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DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION IN LATIN AMERICA: A FIRST LOOK AT THE DEMO- CRATIC PARTICIPATORY PROJECT¹

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we present an analysis of the democratic-participatory project in Latin America. This project is not a standardized and uniform discourse nor an explicit set of practices and institutions, but rather a collection of principles, ideas, practices and institutions that –at an experimental level – have been fought for and achieved in different Latin American countries. Experiences as diverse as the well-known participatory budgeting in Brazil, the “*Mesas de Concertación*” in Peru (type of regional roundtables), the “*Auditorías Articuladas*” in Colombia (practices of society-state partnerships for overseeing public contracting, the execution of public works or the accountability of state agencies), the “*Consejos Gestores*” in Brazil (public management councils for defining public policies in education and health), and the “*Consejos Autogestivos*” in México (self-management councils in protected zones), among many others, demonstrate that alterna-

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1 This chapter draws heavily on the introduction to a collective book entitled (translated from Spanish) *The Dispute for the Democratic Construction in Latin America*, edited by Evelina Dagnino, Alberto J. Olvera and Aldo Panfichi (FCE-Universidad Veracruzana, México 2006). This contribution is, therefore, a collective text coauthored by the three above mentioned editors.

tive forms of citizen politics (generally referred to as “citizen participation”) are possible. However, these experiences have yet to be proven over the long-term effect and are fairly limited geographically, as well as in terms of their cultural (and therefore political) influence. These limitations are due to the preliminary and exploratory nature of the democratic-participatory project. As well, the economic limitations imposed by the neoliberal economic policies that dominate the entire region generate obstacles for more profound democratic innovations.

In the following pages we have two objectives. First, the components of the democratic-participatory project, as well as its historical and national contexts, are outlined. Secondly, examples of the project’s implementation in specific political contexts are presented. For these purposes, information gathered through case studies presented in a collective book (see footnote 4) are used.

This paper is inspired by the current debate on democracy in Latin America. Fortunately, the current situation differs greatly from that of several years ago. The themes which, for over a decade, dominated the analysis of democracy in the region – mainly the transition to and consolidation of – have been gradually replaced by new theoretical and political concerns. The new content of public debate is a result of three processes. Firstly, electoral democracy has been consolidated throughout Latin America (although there have been both positive and negative aspects and varying degrees of institutional instability). Indeed, in recent years, countries such as Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Argentina and Venezuela experienced critical national political crises yet were able to overcome them through constitutional means with no evident risks of authoritarian reversal.² Nonetheless – and herein lies the second process – at the same time, a profound dissatisfaction with the results produced by these democracies, in terms of social justice, governmental efficiency and political inclusion, spread over the region. The notable research carried out by the UNDP (*Democracy in Latin America*, 2004), can –among other things– be credited with the indisputable demonstration of the magnitude of citizens’ disenchantment with the actually existing democracies.

The third process, which the aforementioned report has totally ignored, is of a different type. It refers to the various experiments that are currently underway in several Latin American countries for more profound and innovative democracy, broadening the field of politics, and constructing citizenship. These experiments change the very idea of democracy. They demonstrate, on different scales and to different degrees, that it is possible to build a new democratic project based on principles which extend and generalize rights, create public spaces that include decision-making power, increase political participation in society, and

2 We do not mean to pass premature judgment of the final result of these processes. The way in which they unfold remains open to future developments. What we want to make clear is that democracy as a regime now seems to be the only possible horizon for the formation of governments that citizens and international institutions will accept as legitimate.

recognize and make space for differences. It is precisely the importance of these experiences that has led to the renovation of debates on democracy. This debate is characterized by a major dispute between political projects that use the same concepts and appeal to similar discourses, but are in fact completely different. This refers to, on the one hand, what can be called the participatory democracy project and, on the other hand, the neoliberal project which privatizes broad areas of public policy, while maintaining a “participationist” discourse that places a so-called symbolic value on civil society (also referred to as the Third Sector). Certainly, besides these two projects there is room for the survival of the authoritarian project, which is characterized by a formal respect for democratic institutions, while in practice eliminating the rule of law and citizenship rights.

This process coincides with the introduction of a new political discourse within the international public arena of multi-lateral development agencies, the UN and its agencies, and some of the major private foundations that provide support to NGOs globally. It is related to the new value that is being placed on the role of civil society in the construction of democracy and governability. Within this arena we also find a variety of political projects using an apparently homogeneous discourse, however some of which are more oriented towards participation as a way to guarantee governability and others which reinforce the dominance of management and an explicit depoliticization of public life.

