

LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

A Comparative Perspective: Neighborhood Councils in France, Community Development in the United States, and the “Participatory Budget” in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

Draft

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"The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied (...) Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborhood community"

John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*

In a lot of countries, citizens' participation seems to become an important topic in the public sphere, most notably in urban areas that face social difficulties. It seems that there is continuity between urban policy and citizens' participation, in a virtuous circle can be developed between reconstruction of social ties, more efficient administration and participatory politics. In this direction, a recently proposed French law about local democracy would make it obligatory to establish neighborhood councils in towns with more than 20,000 residents. This initiative is undertaken with the understanding that geographical proximity enables more effective governance and the development of a more active citizenship. However, such a "locally based democracy" remains rather vague with respect to its goals and procedures. In France, the concern with local governance developed out of urban social movements and the politics of self-management in the 1970s, resulting in several experiments of limited scope and duration. Still, they influenced the move towards state decentralization and were among the first steps towards enabling the *politique de la ville*, a state initiative focused on the neediest neighborhoods. While this local based movement has expanded and has become a key player in major urban management projects, such mobilizations have by and large involved the middle-class, remaining weaker in the more "difficult" neighborhoods which are often the focus of urban policy.

On the other hand, the idea of governance has become more and more popular in the academic literature and, partially, among some institutional actors. The term has been used in quite different-and very often vague-meanings. It seems to imply at least four elements. The first is the presence of different levels of public actors in any particular policy; the second is a private/public partnership that goes beyond traditional patterns; the third is a new policy style that is oriented towards an experimental problem-solving process rather than being a mere application of previous decisions taken by the state hierarchy. The last is a more informal decision-making,

partly uncoupled from democratic formal procedures. Together with the European integration, urban policies have usually been considered as a major dimension of governance. It is thus not surprising that urban governance and local citizenship seem to develop an elective affinity, in which participatory democracy seems to be the main intermediary. Still, what is really participatory democracy, and what could it be? What effects does it have, and could it have, on urban governance? Conversely, does urban governance signify a real progress for democracy? In the French case, what then might we expect from the establishment of neighborhood councils? Beyond France, to what extent will an active citizenship become a part of the frameworks of urban governance? Under what conditions might such councils or other types of participatory frameworks improve democracy?

In this paper we will provide a comparative analysis of three different examples of local governance: the neighborhood councils in France, the community development movement in the United States, and the “participatory budget” in Porto Alegre (Brazil). Each of these provides examples of enhanced urban governance and a deepening of local democracy in lower-class neighborhoods (which are of particular interest for the questions raised above, since the problems of urban governance are more evident in these areas as is the “democratic deficit”). However, their approaches are not identical, as they are situated within different contexts and they involve very different kinds of dynamics. We will first briefly present the three experiences, before analyzing their shared objectives and contrasted results. In a third part, we will see how these three examples of local governance have answered common challenges that any attempt to develop participatory democracy has to face.

The French “Politique de la ville”: A Dynamic Initiated by the State

In France, the *politique de la ville* began to be elaborated at the end of the 1970s and was institutionalized in the 1980s. Coming out of a policy of “affirmative action” (that only partially compensated for the extensive prior and present discriminations), priority was given to neighborhoods deemed to be the most in need (based upon various socio-economic criteria) and following extensive political negotiation. This approach was comprehensive and based on a notion of “partnership,” even though “partnership” was conceived of in mostly institutional terms and had little to do with the private sector. This turn represents an effort to reform administration and state institutions in neighborhoods that confront some of the most difficult social issues. Pursued by successive governments of both the Left and the Right, this policy has been subject to significant debate. The call for participation has represented one of its key characters, but has

been partially contradictory. On the one hand, it has promoted a model of local development which relies upon the potentialities of local communities and which looks to local residents to be the agents of social transformation. On the other hand, it has progressively been reoriented toward the regional level. Furthermore, in invoking the need for “social diversity,” it has made the nearly absent middle-class the privileged actor in these neighborhoods. In this context, several cities in France have established neighborhood councils coming with a more decentralized provision of administration and public services. These initiatives have been very heterogeneous in both their organizational form and their modes of functioning. However, they have shared certain similar characteristics: usually they have been top-down initiatives (even if they have sometimes institutionalized preexisting neighborhood committees) and have remained merely consultative, restricted to local-level politics and limited in terms of participation.

