



Citizen Participation between Social Equality and Self-Determination: Integration and Segregation in Postwar Philadelphia

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The rise of citizen participation in the planning process is one of the key aspects of urban history of the latter half of the 20th century. Most research tends to interpret the issue as part of a narrative of the struggle for social justice. Yet, the notion of participation is ambivalent: it is primarily a procedural prerogative, not implying any values per se. Processes of citizen input have frequently also been used to protect a status quo against the agenda of social reform.

In my paper I will contrast two opposing intentions concerning the redevelopment of Philadelphia's Southwark neighborhood that were both legitimized as viable outcome of citizen participation. The post-industrial area inhabited by a Polish community and a growing African-American minority was the stage of an ongoing struggle over racial integration from the late 1950s until the mid-1970s. While the Black community sought access to resources and demanded the right to effectively voice their concerns, white ethnics clung to the ideal of a homogenous neighborhood. With the backing of the civil rights movement and official city policy, citizen participation was intended to ensure that African-Americans had the opportunity to become emancipated stakeholders in the neighborhood's redevelopment. The Polish community reacted by organizing to keep social change under control, arguing that this was the true will of those living in the area and stressing the community's right to self-determination. The conflict culminated as Southwark was declared part of an official Redevelopment Area requiring a more formalized form of participation processes.

The aim of my paper is to show the ambivalence of citizen participation in a case where the respective outcomes could not be more distinctive. It will demonstrate how the claim for a greater influence of local citizens in the planning process evolved into a strategy to legitimize the demand for social change - in form of racial integration - as well as the fight to keep up ethnic segregation. Stressing the strategic character of citizen participation at the point of its ascendancy in the 1960s links planning history with the political history of protest, social reform and cultural identity.

KEY WORDS: Citizens' participation, segregation.