Within this theoretical context, our work intends to contribute research on the processes of democratization in Latin America, through the combined and systematic use of three analytical tools: the notion of heterogeneity of civil society and the State, the concept of political projects, and the methodology of civil society / political society trajectories. In reality, these three analytical tools identify a problem that has not been resolved by theories of civil society and not explicitly dealt with by theories of citizens’ participation and studies of “social accountability”. That is, the critique of the theoretical model that makes a radical separation between civil and political societies. This model constructs a symbolic dichotomy separating a homogeneous and virtuous civil society from an equally homogeneous State, which is seen to embody all the vices of politics and is conceived of as a mere struggle for power (Dagnino, 2002). On the contrary, we propose situating the study of democratization processes within the articulation of connections that link and transit between both spheres of activity, and where dispute between different political projects gives structure and meaning to political struggles.

Recognizing the existence of these projects, and the more precise identification of their content and forms of implementation, is fundamental, particularly within the current context of a situation of “perverse confluence” (Dagnino 2004a) that characterizes political life within the apparent democratic consolidation that is underway over much of the continent. This confluence refers to the encounter between, on the one hand, the democratizing projects that were constituted during the period of resistance to authoritarian regimes and continue to seek further democratization and, on the other hand, the neoliberal projects that were

introduced, at various paces and times, at the end of the 1980s. There is perversity in the fact that although these projects move in different and even antagonistic directions, they are marked by a common discourse.

In fact, both require the participation of an active and creative civil society, and adopt the same points of reference: the construction of citizenship, participation, and the very idea of civil society. “The use of the same, common points of reference, though taking on quite different meanings, has produced what could be called a discursive crisis: the common language, with its homogeneous vocabulary, obscures differences, dilutes nuances and reduces antagonisms. This is then the fertile ground in which surreptitiously, the channels through which neoliberal conceptions are pushed forward emerge, coming to occupy unsuspected terrain. In this struggle in which semantic slippage and the dislocation of meanings become primary weapons, the terrain of political practice becomes a mine field, in which any false step can lead us directly into the adversary’s camp. Therein lies the perversity and the dilemma that this represents, establishing a tension that today shoots through the dynamics of the advance of democracy.” (Dagnino, 2004b:198). Therefore, identifying the distinct meanings that are hidden within these common references by conflicting projects, may contribute to elucidate the dilemma and to face the challenges that it has presented.

POLITICAL PROJECTS IN LATIN AMERICA

Although there are risks inherent to all generalizations, three major political projects characterize the struggle for democracy in Latin America today. Preliminarily and for practical reasons, we will refer to these major sets of ideas, principles and beliefs, articulated by different perspectives on the building of democracy, as authoritarian, neoliberal and participatory democratic respectively. We recognize from the start that all of them share a basic position in relation to democratic processes that flows from their formal adherence to representative democracy and the elementary institutions of the State of Law. In addition, although these projects’ adherence to a common, minimal level may reveal their fragility in relation to the authoritarian project, the concrete implementation of the latter during recent years has not required – as was the case in the past – the suppression of this minimal democracy.

Beyond this minimal level, it is possible to identify the opposite, a “maximum level”, as it is characterized today on the continent: a view of democracy building that is defined by radicalization, that is broader and deeper, and that finds support in the notion that societal participation in the exercise of power is a basic condition for its fulfillment. Although this “maximum level” has not been implemented in any Latin American country, the set of ideas behind it has guided the political practice of a significant number of actors, to varying degrees, across the continent.

It can also be claimed that today, the dispute for democracy emerges, in most countries, as a clash between unequal parties –between the neoliberal and participatory democracy projects – leading to the polarity around which political debate

is currently organized. Nonetheless, since the authoritarian project is not considered to be residual, the possibility that it ascends to be one of the “main actors” on this scene cannot be dismissed, if and when the opportunities and political conditions for such a situation appear. It is the aforementioned conflict, however, which we will focus on, particularly due to the perverse confluence mentioned, which tends to obfuscate, at the discursive level, the basic differences between the two projects engaged in this major dispute. It should also be pointed out that a characterization of each one of these projects does not negate their reciprocal influence and common elements. Part of the reason for these common elements originates from the analyses elaborated on the crisis of the State in Latin America, which coincide in some aspects, and differ in others. (Lechner, 1998; O’Donnell, 2004).

Our effort to characterize the different projects is rooted in concrete subjects and the discursive practices that they produce and mobilize. In this regard, projects are not merely abstract conceptions but are incorporated in subjects and their practice; it is through the latter that we arrive at an understanding of their configuration. Thus, the consolidation of these different projects, their political weight and meaning, and their practical implementation vary from one country to another. Our analytical effort places priority on their most successful expressions – those manifested in national contexts where the configuration of these projects has progressed most significantly, or present in a more fragmented form in contexts where other forces restrict their fuller development.