The Community Development Movement in the United States: Institutionalization of Grass-Roots Organizations

The community development movement in the United States also represents a territorial approach to poverty. It affirms, above all, the capacity of individuals and social or ethnic groups for self-organization, rather than a public policy of urban change. While it has developed appreciably over the past twenty years, this movement is rooted in American history and culture. It valorizes the “community” as an intermediary between individuals and the state and comes out of a grassroots orientation that places “ordinary people” in opposition to powerful elites. The current movement comes out of several particular historical traditions: the Progressive Movement and the first settlement houses of the late 19th century, urban protests of the 1930s, and the urban social movements and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In response to extensive urban organizing in the 1970s, the Federal government provided more community development funding and passed a law requiring banks to invest in marginalized neighborhoods. Then, in the 1980s, cuts in government funding for many activities (such as housing) led many neighborhood associations, and especially Community Development Corporations (CDCs), to “professionalize” and turn more toward the private sector in search of subsidies and financial support. Today, these CDCs constitute a “third sector”, intermediary between capitalist economy and the state. They are key players in the governance and development of inner-city neighborhoods, building, rehabilitating, and managing housing; running health and cultural centers; and engaging in economic development, social work, and urban planning. These associations represent, at least partially, those who live in the neighborhoods in which they operate. Even though about one-half

of their funding comes from the private sector, their “empowerment” approach enables concerned individuals and groups to develop their capacity for “action.”

Porto Alegre Participatory Budget: Joining Top-down and Bottom-up Initiatives

The participatory budget in Porto Alegre was introduced in the late 1980s. This experience has developed within the context of a transition to democracy in Brazil along with Porto Alegre long history of strong progressive traditions, in a city in which the weight of social inequalities and corruption is comparatively less than in the rest of Brazil. The participatory budget came out of a meeting between the Workers Party (PT)’s local government and neighborhood associations that were especially active in the outskirts of the city. The success of the participatory budget has led to the implementation of some ten similar projects in other parts of Brazil and Latin America. Its most distinctive characteristic is the elaboration of a municipal budget via a co-decision between the executive and a participatory pyramid that incorporates both territorial and thematic dimensions. The elected city council basically just signs off on orientations that have been decided upon during the budgetary process. The various neighborhood and thematic participatory councils establish prioritized lists of concerns that are subsequently considered at the city level within a budgetary matrix that allocates resources according to a range of criteria (including the strength of constituents’ participation, the population of the neighborhood and an affirmative action plan that gives additional resources to the poorest areas). This experience has brought forth an undeniably strong mobilization of lower-class constituents resulting in a qualitative shift in public investment toward lower-class neighborhoods and concerns. Despite various limitations, the process has enabled a kind of democratic education. It has also led to the development of an active citizenship among those who had, until recently, been only outsiders regarding institutionalized politics.

Shared Objectives, Different Results

These three experiences involve different dynamics with respect to the relationship between city residents, neighborhood associations, and public institutions, as well as with respect to the articulation of local and more general concerns. However, each of the three involves a locally based governance model and a participatory orientation concerning three allegedly complementary objectives. The first involves a “functional” concern with enhancing city

administration by incorporating the know-how of local residents. The second aims to address social issues by reconstituting “social ties” (in France), the “community” (in the United States) or in prioritizing lower-class issues (in Porto Alegre). The third is more political and involves the development of participatory democracy by creating new arenas of deliberation and debate. These objectives are, however, posed in different terms and come out of different contexts in each of the three cases. Therefore, they entail quite different expectations.

Enhanced City Administration

First, all three of these cases aim to address inadequacies in city-level administration by pursuing some notion of public officials governing “along with” city residents. In the French case, this involves a process of state-initiated reform of public policies. Its goal is enabling on the neighborhood scale decentralization together with multi-levels governance involving various administrations, and to develop a comprehensive public-private partnership that incorporates ongoing consultation with local residents. The state may occasionally delegate some projects that the public sector is no more able to undertake to neighborhood associations, but such a delegation remains rather marginal and tightly controlled. Further, “intermediary organizations” between state institutions and local residents are rarely the result of grass-roots politics and they remain completely beholden to the state or city that provides their finances.

The American experience is quite different as it involves the institutionalization of a third sector via operational and entrepreneurial activities connected with urban social movements. The community development dynamic derives its legitimacy from being rooted in local politics, and community-level associations are, most of all, the expression and tool of a collective undertaking. They usually represent the interests of a local or ethnic group. Intervention in an arena of public service such as education or the police is generally from the perspective of residents organizing to enable some element of local control or influence. Still, this raises the risk of establishing an understanding of neighborhood politics and governance that is quite fragmented and lacking an overall perspective. Indeed, faced with massive cuts in the Federal government by successive Republican and Democrat administrations, community development organizations increasingly have been seen as a substitute for state action, providing neo-liberal government officials with a good means of reneging on any responsibility for public housing or local economy.

