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Separate but Equal Democratization?

Participation, Politics, and Urban Segregation
in Latin America

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Abstract

Many commentators have noted the existence of a historical correlation between cities and democratization. This image of the city as an inherently civic space is linked to the notion that the spatial concentration intrinsic to urban contexts promotes a democracy of proximity. Seen from this perspective, it is perhaps not surprising that the most urbanized region of the global south, Latin America, is also a heartland of vibrant and much applauded democratic innovation. Of particular note are the myriad local level 'radical democracy' initiatives that have proliferated throughout the region's cities during the past two decades. At the same time, however, it is a significant paradox that Latin American urban centres are also amongst the most segregated in the world, something that is widely considered to have a significantly fragmenting effect on public space, and is therefore undermining of democracy.

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1 Introduction

Many commentators have noted the existence of a historical correlation between cities and democratization (Dyson 2001: 83; Mumford 1995: 21). Whether implicitly or explicitly, this image of the city as an inherently civic space is fundamentally linked to the notion that the spatial concentration intrinsic to urban contexts promotes 'a democracy of proximity, of participation by all in the management of public affairs' (Borja and Castells 1997: 246). As Amin and Thrift (2004: 231) succinctly summarize:

> the city has very often been seen as a forcing ground for a politics of emancipation. Thus, the classical Graeco-Roman city is where the rule of democracy is supposed to have arisen, a democracy based upon the public deliberations of a supposedly 'free' citizenship... The medieval city, and later, the Renaissance city are held responsible for such seminal events as the rise of guild politics, the forging of institutions of civic republicanism and the principle of sanctuary based around the rise of independent city states. The Enlightenment city—through its institutions of learning, intellectual exchange, and secular science—is associated with the rise of universalism and a cosmopolitan ethos. And so on.

Seen from this perspective, it is perhaps not surprising that the most urbanized region of the global south, Latin America, is also a heartland of vibrant and much applauded democratic innovation. Of particular note are the myriad local level 'radical democracy' initiatives that have proliferated throughout the region's cities during the past two decades (see Van Cott 2008: 8). These are widely considered to have led to a fundamental 'reconfiguration of relationships and responsibilities' (Cornwall 2004: 1) in urban Latin America, devolving political decision-making to ordinary citizens through a process of decentralized public deliberation, rather than the delegation of authority to elected agents that is characteristic of more conventional forms of representative democracy. Over 250 cities in the region have implemented participatory forms of democratic governance (see Cabannes 2004: 27), and more are doing so every day. At the same time, however, it is a significant paradox that Latin American urban centres are also amongst the most segregated in the world, something that is widely considered to have a significantly fragmenting effect on public space (Pirez 2002), and is therefore undermining of democracy, and more specifically of the communicative processes upon which participatory democratic initiatives are founded.

This paper explores the logic of this apparent disjuncture, seeking to understand how it is that participatory democracy can flourish seemingly counter-intuitively in contemporary Latin America's 'fractured cities' (Koonings and Kruijt 2007). It begins by considering the theory and practice of participatory democracy in a broad-brush manner, in order to first highlight how such initiatives are not necessarily as inherently transformative as often thought to be, before then questioning the putative link that is often made between urban contexts and democratic practices. Drawing on Teresa Caldeira's (2008) recent research on 'neoliberal' participatory planning policies in São Paulo, Brazil, the paper then shows how participatory democratic initiatives can, in fact, actively promote urban segregation, to the extent that a heuristic parallel can be made with South African apartheid's notorious policy of 'separate but equal development'. What this dramatic comparison starkly highlights is how in order to be truly encompassing, participatory democratic practices need to be implemented within the context of a unifying and integrating governance framework that is ultimately

determined by broader political economy considerations. These, however, are particularly unfavourable in a contemporary Latin America characterized by extremely high levels of inequality and exclusion. The conclusion of the paper attempts to mitigate this rather depressing analysis by exploring how emancipatory democratic practices might nevertheless emerge in unpromising circumstances, drawing on the 'extraordinary events' framework recently proposed by Irazábal (2008), and illustrating it through a theoretical consideration of the contingent origins of the, at least initially, remarkable participatory budgeting process implemented in post-crisis Buenos Aires, Argentina.