The participatory project characterization presented below is organized around a set of variables that have been selected according to their relevance to our central theme, the struggle for building democracy. In relation to these variables, the differentiation of projects can be more clearly perceived. The most encompassing one is the relationship between the State and civil society; this is followed by the conceptions of participation, citizenship, civil society and politics itself. In turn, all of this contributes to the elaboration and specification of the relationship between State and society as sketched out by the projects that dispute hegemony in Latin America. In this chapter, the discussion is limited to the specific case of the participatory project.³

THE PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY PROJECT

The nucleus of the participatory democracy project is constituted by a conception that seeks to deepen and radicalize democracy, clearly confronting the limits attributed to liberal representative democracy as a privileged form of State-society relations. In order to contend with the exclusive and elitist nature of the latter, models of participatory and deliberative democracy are advocated as complementary to it (Santos and Avritzer, 2002:75-76). In this regard, societal participation in decision-making processes takes on a key role in democratization (Fals Borda, 1996). This participation is seen as an tool for building greater equality, to the extent that pub-

3 For a full discussion of this theme, see Dagnino, Olvera and Panfichi, 2006.

lic policies oriented towards this goal would be formulated. (Albuquerque, 2004; GECD, 2000; Santos and Avritzer, 2002; Murillo and Pizano, 2003; Daniel, 2000; Ziccardi, 2004; OXFAM/DIAKONIA, 1999; Cáceres, 2006).

Furthermore, participatory democracy is supposed to contribute to a de-privatization of the State, so that it becomes more permeable to public interests formulated within spaces of societal participation, and therefore less subject to private appropriation of its resources. Therefore, participation is conceived as the sharing of the State's decision-making power on public interest issues, distinguishing itself from a conception of participation that is limited to consulting the population.

In Latin America, this formulation for deepening democracy through the extension of participation –which is meant to make the State more truly public so that it can ensure citizenship rights– has its most elaborate expression in Brazil. Beginning in the 1980s, social movements, trade unions, intellectuals, NGOs and other civil society organizations, as well as some leftist political parties such as the Worker's Party (PT), participated in the effort to elaborate and disseminate this set of ideas (Teixeira, Dagnino and Almeida, 2002). Throughout this period, this conception of participation enjoyed significant cultural and political gains. Furthermore, it became legalized in the Constitution of 1988 which, upon consecrating the principle of participation in the exercise of power in its first article, made way for the implementation of a variety of participatory spaces and mechanisms. These include Management Councils (*Conselhos Gestores*) and Participatory Budgeting (*Orçamentos Participativos*). In recent years, this conception has made progress in other countries as well.⁴ An analysis of the institutionalization of participation in several Latin American countries' constitutions (Hevia, 2006) demonstrates this progress, notwithstanding differences in the contexts that preside over them.

The forms and expressions adopted in the implementation of the principles of participation and social control towards democratic innovation vary according to national contexts: participatory budgets, public policy management councils, citizens' councils, roundtables, inspection offices (*veedurías*), accountability mechanisms, monitoring, etc. The multiplicity of these experiences across the continent (Dagnino, 2002; Panfichi, 2002; Olvera, 2003) has attracted the attention of many analysts and there an increasing amount of literature that recognizes its importance, even within the adverse context of the neoliberal hegemony.

In addition to participation in decision making previously monopolized by the State, the need for social controls over the State should include social mechanisms for monitoring State actions, and ensuring its public character –a practice that is referred to as “social accountability” (Smulovitz and Peruzzotti, 2006). The principle of accountability has been adopted by both projects involved in the dispute for democracy

4 For examples, see Albuquerque, 2004; Sánchez and Álvarez, 2002; Múnera, 1999; Villareal, 2004.

on the continent and, therefore, should be taken into account given the different contents that it includes under the auspices of each (Isunza, 2006). In the participatory democracy project, accountability is linked to other forms of citizens' participation, guided by a perspective that seeks to guarantee rights and ensure public social control, "creating a channel for citizens' participation in co-management in order to ensure the political responsibility of civil servants (whether elected officials or not)." (Isunza 2004:7). Within the neoliberal project, accountability is basically seen from the perspective of assuring better communication, and therefore greater efficiency, in the relationship between the State and its citizen-clients, which contributes to governability.

In recent years, at least three models of accountability have been attempted in Latin America. In the first model, there are the actions of civil society groups that have assumed the task of watching over some State agencies or political process, as is the case of: the Civic Alliance (*Alianza Cívica*) in Mexico, with its massive monitoring of elections (1994-2000) (Olvera, 2003); the *Poder Ciudadano* (Citizens' Power) in Argentina, with other groups that were close to them, regarding legislative and judiciary powers (Peruzzotti, 2002); the *Propuesta Ciudadana* (Citizens' Proposal) group in Peru, a consortium of NGOs that created a system for civil society to monitor the central and regional governments on issues regarding the decentralization process; the non-governmental organizations' initiatives such as *Transparência Brasil*, and the *Observatório da Cidadania/Social Watch* in Brazil. In the second model, there is the creation of new State institutions, whose function is to guarantee the right to information or to aid citizens in monitoring the actions of government. An exemplary case of this first type is the Mexican *Instituto de Acceso a la Información Pública Gubernamental (IFAI)* which in its first years of existence obtained several important victories (Marván, 2006); another example of this second type is the Colombian *Veeduría Ciudadana*, a municipal institution whose function is to help civil society groups obtain information on contracts and bids and to provide legal and technical supervision needed to accompany the monitoring of public works. (Garcés Lloreda, 2006).