By contrast, in Porto Alegre, reform of state administration has been explicitly linked to a participatory approach. The primary aim of this approach has been to enhance qualitatively the understanding of local needs, to increase the transparency and efficiency of city government via

popular control, and to fight against the endemic corruption in Brazil (though this has been relatively less extensive in Porto Alegre). The goal has been enabling an active city administration capable of providing feasibility studies and of rapidly undertaking projects, in dialogue with local residents. It has served to convince city civil servants of the benefits of the participatory process, even when they were not particularly sympathetic with the Workers Party (PT). While such an objective may not have been clear from the start, the process also seems to have favored the constitution of a third sector (most notably with cooperative kindergartens). The success of this experience has also rested upon a significant level of municipal regulation of the private sector, most notably in the area of transportation, micro-business and large-scale commerce. This state regulation involves more of a dynamic partnership than authoritarian state control.

Transformation of Social Relations

The French concern with the dissolution of “social ties” is similar to the American concern with the loss of “social capital,” defined as the existence of ties, norms, and trust that enable coordination and cooperation in a group or within society. In the United States, this approach differentiates the “bonding capital”, that brings a community together by creating internal ties, from the “bridging capital”, that opens a community to the outside. It emphasizes the inherent threat of anomie that comes with the loss of social capital, but also stresses the importance of social ties for reskilling in marginalized areas. From this perspective then, Community Development Corporations are doubly important, serving to mobilize local residents and acting as a partner relative to larger-scale political and economic entities. However, it should be noted that, as with the concept of “social ties,” the notion of “social capital” as it is generally used in the United States does not incorporate an understanding of social inequalities or social relations of domination. Rather, it entails a concern with individuals being able to “live together” (in France) or to escape social isolation (in the United States). This is not the case in Brazil where the participatory approach is led by a discourse that stresses social inequalities and conflicts and is particularly oriented toward the working- and lower-class. Participation is supposed to be an important tool in the struggle against a globalization that is at the exclusive benefit of the financial capital. The Workers Party (PT) in Porto Alegre has an ideology rooted in the tradition of direct democracy, but it has displaced the focus of direct democracy from the factory councils to the neighborhood assemblies. It also has integrated the Republican tradition of the Southern Rio Grande, i.e. the idea that the state has to govern for everybody and not rest upon patronizing

relationships. At the end of the eighties, the Workers Party had a debate in order to decide whether it had to govern for the people as a whole or for workers. As a result, in accordance with the Gramscian problematic of hegemony, it decided that one has to do both: to govern for (and with) “the people” in the double sense of the word, the entire citizenship and the lower class.

Extending Democracy

Finally, these three experiences have a peculiar political dimension that aims to reinforce democracy by developing its participatory dimension. In France, participatory democracy is understood as a micro-local complement to representative government. It enables locally elected officials to have direct contacts with their constituency or, more precisely, to the community leaders and to the most active citizens. However, while such contact is considered important for the legitimacy of public policies, the decision-making power remains a monopoly of elected officials and public administrators. They are deemed to be the only ones capable of defining the general interest after having listened to the various particular local interests.

By contrast, in the United States, “grassroots democracy” has its own dynamic, without necessarily having to articulate directly with elected officials. Further, organizations emanating from the grassroots often have an effective decision-making capacity. As long as they have relationships with public officials and administrators, local organizations are lobbying more or less strongly. The “empowerment” perspective thus seems to carry with it a dynamic of counter-power (this has been particularly at stake with the black movement, which was concerned with transforming the black community itself by gaining power in a number of important arenas). However, along with their institutionalization, many community associations have developed a much more consensual approach in which “empowerment” has come to mean integration into the mainstream via property ownership and jobs. In any case, while CDCs may be working to make minority issues more visible and legitimate, they have left the existing representative system of government virtually intact.

This is not the case in Porto Alegre, where the concern with participatory democracy implies the explicit transfer of important areas of power from the representative system of government to a different type of framework. Of the wide range of possible forms of direct democracy (which might be based upon referendum or lot), Porto Alegre participatory democracy has been based upon local assemblies open to every citizen. The goal of the participatory budget oscillates between a utopian vision of a disappearing state apparatus, and a pragmatic affirmation of a new division of power where citizens who participate (often identified as “the people” with a

clear understanding that this term carries a class sense) will benefit from having a central role in the political process. Participatory democracy allegedly will stop the private appropriation of the state by the ruling classes and rehabilitate politics against the growing power of the financial capital. In fact, a process of co-management has been developed in which the city executive and the participatory framework co-decide the main investments and redistributive justice has notably improved. The legislative power seems nearly an outsider in this dynamic¹.