2   Participatory democracy in theory and practice

In very general terms, participatory democratic initiatives can be said to concern an institutional model of governance that is based on a deliberative as opposed to a representational democratic framework. Rather than being organized around the delegation of decision-making to an elected agent, participatory democracy extends and enhances citizen participation in governance by devolving the exercise of authority through a process of bottom-up public deliberation. Intense personal interaction and collaboration generate mutual understandings and shared concerns, and consensual forms of governance are established through the persuasive transformation of preferences by force of communication and (the better) argument (see Avritzer 2002: 36-54). As such, it corresponds to 'a conception of the vitalization of democracy … through popular participation' (Harriss et al. 2005: 1), and is seen to be radically different forms to representative democracy. It is widely considered to be not only fairer, more inclusive, and leading to more efficient policies and decision-making, but is also widely thought to inherently transform individuals into better citizens, and enhance the quality of their life and government. At the same time, however, participatory democratic initiatives are not just bottom-up, voluntaristic forms of organization insofar as they are fundamentally state-centred processes, with the state remaining the principal medium for the enactment of the consensually agreed-upon 'common good'. To this extent, they can be said to involve a potentially fundamental transformation of this all-important connection between state and society by creating 'a new relationship between government personnel and local citizens' (Abers 1998: 511).

The best-known form of deliberative democracy is undoubtedly participatory budgeting. The forms of participatory budgeting are highly diverse, but the process basically involves citizens participating in forums for discussion about budgetary concerns, generally at the municipal level, although participatory budgeting has also been experimented with at the provincial state level. The central goal of participatory budgeting is to hand over decisions about the allocation of municipal funds for basic urban infrastructural improvements—paving streets, extending drainage, building new schools and health centres, etc.—to neighbourhood-level forums. The proportion of a municipal budget controlled by a participatory budgeting process can vary tremendously, from just a few per cent to the whole of the investment budget of a municipality; and some participatory budgeting processes—such as the one implemented in Buenos Aires, for example—seek to determine an order of public work priorization rather than a specific percentage of municipal spending (in some ways making them forms of participatory planning). Participatory budgeting has become extremely popular all over the world, and numerous cities in Africa, Asia, Europe, as well as North and South America, have implemented it, although undoubtedly the most

paradigmatic instance is that of Porto Alegre in Brazil, where participatory budgeting was actually first applied in 1989 (see Abers 2000; Baiocchi 2005; Wampler 2007).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider participatory democratic initiatives in anything other than a broad-brush manner.[1] But a striking element of the vast majority of studies about such processes is that few actually offer any concrete data regarding whether they make a difference in developmental terms. Although Abers (1998) argues that Porto Alegre enjoys better than average infrastructure and better performing public services than any other Brazilian city of comparable size and socio-economic profile that has not implemented participatory budgeting, it is striking to note that the Porto Alegre population voted out the Brazilian Workers' Party that implemented participatory budgeting, and elected a mayor, José Fogaça, who has explicitly criticized the process, and indeed, has been actively dismantling it (see Koonings 2009). What in fact clearly emerges from an even cursory survey of the literature is that many contributions are imbued with a significant romantic—and sometimes even fanatical— idealism. There is a widespread but not necessarily explicit view that participatory democratic initiatives are inherently transformative and will by the very force of their existence, sweep all before them. Suffice to point out in this respect that the American sociologist Erik Olin Wright's (2003) preface to the overview volume co-edited with Archon Fung is entitled 'The Real Utopias Project', while a comparable tome in Spanish edited by the Argentinean political scientist Ricardo Romero (2005) is entitled *Democracia Participativa: Una Utopía en Marcha* (Participatory Democracy: A Utopia on the March).

In both these cases, the term 'utopia' is used according to Thomas More's (2005 [1516]: 120) original coining of the expression, that is to say associating participatory democracy with 'the best in the world'. The word has also come to have a much more widespread second meaning, however, designating 'an impossibly ideal scheme'.[2] This second sense of the term probably best describes contemporary participatory democratic processes in Latin America, especially when one considers the practical pitfalls that they must surmount to be meaningfully implemented. Evans (2002) outlines three basic problems. First, participatory democratic initiatives must be economically efficient. Second, there must be sustained participation. Finally, they have to overcome what he calls the 'political economy problem'. The first two issues we can take as a given. Deliberative policymaking involving economic affairs will be subject to the same laws of accounting as non-deliberative forms of government, and without participants, there can be no process. The political economy problem is less straightforward, however. It can be approached in two ways, 'endogenously' and 'exogenously'. The 'endogenous' view focuses on the way that power relations play out between those participating within the deliberative process. As Baiocchi (2001) points out, inequality within participatory democratic processes can subvert public deliberation in a variety of different ways. Certain participants may be better-off citizens or dominant groups as a result of their privileged links to political parties or the State, for example, and might use their superior resources to promote collective decisions that favour them. Other

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[1] For wide-ranging collections of detailed studies, see the excellent special issues of *Politics and Society* on 'Empowered Participatory Governance' (vol. 29(1) 2001), *Environment and Urbanization* on 'Participatory Governance' (vol. 16(2) 2004), and of the *IDS Bulletin* on 'New Democratic Spaces' (vol. 35(2) 2004), as well as the volumes by Chavez and Goldfrank (2004), Cornwall and Coelho (2007), Fung and Wright (2003), and Harriss et al. (2005).