In the third model, there is the process of relative internal reform of the State that, following the global tendency of institutional development of the public sector, has created internal control agencies within the State itself, operating as autonomous entities (Ackerman, 2006). This is the case of the *Auditoría Superior de la Federación* in Mexico, the *Contraloría General de la República* and the *Defensoría del Pueblo* in Peru, and even more notably, the *Contraloría General de la República* and the *Procuraduría General de la República* in Colombia. Nonetheless, the autonomy of these agencies, for example in the Peruvian case, varies. The *Contraloría*, responsible for the control of the way the State invests public resources, never showed

the political will to impose itself on President Toledo's administration (2002-2006), while the *Defensoria* played an active role in the defense of the rights of citizens who have been affected by the actions of the State. The heterogeneity of the State and the variety of political wills of those who are in charge of these agencies are some of the variables to be taken into account when attempting to explain different patterns of action. Something similar occurs in Brazil where, for example, the creation of the *Ouvidorias*⁵ linked to the various levels of government and State agencies has had varying impacts. However, advances have been made in the transparency of several sectors of government, with increasing on-line access to significant official data.

Another central element in the participatory democracy project is actual conception of civil society. (Avritzer, 1994; Olvera, 1999; Nogueira, 2004). Made up of organized sectors of society, civil society is recognized by its heterogeneity and conceived of in a broad and inclusive way, given its role in ensuring the public nature of the State through participation and social controls. Civil society is considered to be the constitutive terrain of politics, given that it is within civil society that the debate between divergent interests and the construction of provisional consensus is able to shape public interest.

In a similar vein, public spaces—strictly societal or including State participation—have been built for the purpose of making conflict public and ensuring that divergent interests become an object of public discussion and deliberation. These spaces take on a central role within the participatory democracy project (Avritzer, 2002; Dagnino, 2002, GECD, 2000). The notion of public space, in its different theoretical versions, is strongly incorporated as a key political instrument for the advancement of the process of building democracy.⁶ Looking beyond the mere existence of an organized society, the constitution of these spaces is considered to represent a tool for the implementation of real participation, whether in public spaces of co-management with the State, or in those public societal spaces where diversity, as well as fragmentation, find a place where conflicts are made explicit and where discussion, articulation and negotiation on public issues occur.

An additional element that is central to this project, and directed at the construction of greater equality—in all its dimensions—is the development of citizenship. A redefinition of the classical vision of citizenship, as formulated by Marshall during the 1940s, has been developed by social movements and other civil society organizations in order for it to meet the specific needs generated by the struggle to deepen democracy. Through the basic premise of the *right to have rights*, this redefinition has sustained the emergence of new themes and the constitution of new

5 Note: government departments where citizens may voice complaints; literally, "listeners" or "auditors".

6 Reading Hannah Arendt's work, and particularly that of Jurgen Habermas, have served as a source of inspiration here, as they have in other parts of the world. Many of the intellectuals tied to this project have used in more or less critical ways the Habermas notion of public space. (Avritzer, 2002).

political subjects that, through their practices, define what they consider to be their rights and struggle for their recognition (Dagnino, 1994).⁷

Thus, in different time periods, with different particularities, the emergence of a new notion of citizenship seeks to link struggles demanding specific rights (health, housing, education, etc., and also ethnic rights, women's rights, gay and lesbian rights, etc.) with the larger struggle to build democracy. The defense, broadening and/or invention of rights results from the perspective of citizenship that guarantees collective rights (Marés, 1999) and in some versions, recognizes the right to participation in the management of the State and in political decision-making. Furthermore, an indelible link between the right to equality and the right to be different (Dagnino, 1994) is crucial, and therefore, the homogenizing character of the liberal vision is criticized. For this reason, this perspective has become a reference for women's and gay rights, black liberation and indigenous people's movements, among others. (Peña, 2003; Domínguez, 1999).

