

# Delaware Review of Latin American Studies

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Vol. 17 No. 3 December 31, 2016

***The Limits to Citizen Power: Participatory Democracy and the Entanglements of the State.*** Victor Albert. London: Pluto Press, 2016. 207 pages

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In the past three decades of democratic transitions and then democratic consolidation in Latin America, one recurrent theme in the scholarly literature has been the variety of initiatives developed in several countries to deal with the pervasive democratic deficit in the region. To address the existence of unresponsive governments, political class impunity, miscarriage of justice, unreliable provision of public services, and lack of transparency in government operations, the last thirty years have brought a ray of hope to Latin America with the implementation of mechanisms aiming to provide society with venues to intervene in the government decision-making process, more commonly called popular participation in politics and in public policy decisions. The results of these bold experiments in participatory democracy are mixed. Albert's sophisticated analysis explores the possibilities of new democratic tools tested in Latin American cities, as well as their limits as they face the longstanding practices of representative democracies, in a clash that Albert aptly calls *the entanglements of the state*.

The calls for reducing the democratic deficit and democratizing democracy have been the result of a wide revulsion with Latin America's notorious 500-year political and socioeconomic chasm, one that has provided to the elites the benefits of political and economic power and neglected the needs of the majority. In most countries, elites have benefited even more (through corruption, sweet government deals and impunity) during times when authoritarian governments, dictatorships, and military juntas suppressed speech, silenced the opposition and tortured and killed those caught in the strife, even if many were innocents. Not surprisingly then came the public clamor for government accountability and control by the people. In the 1980s several countries in the region got rid of authoritarianism to embrace civilian rule and democratic politics. It is against the backdrop of substantive political changes that Albert discusses participatory democracy with a focus on Brazil – likely the Latin American country where the notion of citizens' control and citizens' empowerment set deeper roots than in any other in the region. In fact, the 1988 Brazilian constitution was promulgated by a constituent assembly with provisions for citizens' participation in government decisions, particularly at the local level. It is worth mentioning that one of the constitution's changes having the most impact is its disapproval of centralized government through clauses that mandate the devolution of federal resources and responsibilities to sub-national levels of government—the states and cities.

Albert's case study of participatory democracy is the city of Santo André, one of the 39 municipalities of Greater São Paulo, Brazil's largest metropolitan region. With more than 600,000 residents, Santo André, together with São Bernardo and São Caetano are the ABC cities, an industrial hub and the birth place of the Workers' Party, whose platform has popular participation in governance at its core. It was in the ABC, in the late 1970s, when thousands of working class men and women from the auto industry started to mobilize for freedom and better living conditions under the leadership of Lula (Luiz Inácio da Silva), then a union activist who later (2002) was elected president of Brazil. The massive protests and labor strikes made an indelible contribution to the Brazilian democratic transition process which came about slowly starting in 1985. By 1988, *Andreenses* elected Mayor Celso Daniel, a charismatic Workers' Party politician who came to power with a mandate to make a reality of Henri Lefebvre's proposal from years earlier as the *right to the city*. Although it has been reinterpreted many times, Lefebvre's proposition is far from rhetorical as it calls for practices that integrate the urban poor with the formal city in hopes of eliminating from the public space the divisions, walls and other forms of city segregation that separate the haves and the have-nots and that are so pervasive in urban Latin America. Mayor Daniel, as cited by Albert, had a clear vision when he said that, ". . . the culture of rights is only going to come about by defeating the political culture of the privileged . . . when the state is subordinated to the needs of the society and is controlled by it" (p. 31). As the head of the municipal administration, Daniel implemented initiatives imbued with the notion of governance methods infused with public participation. After completing his first term in 1992, Daniel was re-elected (1993-1996). Years later in 2002 (after winning a new election for city mayor), he was brutally murdered; a tragedy that baffles Brazilians as the motives are still unknown today. Albert assigns to himself the monumental task of assessing the legacy of the participatory mechanisms put in place by Mayor Daniel. The author started his fieldwork in Santo André in 2007 to study the dynamics of three tools for democratizing democracy and empowering citizens' politically: participatory budgeting (*orçamento participativo*), participatory planning (*planejamento participativo*) and management policy councils (*conselhos gestores de políticas públicas*). Through impressive research skills, interviews and participant observation, Albert's objective is to test the extent to which participatory democracy

does or can challenge political authority (p.13) along the lines expressed by Mayor Daniel regarding the subordination of the state to the needs of the society.

Although the past two decades have seen a proliferation of participatory democracy studies focusing on Latin American countries in general, and particularly in Brazil, Albert's analysis stands out as it does not seek (as several others do) to measure precisely what citizens' participation in politics has accomplished in terms of improving the delivery of public services and whether popular intervention in the design of city budgets has brought benefits to the poor. Rather, Albert pursues an in depth understanding of the inner dynamics of the participatory budget assemblies and the management policy councils' meetings to advance knowledge of political participation through several lines of inquiry: to what extent is in fact participatory democracy a radical change in democratic politics, that is, one that advances the *right to the city*? Are participatory mechanisms *down-to-top* initiatives that put society in control of the state? Or are they, instead, *top-to-down* mechanisms that legitimize the political power of state officials?

Through his analysis, Albert successfully demonstrates that the *entanglements of the state* were evident in experiments with participatory democracy in Santo André (and, one must say, in any other city in Brazil where mayors implemented the practice). As a result of his numerous interviews with activists and participants in these participatory activities in that municipality, Albert suggests that participation cannot be dissociated from the state. On one hand, we cannot neglect the fact that calls for civil society participation in governance matters came (and usually comes) from the local state, and that participatory processes take place within formal, institutional spaces where state officials are not only present but also in control of the agenda. On the other hand, as Albert notes focusing on Santo André, the civil society, ". . . more ambitious demands were met by government intransigence."

This important book, therefore, brings to light an intractable problem in democratic politics— not only in Latin America but worldwide—the crisis of representation. One would assume that if representative democracy is not enough, if it is no longer an adequate conduit for citizens' aspirations, then participatory democracy would be the response. Yet the co-existence of the former and latter is more than often undermined by attempts to preserve state institutions no matter what, or perhaps more precisely, to preserve their power. Participatory mechanisms are important tools for enhancing the political education of citizens and to provide civil society with opportunities to influence government decision. Thus, they should be seen, valued and taken as a healthy complement to address the flaws of representative democracy.