The Efficiency Challenge

Over and above their parallels and differences, these three examples face similar challenges, which they are each responding to in quite different ways. The first challenge is that of efficiency. It is quite common to place efficiency and democracy in opposition. The elitist vision that supports such a position has historically taken various forms, moving from a classic aristocratic view to a paternalist State-focused republicanism to a contemporary discourse that invokes “expertise.” What might we learn then with respect to this issue from the various participatory approaches considered here?

In France, few evaluations assessing the overall effects of urban policy and neighborhood councils have been undertaken. However, many monographs have documented the positive effects of such experiences at the micro-local level. The designation of an official in charge of coordinating all public interventions in a neighborhood, in conjunction with regular public meetings of local representatives with the public, may facilitate effective responses to daily issues. These dispositions may help build more constructive relations between local residents and public institutions. But, as positive as this dynamic might be, it remains quite limited. While at times it has brought a reform of the internal structure of municipal administration, it has rarely led to an overall change of administrative issues and orientations. “Participation” has generally remained a mutual exchange of information. The key issues have never been subject to debate. Participation has therefore been more a question of how best to incorporate at the micro-local level what has been already decided upon at a higher level.

In this regard, community associations in the United States have gone much further. Given cutbacks in state activities, community level organizations have had to be quite inventive and have developed very innovative and effective forms of management and governance, creating many opportunities for local residents to exercise significant influence. However, they are

¹ Since the new 1988 democratic Constitution, the representative government is organized following a presidential scheme at all levels of the Brazilian political system (towns, states and federation). This usually implies a relatively weak power of the municipal council, and the participatory dynamics have further weakened it.

confronted with a structural fragility that is linked to their relentless search for adequate financing, making it difficult to undertake a more long-term strategy. Caught up in an entrepreneurial logic of sorts, CDCs face the contradiction of working to enable their on-going viability while also remaining true to their social concerns.

Porto Alegre, on the other hand, seems quite unaffected by such a contradiction. Its success is exemplary in terms of governance, and the World Bank and the UNO (hardly to be suspected of Left-extremist sympathies) has given it awards for excellence. Its success is due to a large extent to the pragmatism of the Workers Party's municipal governments. They have managed to maintain a radical perspective while at the same time being able to revise their initial objectives when they did not correspond to concerns expressed by local residents or when confronted with unfavorable power relations. The participatory structure has certainly contributed in a decisive manner to this flexibility by progressively increasing communication between political leaders and various segments of the population, and by enabling a real popular control of city government.

On the whole, an examination of these three examples shows that by incorporating the know-how of residents, the governance of local neighborhoods has been enhanced. Thus, elitist prejudices about a loss of efficiency appear to be quite weak. However, the participatory dimension of local governance remains has limited effects when accompanied by the withdrawal of the state or when it remains merely within a micro-local perspective.

The Participatory Challenge

The second challenge is that of participation. To various degrees, it is at issue in any contemporary democracies. In effect, it is a paradox to ask citizens to be interested in official politics when they are virtually excluded from any effective decision making power. Further, the weaker citizens' economic and educational capital, the less they participate in institutionalized forms of politics. Thus, how might endeavors that are explicitly based upon participation confront this double difficulty? In the three cases studied here, participation remains quantitatively limited. The number of involved residents rarely surpasses one percent in the French neighborhood councils, and rates of participation are equally weak in the United States. Even in Porto Alegre, where the participatory process is extensive and growing, only 20,000-50,000 persons² (out of a population of one million and three hundred thousand inhabitants) have been involved in each round of budgetary deliberations. Thus, while the circle of political activity has noticeably

expanded, it is far from incorporating *all* of the city's residents. In addition, participation remains quite unequal among different social classes and it is difficult, therefore, to talk about statistical representation. This "avant-garde" represents different sectors in each country. In France, as in the United States, the most precarious sectors of the population, and the youngest, are rarely present and they are less *active subjects* in participatory proceedings, even though they are often the *objects* of debate³. If CDCs offer a sort of training ground and a form of representation for ethnic minorities, they were created largely at the initiative of middle-class community organizers and their more recent professionalization has not contributed to opening a larger terrain for those without formal qualifications to participate. In France, those from immigrant backgrounds remain outsiders in the neighborhood councils. Thus, the distortions that characterize representative democracy are found also in these participatory instances, though attenuated.