Another important element of this vision of citizenship is how it serves as a proposal for new forms of sociability, given it transcends the legal recognition of rights and the strict limitations on the relationship between individuals and the State, and instead focuses on social relations as a whole, where the recognition of rights constitutes new parameters for conviviality in society. (Telles, 1994; Dagnino, 1994, 2003). The emphasis on this dimension results from the authoritarian and hierarchical social order that prevails in the region, in which being poor not only refers to material and economic deprivation but also to the submission to cultural rules that fail to recognize those impoverished as bearers of rights. (Telles, 1994). Thus, this view of citizenship expresses a broader notion of democracy that goes beyond the formal status of a political regime to designate a democratic society, organized through more egalitarian cultural matrices (Chauí, 1981), thus giving voice to "aspirations for democracy as actual sociability". (Paoli, 1999:7).

Similarly, as with the notion of participation, it seems that the formulation of a conception of citizenship linked to this project is most advanced in Brazil. However, there is a growing emphasis on the adoption of this conception, in distinct variations, in countries such as Colombia (González, Segura e Bolívar, 1997), Ecuador (Menendez Carrion, 2002-2003; Pachano, 2003), Argentina (Wappenstein, 2004; Cheresky, 2001; Bloj, 1994), Uruguay (Villareal, 2004), among others. Even in Chile, where the emergence of the contemporary notion of citizenship was strongly linked to the neoliberal project, the dispute between different versions of the concept is indicative of its importance. (De la Maza, 2005).⁸

7 According to some definitions given by Brazilian social movement participants in research carried out in 1993, citizenship was itself, at times, seen as constituting this process. Thus, the ability to struggle for rights was seen as evidence of their citizenship, even in the absence of other rights. (Dagnino, Teixeira, Silva e Ferlim (1998)

8 For a summary of the debate on citizenship in different Latin American countries see Dagnino, Evelina, "Meanings of Citizenship in Latin América". IDS Working Papers.

Lastly, from this set of elements that constitute the participatory democracy project there emerges a broader notion of politics which affirms the multiplicity of its terrains, its subjects, themes and processes. The recognition of “new ways to do politics” –the formula that a number of analysts have found to designate the emergence of new political subjects such as social movements– bringing new issues to the public arena and claiming their political nature, finds its place here. (Sader, 1988; Nun, 1989; Paoli, 1995).

It is necessary to note that, on the one hand, the dynamics of the dissemination of this project and the attempts for its practical implementation in Latin America show a verifiable “demonstration effect” linking different countries, in which one learns through the experiences of the other. This process has intensified with the growth of continental networks of social movements, NGOs, academics and political parties. The most obvious, although not the only example of this, is the proliferation of the Brazilian experience of participatory budgets which began in 1989 in Porto Alegre and has today spread to different countries across the continent.

On the other hand, these attempts have encountered a series of difficulties throughout the continent as well. In particular, obstacles exist related to the scarcity of resources available for social policies which result from economic limitations from a number of factors: the priority of paying the external debt, the fiscal costs of banking crises, corruption that has gotten out of hand, the fiscal ineptness of the State, and so on. Furthermore, the possibilities for its complete implementation within the context of the current form of the capitalist order (or according to some versions, in any of its forms) has been an object of intense debate among those affiliated with the project. This discussion includes those who believe that there is a contradiction between the broadening of democracy and capitalism as a system, and advocate socialism as an answer, as well as those who become theoretically and politically engaged in what has been termed the “social” or “solidarity” economy. (Singer, 2003; Singer and de Souza 2003; Santos, 2002). In this latter version, which is being disseminated throughout several countries, the main idea is to introduce a democratic and egalitarian logic into the spheres of production and the market.

SOME EXPERIENCES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT

This section contains information about specific experiences of the participatory project in Latin America. The information was gathered from case studies commissioned by the authors of this chapter, within the framework of a comparative research project on the actors and scenarios in the construction of democracy in Latin America, published in Brazil and Mexico in 2006.

The well-known mechanism of participatory budgeting, or *Orçamento Participativo* (OP), in Brazil is surely the most disseminated and successful experi-

Brighton, University of Sussex, 2005 as well as the special issue on this theme in *Latin American Perspectives*, volume 30, number 2, issue 129, March 2003.

ment inspired by the participatory democracy project. Due to its success, the model of Participatory Budgeting, which was inaugurated in 1989 by the Workers' Party (PT) in Porto Alegre, state of Rio Grande do Sul, spread not only to other countries but was also adopted, within Brazil, by other parties and political projects.

For Teixeira and Albuquerque (2006), the democratizing scope of the Participatory Budgets seems to depend, on the one hand, on the relationships that the democratizing project has established with its environment and with the other projects that are present therein. Thus, the ability of this project to move ahead with proposals and the degree to which its representatives negotiate with and/or subordinate themselves to other conceptions – those that are dominant in the local culture or those advocated by allies, interlocutors or adversaries – are issues of concern. “If the chance that the OP becomes a public space of real power sharing depends mainly on the vitality, vigor and maturity of the democratizing political project coming from the local civil society, it is also undeniable that it radically depends on the clarity and consistency with which the government implements a democratic and participatory political project.” (Teixeira and Albuquerque, 2006, pp. 206). The dispute, which tends to shape this clarity and consistency, includes in some cases not only the parties that govern in alliance with the PT, and the sectors that prevail in local power, but also unfolds between the different sectors of the party itself.

