Participation in the City: How Urban Participatory Innovations are Reshaping Democracy, Governance and Trust (PAR-CITY)

A crisis of democracy, governance and a decline in trust is now being observed worldwide. At the same time, political engagement is growing in different places. In an urbanised world, cities are significant spaces where new forms of participation are emerging, but also deep conflicts around practices of democracy and governance. The PAR-CITY project aims to understand how Urban Participatory Innovations (UPIs) transform democracy, trust and governance. UPIs are understood as new practices and mechanisms through which citizens and/or officials form and transform democratic institutions. In 21st-century metropolises, such innovations include new forms of dissent and protest, institutional reforms (Open Government), attempts to redesign participatory institutions, the use of information and communication technologies in 'smart cities' (Smart City), and the role of social media in (dis)information and trust-building/weakening processes.

Cities are sites of profound inequalities and political conflict, often violent. At the same time, digital and material urban space is a key source of urban participatory innovation: new practices and mechanisms through which citizens form and transform democratic institutions. Cities are vital for building relationships that create or destroy democracy and trust. Still, our knowledge remains fragmented across disciplines and regions and lacks an integrated, comparative and relational approach.

PAR-CITY brings together for the first time a unique interdisciplinary team of researchers from both sides of the Atlantic and the North and South to explore how and why cities can respond to the key democratic challenges of our time. The project compares seven major cities (from four regions of the global South and North). These are Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Lyon, New York, Sao Paolo, Toronto and Warsaw.

The three main objectives of the project are: (1) to explore the importance of cities in responding to global challenges to democracy, governance and trust; (2) to explore the role of digital media, tools and technologies in eroding or enhancing democracy, governance and trust in large cities; (3) to develop concepts, models and theories of democracy, governance and trust by analysing urban participatory innovations.

The research questions answered by the project are: how do urban participatory innovations (UPIs) transform power, authority and conflict? How do they grapple with marginalisation and inequality? How do geographical differences condition them? How do they help us understand the challenges and crises of democracy, governance and trust in the global north and south? The project uses quantitative and qualitative methods: document analysis, observation of participatory practices, interviews, questionnaire research, discourse analysis and media content analysis.

The PAR-CITY project brings together researchers from several disciplines: geography, law, media studies, public administration, political science, sociology, gender studies and urban studies, who compare the determinants of innovation in different cities. As much practice and research is confined to the local languages and cognitive frameworks of the respective disciplines, this limits the flow of knowledge and the exchange of experiences. This transatlantic project is a dialogue across borders (disciplinary, linguistic, epistemological, cultural and political). In this way, the project will result in 1) the integration of hitherto fragmented disciplinary approaches to understanding democracy, governance and trust, 2) the demonstration of the crucial role of geography and urban space, 3) the derivation of conclusions and recommendations based on a global set of viewpoints, supported by empirical evidence.