The Limits to Citizen Power

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Participatory Democracy and the Entanglements of the State

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Introduction

Participatory democracy has a venerable place in political history, and yet it has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in recent years among social movements, activists and reformist politicians who seek to address an array of governance ills. The rise of transnational political actors, such as the EU, IMF and World Bank, have created a 'democratic deficit' by putting important decision-making processes beyond the reach of the voting public. The transformation of the political class into a moneyed and professionalised elite, especially in the Global North, has widened the gap between elected officials and rank-and-file party members, leading to diminishing membership rates and grassroots support for traditional political parties, challenging the representativeness and vibrancy of electoral democracy. In addition, the prevalence of patronage politics and clientelism, often identified with the countries of the Global South, continues to thwart the programmes of elected governments, and is particularly injurious for communities of little strategic electoral value. All of these problems and more are held to be remediable by instituting participatory democracy, by re-energising and recalibrating existing democratic institutions with the participation of the lay public.

The new-found enthusiasm for participatory democracy has been nourished by a florescence of participatory reforms in Latin America. New constitutions that encourage and mandate citizen participation have been promulgated; electoral parties supportive of participatory democracy have been elected, some with explicitly democratic socialist aims; and scores of localised participatory experiments have spread across the continent, garnering the attention of the international development community and global justice movement. The rhetoric of participatory democracy and the ambitious aims of some activists and progressive politicians have helped to cast some of these reforms in a redemptive light, as challenges to the very nature of politics and the distribution of political power. The success or failure of participatory reform is, however, often determined in mundane situations that seem to have little in common with the emancipatory language of participatory democracy.

This is a book about participatory democracy in the everyday, about how the promise of participation is realised or thwarted in the course

of quotidian interactions between social activists, public servants and political appointees in Santo André, a medium-sized city that is part of Greater São Paulo, Brazil. Santo André and the industrial region of which it is a part was the birthplace of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party), a political party that championed participatory reforms in office, which would earn a kind of celebrity status that was remarkable even in a continent with so many other noteworthy innovations. I come to the history of the Workers' Party in a moment. But first it is fitting, in a study of participatory democracy in the everyday, for you to begin where I began, in the most familiar setting of my daily life in Santo André.

Santo André

In Santo André I stayed in an apartment on Avenida Portugal, in Jardim Bela Vista. It had two bedrooms and polished floorboards. The kitchen was covered in tiles, in the Portuguese style, and my small back porch gave out onto the car park of an adjacent shopping centre. From there I could see beyond the car park to Avenida Pereira Barreto, an avenue that leads from the city centre of Santo André to the neighbouring city of São Bernardo do Campo. Following Pereira Barreto towards São Bernardo do Campo, one is led to the large factories of São Bernardo, where at the end of the 1970s a number of famous strikes signalled the diminishing authority of Brazil's authoritarian regime that had been in power since 1964. They were strikes that form an important part of the historical narrative that activists in Santo André tell and retell about local opposition to the military regime and the eventual return to democracy in 1985.

Traversing Avenida Pereira Barreto and heading further towards the horizon from my apartment window leads to Parque Central. Redeveloped in 2005, it would be the envy of any Western city. It had lush, rolling slopes and a sandy jogging track that wound around its edges. A series of ponds and small lakes played home to different types of fish and scores of water birds, seemingly attracted by the former. When there was wind, and particularly on weekends, groups of children would congregate on one of the park's hills, where updrafts would take their brightly coloured kites far into the bright blue sky. At the base of the kite-runners' favoured slope, a well-trodden dirt ramp led over a concrete boundary fence and into Favela Gamboa II, a strip of informal housing that had been constructed under high-tensile power lines. It was much like innumerable other shanty

settlements peppered about São Paulo: most of its residences had orange breeze-blocks for walls with concrete floors and corrugated fibreglass or aluminium roofs. Some of the houses functioned as shop fronts, and the owners could often be seen, leaning out of the shop window, laconically engaging in the community life of the *favela*, talking to the neighbours or reprimanding annoying kids. Sometimes passers-by would stop to buy some tapioca pancakes or sugar-cane juice. And there always seemed to be, emanating from one house or another, some kind of bass-driven tune whose rhythms gave the *favela* a pulsating life that contrasted with the manicured solemnity of the park. The juxtaposition of the patchwork architecture of the *favela* and the precise landscaping of the park was indicative of the strange intermingling of social classes in São Paulo's urban form.