The situation is more balanced in Porto Alegre. It is, in fact, quite remarkable that the lower classes have been involved to a greater extent than the middle and upper classes, at least in meetings at the neighborhood and district levels. Yet, this is not so much the case at other levels of the participatory pyramid: until the last round of the participatory budget, some of the preexisting social inequities used to affect the election of district delegates to the participatory councils, and the middle-classes and corporate interests used to be strongly represented in the "thematic" assemblies⁴.

The explanation for such different results is to be found by and large in the differing local political contexts (with the Brazilian middle-class, for instance, having a much weaker participatory tradition than their French and American counterparts). It is also due to the manner in which the more popular classes are incorporated into the participatory frameworks. The way in which marginalized groups are identified within these various collectivities thus appears to be determinant with respect to their on-going political participation. The contrast between France and the United States in this respect is striking. For instance, ethnic minorities are structured in a different manner in American neighborhoods where their participation is considered quite legitimate in community life. This contributes to their strong presence in local public arenas. Thus, the various public discourses have a performative effect. The rhetoric of "social diversity" that is hegemonic in France tends to overlook those from the lower class who are not affiliated or identified with the categories of diversity that are valorized. This has a negative effect on political organizing, and the social domination is increased by a political one. Further, an emphasis upon

² The number varies according to the scale. It is smaller during the general assemblies of the 16 local constituencies, and bigger during the neighborhood assemblies.

³ By way of contrast we note the rather strong presence and weight of women in these participatory proceedings.

⁴ According to the last enquiries, it seems that the impact of social inequalities on the election of delegates in the participatory structure has been strongly reduced in 2001.

consensual decision-making has similar effects by imposing a more technical or managerial logic in decision-making, pushing those involved to come to an agreement about what can “work” in regard to the present situation, instead of addressing the inequalities and social relations of domination that may pertain in various instances. By contrast, the emphasis given in Porto Alegre to organizing and ensuring adequate representation for those from the “lower-class” and the recognition given to social conflict does suggest a strong political orientation toward a concern with promoting social transformations. This enables the recognition of lower-class sectors and favors their incorporation into political processes. The north-American notion of “empowerment” is thus situated between these two poles: it clearly denotes an emancipatory approach but too often becomes simply a call for personal responsibility. When the more systemic aspects of political processes are not adequately taken into account, it tends to contribute, paradoxically, to the maintenance of subordinate groups in subordinated and marginalized positions.

The Challenge of Institutionalization

The third challenge for participatory approaches is that of institutionalization. While successful institutionalization has enabled social movements to establish themselves over time and has facilitated their ability to make strong demands, it has also brought the danger of the leadership being co-opted in key areas of responsibility as well as the loss of autonomy relative to the state. Too often institutionalization has resulted in leaders becoming cut-off from their “base” along with a bureaucratization of the movement. The actual danger of this occurring is, of course, inversely proportional to the initial strength of the social movement. It is also why the distance between leaders of neighborhood-level organizations and the rest of the population is the greatest in the French case. If new forms of interaction between political leaders and local residents are developing and replacing some of the older partisan groupings, they hardly involve the majority of citizens who are increasingly distant from the institutionalized political system. On the whole, the *politique de la ville* seems to have remained a *policy* rather than having become a true *politics*.

In the United States, with the retreat of the state, the problem is a bit different with respect to CDCs. Here it is less co-optation by the state apparatus that threatens the on-going relations between residents and leaders of the community development movement, but more a managerial type of professionalization-which is almost inevitable when criteria based upon management and productivity are used to enable a relationship with the private sector. Professionalization in this

sense seems the greatest when CDCs are involved in managing existing projects, becoming at times veritable purveyors of social services.

Even Porto Alegre has some difficulties with the challenge of institutionalization. The Workers Party (PT) has developed out of a strong social movement that struggled against the former dictatorship and for social justice. The Party now governs cities and states in which millions of people are living, among others the state of Rio Grande do Sul. In Porto Alegre, the state's capital, a lot of grassroots activists have joined the PT and a large part of the party animators are active either in the city government or in the state government. Despite the sincere concern with maintaining autonomous civil institutions, co-optation of a part of the community's leadership and the constitution of a class of powerful political leaders after four successive terms in office constitute, in this regard, a significant problem. It offsets, in part, the strength of the ongoing new energies that have been actualized by the participatory approach. The future remains an open question in this respect, with a permanent democratic revolution difficult to envision within the framework of a democracy that largely remains that of a semi-oligarchy.

