The Scale of Participation: From Municipal Public Budget to Cities’ Conference

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In a well ordered city every man flies to the assemblies: under a bad government no one cares to stir a step to get to them, because no one is interested in what happens there, because it is foreseen that the general will will not prevail, and lastly because domestic cares are all-absorbing. Good laws lead to the making of better ones; bad ones bring about worse. As soon as man says of the affairs of the State What does it matter to me? the State may be given up for lost. (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1950: 93).

The essay is intended to contribute for a better understanding of the process of creating a healthy public realm through citizen participation. The empirical reference is the participatory budget as developed in the city of Porto Alegre (Brazil) since 1989 up to this date, and from 1999 to 2002 in the State of Rio Grande do Sul. Based on similar principles, the federal government started a Cities’ Conference process which allows reflecting about the possibilities of expanding the scale of participation to a broader geographical area and to more complex and larger social contexts. At the end, the reference to a new social contract points to the search for other social organizations and other ways of living together.

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