Beyond the park, walking past its lakes and then up steep, labyrinthine side streets, I arrived at Cap. Mário Toledo de Camargo Road. A major arterial of the city, Mário Toledo always seemed a torrent of traffic, of heavy trucks that wheezed black smoke, and whose tyres left deep furrows in the tarmac. Arriving at Mário Toledo, I encountered a quite different built environment. It was unlike the park and the *favela*, and even some of Santo André's older suburbs, characterised by their two-storey gated homes. Here concrete was almost ubiquitous. It made up adjacent dividing walls, buildings, shops and, before it was demolished, the prominent rectangular frontage of the Bruno Daniel Stadium – home of the city's football team, the Ramalhão.[1] Along this stretch of the city, space was less intensively developed, and hence perhaps the prevalence of *pichação*, that angular graffiti script so common in Brazilian cities. Following Mário Toledo south, to its conclusion, I finally arrived at the so-called periphery – an expanse of working-class and informal housing that extends into the hills of the *serra*. This was one of my most common journeys during fieldwork. I came to the periphery to interview fieldwork colleagues, to visit neighbourhood associations and also to socialise. Yet this is not a work about life in São Paulo's outskirts, in the vein of other urban ethnographies (see Donna Goldstein 2003; Perlman 2010). It is about how the periphery is influenced from afar, by administrative decisions and deliberations, by attendant laws and policies, and most importantly, by the power relationships that decide whether its residents, and other members of the popular classes, partake in the governance decisions that come to influence their communities.

My most common fieldwork journey was thus not out along Pereira Barreto, nor past Gamboa II, along Mário Toledo and out into the periphery.

Rather, I would exit my two-tone mustard and bone-white building and follow Avenida Portugal north towards the centre of town. It was a downhill walk. I followed the path of the rains, past the 24 hour cafe, then the 24 hour bakery and finally the medical centre, where small bronze birds had their own seed-filled pagoda. It was only a ten-minute walk from my apartment to the Paço Municipal (City Square), a paved square with an expansive pond and fountain. The three largest buildings constructed thereon were themselves symbols of the trinity of political power. They looked austerely hard edged and functionalist. The judiciary, several floors high, was located to my immediate left, while the legislature, a more diminutive building, was to my right. Located on the far side of the square from my entry point was the fifteen-storey *prefeitura* (town hall), which housed the municipality's executive and dwarfed other buildings around it, reflecting, perhaps, its pre-eminence among the branches of government. In this book I will argue that, though more diffuse, fluid and multiform than the buildings on the Paço Municipal, there are other manifestations and enactments of state power that have become highly problematic for the democratising project undertaken by Workers' Party administrations in the city.

Participation in the Workers' City

Santo André is part of the ABC region of São Paulo. The acronym derives from the names of neighbouring municipalities: Santo (A)ndré, São (B)ernardo and São (C)aetano. In recent times the expression Greater ABC region has been used to also include the municipalities of Diadema, Riberão Pires, Mauá and Rio Grande da Serra, which are also identified with the common history of this area, the most heavily industrialised region in Brazil. The ABC region was the birthplace of the new, autonomous union movement, which was active in the creation of the Workers' Party (Sader 1988). The city is also recognised for historically having active civic associations and social movements, and it was in Santo André that one of São Paulo's most important urban popular movements of the 1980s emerged, the Movimento de Defesa do Favelado (MDF, Movement for the Defence of Shanty-Town Inhabitants) (Almeida 1992: 69, 82; Jacobi & Nunes 1983). The Workers' Party became the major electoral force in local politics in Santo André following democratisation, and by 2016 had failed to win the mayoral elections on only two occasions since 1988. Celso Daniel was the first Workers' Party mayor and the city's foremost political