The Challenge of Scale

While local-level democracy enables political debate to be rooted in concrete issues, it carries at least two limitations. The first, which is well known, is the *NIMBY* phenomenon (*Not In My Back Yard*). It is the more conservative side of local politics coming out of individualized and fragmented interests. The second entails the potential for discouragement or, indeed, even a sense of culpability that may accompany the call to resolve locally problems that go beyond the local level, without also furnishing adequate means to address the larger issues or even to pose the more general conditions needed for more extensive and comprehensive social change. A stigmatization of local areas and the populations concerned accompanies all too often such political impotence. This is the case, for instance, with educational issues and problems of social violence when they are couched in terms of parental negligence. Thus, the ability to place local issues within a more general context appears to be a crucial component for carrying out an effective local-level politics. The participatory movement in Porto Alegre seems to have been able to place itself within such a framework by connecting local-level debates, governance, and projects for social change with political transformation at the city and even state level.

For different reasons, in the two other cases the margin of intervention for local residents has remained at the neighborhood level, like an island. In addition, in France, the participatory

approach has involved almost exclusively the neediest neighborhoods and, as such, has been part of very particular interventions that have not been a part of larger political projects.

Local-Level Democracy or Participatory Democracy?

The deliberative dimension of the local-level approaches addressed here seem essentially to be aimed at responding to the contradictions inherent in such an approach. This is an ambitious project: for, in order to exist; the arena for deliberations must develop a dynamic that is distinct from paternalist or elitist logics and, especially, from technocratic or market-based rationalities. This cannot be accomplished without including all of those concerned and this, in itself, is a difficult goal in societies rife with inequalities and where many of the underlying dynamics mirrors entrenched dominant relations of inequality. At least, then, it becomes a question of moving in this direction to the extent possible, and this cannot occur without a strong political will. The legitimacy of this process cannot be purely procedural; it also must rely upon substantial and on-going popular participation.

In any case, democratic deliberation does not eliminate social conflicts. Rather, it gives them a particular form and enables particular outcomes that would not exist otherwise without such avenues for political expression. In part these conflicts reflect issues that are not simply at play at the local level as well as problems that are not simply regional (in the area of work relations, for instance), so that if the arena for democratic deliberation is only built at the local or city level it will always remain rather limited. Nor does it suffice to remain at an ideological level since this soon becomes rather vague and lifeless. It is only by building participatory instances that come out of existing issues and that have a sufficient margin for action and initiative so as to enable those involved to be able to truly influence local governance. Informed public deliberation requires both an intense level of participation and the real development of a citizenship that has a true decision-making capacity. This can only occur with a politicization, in the true sense of the term, for participatory democracy is not reducible to local-level politics.

From this perspective then, conceiving of citizens' participation as simply a complement to representative democracy is quite limited, as the example of the neighborhood councils in France clearly shows. Yet, also community-level participation that is disconnected from the political sphere, a sort of grassroots democracy without clear outlets in the political realm as in the case of the United States, has few means for influencing events beyond the local level. Thus, American community development organizations remain trapped in their role as service providers or, at best, as lobbyists. In Porto Alegre, however, a much stronger overall dynamic is at play,

since participation in this case does function to some extent as a counterweight to representative democracy and, thereby, as a new political force or power. Though, as we have seen, this experience is not wholly free of difficulties that in large part are due to the dilemmas associated with any form of direct democracy.

No unique model or miracle recipe can be found in looking at these three examples of participatory governance. Each is shaped by its own particular local and national culture and context, with each carrying particular possibilities and limitations. Nor are any of them directly transferable. In Porto Alegre an unprecedented approach is being developed that brings together an extensive popular political base with a project of institutional transformation. The American community development movement has a local strength and an undeniable vitality, but remains limited to this level. In France, the potential interaction of a strong public sector with a sought after “third sector” could open interesting possibilities. For now, the experience remains rather timid. To build upon these experiences means undertaking a qualitative transformation and the multiplication of local-level experiments and organizations. Participatory has to be something more than a local complement to representative democracy in order to liberate all its potential and transform the meaning and the real dynamic of local governance. And the notion of governance has to go beyond a reasoning focused on the “management of politics” from above, beyond an evaluation focused upon governability problems, and it has to address the question of the impact of social inequalities upon public action in order to bring a significant analysis to the understanding of the present.

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