On the other hand, the project that serves as inspiration for the OP faces clear limits imposed both by the scarcity of resources for social investment that characterizes Brazilian governments today, as well as by the precarious conditions for societies organizing their own participation, particularly in cities with weak associative traditions. Together with this instability comes varying degrees of experience, training and maturity of societal organizations to participate autonomously in conflictive processes that negotiate distinct interests, as well as difficulties originating from the qualification and specialization that are required for OP participation. The issue of representation –central to the process– also encounters problems that derive both from this precariousness as well as from the sometimes quite difficult dialogue that is established between the OP and representatives chosen through electoral democracy.

According to the authors, “The way in which conflict is dealt with is important for the perception of different forms of action, on the part of government and society”.... They found both “forms of action that seek to ‘manage’ conflict through avoiding it” as well as “forms of action that locate in the very conflict the possibility of defining public criteria for the understanding of the world” (Teixeira and Albuquerque, *op. cit.*, pp. 210).

Participatory budgeting is possibly the most important experience in terms of power-sharing between society and local government in Brazil. However, it is limited to a small part of public budgets and the processes have not always led to the transformation of the overall political culture and practice. It created a popular participatory democratic practice that coexists with forms of “normal politics”,

that is, clientelism and neoliberal public policies. The final result remains to be seen, but in a profound way, the OP demonstrated that it is possible to conceive of and implement public policies that are deliberative and participatory.

The study done by Palomino and colleagues (2006) on Argentina reveals the presence of a variety of political projects within social movements such as unemployed *piqueteros*⁹, *asambleas barriales* (neighborhood assemblies), and the occupation and “recovery” of recently closed industrial plants, all of which erupted on the Argentine political scene in the mid-1990s as a response to the harsh effects that the neoliberal project implementation had on the living conditions of its citizens.

These political projects are quite diverse and can be distinguished from one another by their ideological particularities, their unequal abilities to influence social movements and their varying degrees of connection to political parties and to the State. Some projects are oriented toward direct intervention in electoral competition through their own candidates or alliances established with other movements and parties. Other projects prefer direct action and placing demands on the State as a way of obtaining resources, while others conceive of participation in social movements as a way of building more ambitious alternative policies for social transformation. There are also those that share several of these characteristics.

Differences notwithstanding, a good deal of these projects share the same rejection of the neoliberal project, a strong critique of forms of delegative representation and a commitment to promoting democratic and participatory ideas and practices.

As a consequence, the sphere of politics and even of electoral democracy is broadening, with the unfolding of new social practices that include deliberation and collective action in assemblies and public spaces. These are practices that underwent gradual development until they became substantial traits of the movements. Similarly, there is a strong emphasis on the social movement’s autonomy in relation to the State and the *Partido Justicialista*—old partners in the populist corporative model of earlier decades. And lastly, the boundaries of citizenship are broadening to incorporate the rights of the poorest sectors defended by the new social movements as well as the defence of the “right to have rights”.

Panfichi and Dammert’s study of Peru (2006) shows how a participatory democracy project promoted by a group of civil society activists, who became civil servants at the beginning of the Peruvian transition (which began in 2001), achieved important progress in the institutionalization of a variety of citizens’ participation mechanisms. Nonetheless, as these experiences are consolidated, the participatory sectors are obliged to confront resistance first, and soon after outright opposition of a sector of political society—authorities, State employees, and government parties—that respond to the more traditional and clientelist ori-

9 The *piqueteros* are a set of mainly spontaneous organizations of unemployed people that used the interruption of traffic as a mobilization strategy.

entation and projects. The analysis of political disputes on the content of citizens' participation, and in particular, on the strategies in the struggle to combat poverty, is one of the contributions of this study.

Gonzalo de la Maza and Carlos Ochsenius' study of Chile shows how the virtuous confluence of "political projects" (Dagnino, 2003) originating in civil and political societies, which were both mobilized to rebuild democracy in Chile, was not enough to guarantee the expected democratization of State and society. According to the authors, part of the explanation is found in both the institutional conditions of the Chilean political transition itself, which impeded the political majority that had been in the government since 1990 to exercise its power more completely (Garretón 2000), and the non-participatory character of the project developed by the *Concertación* governments. In effect, the authors consider that the end of the Pinochet period and the transition to democracy were based on a political pact that ensured the preservation of the neoliberal political model, preserved military power quotas and sanctioned an elitist and highly segmented conception of democracy. This political arrangement allowed the reconstitution of an institutional political system of representative democracy that has, until now (with possibilities for future change), functioned in such a way as to block the deepening of democratic participation and the strengthening of civil society.