figure in the post-authoritarian period. A charismatic leader and a gifted intellectual, Daniel, on assuming office, immediately began experimenting with initiatives that elicited the participation of the wider public in matters of governance. It began in a tentative fashion during his first administration, and developed and became more complex over time. By the time I began my first stint of fieldwork in 2007, over two dozen participatory institutions were active in the city. There were 24 management policy councils, a participatory budget, a participatory planning programme called Cidade Futuro (Future City) and dozens of other attendant ad hoc assemblies and conferences. On average there was at least one participatory assembly per weekday, and at times many more. Despite the large numbers of participatory institutions in Santo André, it was the city's participatory budget that caught the attention of academics and activists alike.

Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgets were first developed in Porto Alegre, in Brazil's southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul, by the Frente Popular (Popular Front), a leftist coalition, after winning the 1988 elections. Headed by a Workers' Party mayor, Olivio Dutra, the Frente Popular developed a participatory budget (PB) in response to a history of demands, from various social actors and a confederation of local civic associations (União das Associaçõoes de Moradores de Porto Alegre), for the community to have a direct influence on the way the municipal budget is spent (Baiocchi 2005: 31; Goldfrank 2003: 33). The PB invited the lay public to determine investment priorities in a series of regional and thematic assemblies held around the city, which were then implemented by the government over the following year. The result transformed sections of the impoverished urban periphery (Abers 2000; Goldfrank 2003), led to increasing civic activism (Goldfrank 2007: 163) and drew international fame for the city which hosted five World Social Forums.

This case of participatory democracy, and several others inspired by it, caught the imagination of progressive scholars and activists around the world. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1998) saw the PB as an example of redistributive democracy, and also argued that it was one of the most 'credible guiding ideas mobilising countless social movements and progressive NGOs around the world in their struggles against exclusion, dispossession and discrimination produced or intensified by neoliberal globalisation' (Santos 2005: 336). Rebecca Abers (2000) and William Nylen (2002) saw

in the PB the potential for citizen 'empowerment'. Gianpaolo Baiocchi (2003, 2005) and Lígia Lüchmann (2002) interpreted the proliferation of participatory forums as burgeoning, deliberative 'public spheres' that had ignited a civil society which had been repressed by years of military rule. Leonardo Avritzer, similarly inspired by Habermas's work on the public sphere, and drawing on his close study of civic associations (Avritzer 1997; see also Avritzer 2003), developed the concept of 'participatory publics' (Avritzer 2002a; see also Avritzer & Wampler 2004). These were part of what might be called a hopeful wave of interest in participatory democracy, in which well-worn ideas about Brazilian politics, at least for some analysts and commentators, seemed to melt in the face of innovation. But less well developed, in some of the more celebratory evaluations of participatory reform, was an account of the key role of state actors and how continuities of state power persisted in the new spaces opened up for civil society.

Santo André's PB also attracted significant attention in the early years. Pedro Pontual (2000) posited that participants became educated citizens through taking an active role in the government of the city. Bruno Daniel, brother of the erstwhile mayor, Celso Daniel, similarly found the PB to be a 'space of learning' (Daniel 2003: 230) that improved 'accountability', but whose primary limitations were the scarcity of funds and the 'efficiency and efficacy' related to public spending (ibid.: 231). Claudio Acioly et al. argued that the PB 'provided an avenue for participation and communication to population groups that were traditionally excluded from public policy' (Acioly et al. 2003: 41), but held that there existed challenges to institutionalising the relationship between the PB and the city planning programme, Cidade Futuro while maintaining flexibility (ibid.: 84). These kinds of findings gave the impression of an administration at the forefront of innovation in democratic governance (Wampler 2007: 179), an impression strengthened by, as the mayor was wont to say, 'a cabinet full of trophies', awarded by a slew of government and non-government bodies.

