by placing the role of ideas and discourse in politics central to provide an endogenous understanding of institutional change, rather than focusing on institutional continuity and constraints. It differs from the other three neo-institutionalisms in its definition of institutions, its object and logic of explanation, and in how it deals with continuity/change (Schmidt, 2010).

While discursive institutionalism brings refreshing insights and prevents us from interpreting institutions only in terms of continuity and persistence, or in terms of exogenous change, ideas and discourse do not necessarily have to be the origin of institutional change. As discursive theorists acknowledge, ideas and discourse can also be a source of continuity and persistence (e.g. Hajer, 1995), much in line with the other three neo-institutionalisms. We go one step further: the study of ideas, discourse and discursive practices is not only helpful in providing us adequate tools to signal, interpret and understand the nature and dynamics of institutional change taking place, but may even benefit our understanding of the lack and obstruction to institutional change. There is no theoretical prevalence, priority or preference for ideas and discourses to be always a leading or progressive force in institutional transformations. As argued by Hope and Raudla (2012:403): "In the same way that discourses can be formulated to drive progress on a policy issue, their very formulation can also be obstructive to action (...) Discourse can suppress the emergence of new interest coalitions, prevent the emergence of new norms and undermined the development of particular forms of institutions". Under specific conditions there may be key interests in maintaining hegemonic ideas and storylines, while realities are no longer represented by the dominant discourse. Through processes of framing of ideas and lock-in effects, a discourse can sustain and endure while realities have transformed. This blocks (much needed) institutional change. Hegemonic powers may have interests in maintaining dominant storylines, ideas or frames, to conceal the need for institutional

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