Chile is usually presented as a successful case of the application of the neoliberal economic model in which the notion of citizen participation is depoliticized and reduced to its most instrumental aspects in the provision of services. Nonetheless, a new and growing idea has some sectors of civil society attempting to build new spaces of participation and local negotiation between authorities and citizens. These experiences are still poorly developed and unarticulated, but they also demonstrate the growing dissemination of ideas and aspirations for participatory democracy throughout the region.

In Mexico, the cases studied by Ernesto Isunza (2006) point to the fragmented and experimental existence of a participatory democracy project in some "interfaces"¹⁰ of government and civil society interaction which are defined around specific fields of public policy. As we shall see, the Mexican democratic project is still in an initial phase, designed and implemented as a set of micro co-management projects, and not yet articulated as a more general proposal.

In the case of the HIV-Aids Council, Isunza shows that the combination of a high level of activism on the part of organizations of AIDS-infected people and the attitude of openness that was shown by the federal government's Secretariat of Health during 2002-2004 opened the doors for the formation of councils that were given decision-making and evaluation functions. These councils were made up of citizens (representatives from these organizations, health-related NGO's,

10 Interfaces: places and moments of interaction between social and political actors, limited by institutions or normalized practices, in which conflicting views and interests are put forward, publicized and negotiated.

and some university researchers) and civil servants in the public health sector in charge of the implementation of AIDS related programs. The case study indicates that, as long as the authority of the civil servants was not questioned, the Council was able to operate almost as an instance of co-management, in which the HIV bearers and their allies were heard. The public space created by these councils was open, deliberative and at the same time, a locus of decision-making. However, when the operational efficiency of the civil servant staff came under questioning, the Council was then boycotted by the government representatives. However, the Council constitutes the example that is most similar to the management councils in Brazil, although applied in this case only to the specific case of people living with HIV-Aids.

In the case of the Federal Electoral Institute (*Instituto Federal Electoral* - IFE), Isunza argues that the organizational model of the institution responsible for the coordination of Mexico's federal elections constitutes a democratic innovation in the context of a country that has only recently emerged from political authoritarianism. The FEI created a General Council made up of nine citizens who were designated by the federal Chamber of Deputies to be in charge of the organization of elections. These nine people were selected in 1996 on the basis of their personal autonomy in relation to political parties and their professional or academic prestige. Upon conceding them real power in supervising and making decisions on elections, these counsellors then acquired notable power over the administrative apparatus of the IFE and thus created a space of relative autonomy in relation to the government and to political parties. Applying this same model to 32 local councils—one for each state in the republic—and in the nation's 300 electoral districts, the principle of the so-called "citizenization" (*ciudadanización*) of the IFE has allowed the organization of elections to stay firmly in the hands of politically independent citizens that have authority over the professional electoral bureaucracy.

Although this institution cannot be considered part of a participatory democracy model, it does contain some elements of the latter, to the extent that it establishes *de facto* co-management between symbolic representatives of Mexican citizens and those of the government, within the framework of an autonomous institution that has been created specifically for that purpose. Isunza gives prominence to this form of "transversal accountability" that consists of an institutionally established space for the definition and application of public policy, with citizen representatives who "penetrate" State structures. The participatory nature of this institution can be questioned on two different bases. Firstly, there is a problem in the fact that citizen representatives are chosen by the Chamber of Deputies, that is politicians, rather than by civil society. This circumstance imposes a structural limitation on the institution, making it dependent on the decisions of a State institution. Secondly, a flaw lies in the fact that real citizens' participation is only sporadic, occurring every three years and operating according to rules and norms previously established within a strict margin of action and decision-making.

Felipe Hevia (2006), in his analysis of participation in Latin American constitutions, demonstrates how they have come to reflect normative understandings that were produced in the region, in the cycle of transition to democracy. In effect, as has already been pointed out, almost all South American nations, beginning in 1988, have participated in the wave of elaborating new constitutions, whereas Central American and Caribbean countries (with the exception of Nicaragua) and México have not. Hevia has observed that in most of the new constitutions the principle of citizens' participation has been directly or indirectly included, with Venezuela and Nicaragua as the most explicit and extensive cases. Nonetheless, the author notes that there is considerable distance between the content of these constitutions, as abstract legal discourse, and the real possibilities of implementing such measures. This is most often not contemplated by constitutional precepts and require another legislative cycle (secondary legislation, regulation, etc.) that does not always come about. The inclusion of participation is linked to the constitutional recognition of diverse mechanisms of direct democracy, a process that has made it possible to legalize the plebiscite, the referendum and the "popular consultation" (*consulta popular*) in almost all South American countries. Nevertheless, these legal resources have seldom been used in practice, with Uruguay as the only real exception. Furthermore, the only countries that have legalized the possibility to revoke a mandate are Peru and Venezuela; in the latter case, this resource was in fact implemented through a nation-wide vote which proved quite traumatic and ended in the ratification of President Chavez' mandate.