The initiatives in cities like Porto Alegre and Santo André helped to breathe new life into participatory and deliberative democracy, and generated considerable enthusiasm for their transformative potential in Brazil and abroad. An initial wave of enthusiasm was part of what Leonardo Avritzer has called the 'laudatory phase' (Avritzer 2009: 174) of participation, a period that gave way to more sobering evaluations of the changes that had been wrought through participatory reform and that were yet possible (see Lavalle 2011). In part, the early ebullience was due to a selective focus on a series of exemplary cases (Wampler 2008: 61),

but it was also due to an emphasis on civil society activity and a reluctance to account, at least in a sustained and theoretically informed way, for the role of the state in both enabling and conditioning projects of participatory reform. That is, of course, not to imply that the state and its constituent actors have a singular influence on the prospects of participatory democracy, either as the enablers of reform or as agents that constrain the influence of the public. However, it often left an array of powerful actors and the influence of political and administrative authority out of the analytical mix. Before outlining how such factors figure in the approach taken here, I locate the participatory reform effort in Santo André within a broader historical compass that also incorporates the experiences of other Latin American countries.

Participatory Democracy in Brazil

Institutions of participatory democracy emerged as part of a florescence of political experiments that followed Brazil's transition from military rule. In the early days of the authoritarian regime that began in 1964, there was little active support for the participation of ordinary citizens in institutions of governance. At a time when the country was experiencing record-breaking growth (during Brazil's 'economic miracle', from 1968 to 1972), the regime discriminated against the popular classes and brutally repressed opposition, helping to create the image of a polarised society (Assies 1994: 84; Gohn 1997: 282), one in which collaboration with the governing elite was considered both unproductive and disloyal to a popular movement fired by the autonomous and anti-capitalist ideology of Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (Catholic Base Communities) (Banck 1990; Singer 1983). Many popular actors, in practice, adopted more pragmatic postures in their private dealings with local state institutions, which provided vital resources (Cardoso 1983; Mainwaring 1987: 151).

The political polarisation that was exacerbated by repression began to diminish by the second half of the 1970s. A democratic transition that had been repeatedly postponed by successive military leaders finally became increasingly likely under the generals Ernesto Geisel, who became president of the republic, and the *éminence grise* of the 'decompression', Golbery do Couto e Silva. Some of the more draconian measures put in place by hard-line predecessors were repealed, such as the arbitrary detention of adversaries of the regime and prohibitions on the press and

free assembly. The regime's liberalising rhetoric and a thawing of relations with the workers – symbolic opponents of the regime – helped restore the prospect of a return to electoral democracy (Stepan 1988: 33). The possibility of effective representation, buoyed by a resurgent, broad-based movement for democratic reform, helped allay the categorical disdain for formal politics publicly held by a number of important popular actors. Exclusion from institutional politics had, in any case, been a chastening experience for many urban social movements, for although the discourse of autonomy may have been born of an incisive appreciation of patterns in elite politics, it had failed to provide much needed goods and services for poor communities.

A new autonomous union movement that developed in contradistinction to the corporatist labour system also gained in strength during the latter half of the 1970s. The largest strikes in the country's history were held in 1978 and 1979 in the south-east industrial region of São Paulo, some of them just within walking distance from my apartment in Santo André. But even if the strikes failed to secure many of the workers' substantive demands, or provide the kind of impetus for political change attributed to them by some analysts (see Sader 1988), they did provide a heavily publicised, and therefore symbolic, challenge to the authority of the regime in what became a national wave of militancy that numbered supporters in the millions (French & Fontes 2005: 19). In 1979 and 1980, a series of meetings was held in São Paulo, led by some of the new unionists and leftist intellectuals, that culminated in the creation of a new political grouping, the Workers' Party, which was conceived as a manifestation of the social movements whose activities had gathered pace at the end of the 1970s (Brandão 2003: 38). It was socialist, but ideologically heterogeneous, maintaining independence from the USSR and uniting in its ranks Trotskyists, socialist democrats and others of a more conservative disposition under different 'factions'. By now, demands for citizen participation had widespread social support, and the Workers' Party became its foremost political advocate in elected office.

In 1985, the presidency was finally transferred to a civilian. The first presidential elections of the democratic era were held in 1988, the same year in which a new federal constitution was enacted. These are the customary registers of the democratic transition. Yet even in such formal markers of political renewal there were telling signs of continuity. After the untimely death of civilian president-to-be Tancredo Neves, the presidency somewhat symbolically passed to José Sarney, a man who

only months earlier represented the Partido Democrático Social (PDS, Democratic Social Party), the party of the authoritarian government in Congress. Indeed, Frances Hagopian (1996: 213) argued that it was the traditional elite that maintained power during the political transition and that retained control over the design of the new democracy's political institutions. Many scholars and critical commentators thus interpreted the democratic transition as yet another episode of cosmetic regime change, of the kind analysed in the works of Florestan Fernandes (2005) and Caio Prado Junior (1965). Luiz Werneck Vianna used the Gramscian term 'passive revolution' to capture the way official regime change had an insignificant practical influence on Brazil's political economy (Vianna 1997: 53; see also Nogueira 1998: 270–90). According to such analyses, the need for substantive democratisation remained undiminished following the formal transition.

With the return to electoral democracy, the Workers' Party won a number of local elections, some of them in large cities. These became the source of enormous academic local and international attention for the implementation of policies and programmes that sought to confront many of the so-called 'traditional' characteristics of the new democracy. The Workers' Party administrations won accolades by combating inequality, breaking clientelist relationships that were pernicious for politically unimportant social groups, and developing channels for the participation of the lay public in government decision-making. The success of some of these administrations set against the backdrop of a conservative democratic transition only emphasised their accomplishments.

The Participatory Turn in Latin America

Participatory reform in Brazil was part of a wave of interest in participatory democracy that swept across Latin America at the end of the twentieth century. Just as in Brazil, this predilection to directly engage with state agencies in deliberative forums contrasts strongly with the strategies of earlier social and popular movements that called for autonomy from the state (Cameron et al. 2012a: 5). The willingness to participate in formal state institutions was in part a reaction to the changes to the political establishment that civil societies of the region had helped to effect. In the 1980s, military regimes were removed from office in Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Brazil; the only South American country that did not

liberate itself from military rule during this time was Paraguay, and even there the end of the Stroessner dictatorship led to political liberalisation (Remmer 1992: 4). However, the new democracies were the subject of often vociferous criticism, as formal political transition revealed a governance landscape ill-equipped for the manifold demands and heightened expectations of democratic government. Discontent with democracy was especially pronounced in the Andean region, where between 1992 and 2005 Colombia was the only country that did not have a presidential term cut short by popular and elite dissatisfaction (Mainwaring 2006: 13). Indeed, scholars of comparative politics have tended to explain the emergent interest in participatory democracy in terms of a failure of representative institutions to effectively incorporate excluded social sectors and their interests into the political system (Barczak 2001; Cameron et al. 2012a). The 'crisis of representation', weak political parties and the enduring influence of political patronage and clientelism, according to this reasoning, led to the search for alternative means of influencing state action. In a region with such diversity, it is unsurprising that there was significant variance among the participatory reforms pursued and realised in the new Latin American democracies.

Latin American polities are often informally rated according to the opportunities for citizen participation they allow. Whenever such comparisons are made, Chile and Mexico are generally held to be home to the least serious reform efforts (Cameron et al. 2012b: 241; Lupien 2015). Chile's democracy is generally praised by liberal scholars for its consolidated electoral system and representative institutions, but it was not until Michele Bachelet's presidency in 2006 that a discourse of popular participation was promoted at the national level, and among Latin American countries it still has, according to Pascal Lupien, 'one of the least participatory systems' (Lupien 2015: 3). Mexico's recent history of participatory governance goes back quite a bit further. Developed in 1983, the Sistema Nacional de Planeación Democrática (National System of Democratic Planning) provided a legal framework for the participatory institutions that were later developed. In order to comply with the national democratic planning framework, municipalities were obliged to develop two kinds of participatory institutions. First was the Comité de Planeación para el Desarrollo Municipal (Municipal Development Planning Committee), a committee formed by citizens to aid state officials to determine investment priorities, particularly in those cases where federal infrastructure funds were involved. Second was an array of different kinds of neighbourhood