If, from a juridical point of view, there has been enormous progress in Latin America related to participatory democracy, in practice citizens' participation remains quite limited and is concentrated mainly in Brazil, where management councils in the area of health continue to represent the most successful example of a mechanism established by the constitution that operates at the national level, notwithstanding the practical difficulties they faced. The other major Brazilian contribution to participation, participatory budgeting (OP), lacks an explicit constitutional base. This demonstrates that democratic innovation does not necessarily require legal spaces specifically designed to ensure the materialization of participatory practices.

FINAL REMARKS

In order to contextualize this analysis of the participatory project in Latin America, it is necessary to mention briefly its opposite –the neoliberal project. The conceptions of citizenship, civil society and participation formulated by the neoliberal project intend to depoliticize and represent what we might call a minimalist view of politics. This view, which reacts against broadening the political sphere –the exact democratization effort that the participatory democracy project has struggled to carry out– is translated into its opposite: the reduction of spaces, subjects, themes and processes that have been considered essential to politics. If a broad view of politics includes civil society as a legitimate political arena

and emphasizes citizenship as a process that establishes political subjects, than the minimalist version of politics is based on, firstly, the selective reduction of civil society to specific types of organizations, with the subsequent exclusion of other actors, and on the redefinition of its role, which becomes a compensation for State absences in the implementation of social policies. The very substitution of the term civil society for that of Third Sector is indicative of this new function and demonstrates that an attempt is being made to remove the essential part that civil society plays as the foundation of the political domain. The latter becomes once again limited to political society. Self-denominated as a-political, the Third Sector reinforces a statist definition of power and politics –one that participatory democracy’s view of civil society as confronting the monopoly of power by the State and political society has been directed against.¹¹

Secondly, these policies and the issues that they address are treated strictly from a technical or philanthropic angle. As a consequence, poverty and inequality are withdrawn from the public (political) arena and from their own dominion –that of justice, equality and citizenship. The distribution of social services and benefits increasingly replaces the space for human rights and citizenship, obstructing the demand for rights –there is no place left for this, since their distribution depends entirely on the good will and competence of the sectors involved. Even more insidiously, obstacles block the formulation of rights, notions of citizenship and the very enunciation of the public (Telles, 2001). Thirdly, the privatization of the most urgent issues in Latin American countries – poverty and inequality – contrasts starkly with recent efforts to create public spaces for the discussion of these and other issues of public interest that are defended by the democratic project as ways of broadening the political debate so that conflict between divergent interests can be publicly exposed and negotiated within democratic parameters.¹²

In contrast to a conception that recognizes conflict as central to public life and democracy as the best way of dealing with it, the neoliberal vision attempts to confine conflict or make it invisible by giving it a technocratic and managerial treatment. This characteristic of the neoliberal project is at the root of the critique by those who consider it to be a “fascist pluralism” (Santos, 1999) or a kind of totalitarianism centered on the triad of “privatization of the public, destitution of speech and annulment of politics” (Oliveira, 1999).

11 *The most common accusation made by governments and conservative media against social movements, such as the Landless Peasants Movement (Movimento dos Sem Terra) in Brazil, is that they “are political” -- this is symbolic of this restrictive view of politics.*

12 *In Brazil, the contrast between these two projects as far the depoliticization of the process of creating and implementing social policies goes, was paradigmatically expressed in the elimination, during the very early days of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s presidency, of the Conselho de Segurança Alimentar, substituted by the Conselho da Comunidade Solidária (Telles, 2001; Almeida, this volume).*

Without considering the merit of these evaluations, the approach in our book offers a distinct emphasis: the need to illuminate the differences, conflicts and disputes among the political projects that are currently present in the political scene. Otherwise, it is possible for fatalism to replace the euphoria that was present in countries such as Brazil during the decades of the 1980s and early 1990s, in which the dynamics of building democracy, nourished by a favorable environment and the visibility of social movements, contributed to a simplified view of what the democratization process would look like and the dimensions of the disputes that would unfold within it.

Perhaps we have overestimated the political strength of one side involved in the struggle and thus minimized the power of its adversaries. The practical and overwhelming revelation is that what seemed to be a linear and ascendant process was in fact met by contradictions, limits, dilemmas, unequal paces, which seems to make us forget that political dispute is an intrinsic and essential element of building and deepening democracy. Recognizing and elaborating on the permanence of this struggle, carefully examining its characteristics, seems to be a procedure that can contribute to elucidating the dilemmas and overcoming the limits that confront us today.

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