[2] See 'utopia', *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://dictionary.oed.com/.

powerful participants may attempt to exclude or avoid issues that threaten their interests, to the extent that in cases where deliberative democratic arrangements challenge their power and privileges, they may actually seek to dismantle them. Ultimately, as Schönleitner (2006: 44) remarks, 'if powerful actors do not renounce their power over others as a means for shaping collective decisions, deliberation can hardly be sustained'.

This latter point relates directly to the 'exogenous' dimension of the political economy problem. It is difficult to imagine institutional innovations such as participatory democracy emerging in contexts where particular individuals and groups have a disproportionate amount of power as a result of the existing political framework, as these will obviously have an interest in perpetuating the current system. For the same reason, even the formal existence of an institutional framework for participation does not guarantee that a participatory process will occur, insofar as rules can be ignored or not respected. Although it is not completely implausible to imagine circumstances where traditionally dominant political actors might be prepared to spontaneously give up (at least part of) their power in favour of institutions that incorporate ordinary citizens, this is relatively unlikely except in very specific contexts and under particular circumstances, and *the* critical question to ask concerning any participatory democratic initiative is therefore clearly 'what political context is necessary to carry out such an experiment in the real world'? (Baiocchi 2001: 45).

The classic study attempting to answer this question is Heller's ground-breaking comparative examination of participatory democratic initiatives in India, South Africa, and Brazil, where he underlines how such processes were 'given life …because they were underwritten by …the political initiative of a programmatic party', generally associated with a subaltern class (Heller 2001: 158).[3] A slightly different perspective is provided by Goldfrank (2007) in his recent comparison of the divergent experiences of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre on the one hand, and Montevideo, Uruguay, and Caracas, Venezuela, on the other. In contrast to Heller, he argues that it was the weak political opposition to the promotion of participatory budgeting—rather than its strong promotion—that allowed its coherent implementation in the former city, while strong resistance in the latter two led to more 'restrictive designs …in which citizen input was limited and subordinated within formal, party-dominated structures' (Goldfrank 2007: 148). This leads Goldfrank (2007: 165) to conclude that 'in cities with strongly institutionalized parties, decentralization will likely result in elite capture and exclusionary politics. Even where new parties win office, established parties can debilitate institutional reforms. In cities with weakly institutionalized parties, however, decentralization's democracy-enhancing benefits are more likely to filter through'.[4]

The link that Goldfrank makes to the city is by no means fortuitous. His study highlights how participatory democratic initiatives require very specific enabling contexts in order to flourish, and he associates the particular configurations of party politics in the three cities with the varying natures of their urban contexts, including in particular differing

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[3] Other studies that have reached similar conclusions include Baiocchi (2003), Goldfrank and Schneider (2006), Van Cott (2008), and Wampler (2007).

[4] Goldfrank's analysis is in fact quite complementary of Heller's, insofar as the existence of weakly institutionalized parties is no guarantor of the emergence of participatory democratic initiatives, and some programmatic impulse is inevitably needed to promote them, but conversely the latter is also not enough by itself to ensure their implementation.

levels of inequality, social mobility, and access to public services.[5] The concern with the nature of the city as a variable in its own right is one that implicitly or explicitly runs through all studies of participatory democracy. In his classic study of participatory processes in Brazil and Mexico, for example, Avritzer (2002) develops his notion of 'participatory publics' based on a very particular conception of the urban public sphere, the roots of which 'can be traced back to the Greek polis and the way it connected community and democracy' (2002: 36), or in other words, the (perceived) specificity of urban contexts as inherently bringing otherwise disparate individuals into contact with each other.[6]

The problem with this vision of urban life is that it does not quite square with the observable reality of the overwhelming majority of contemporary Latin American cities, however. These are amongst the most segregated in the world, with high levels of violence (Moser and McIlwaine 2004), spatial inequality (Koonings and Kruijt 2007), the proliferation of gated communities (Caldeira 2000), and the growth of 'precarious peripheries' (Rolnik 2001), all widely reported to be primary features. As Gareth Jones (2004: 171) observes, such phenomena are clearly 'not …compatible with more inclusive notions of citizenship', being in particular fundamentally undermining of the communicative processes upon which participatory democratic initiatives are founded. Focusing in particular on the potential consequences of the proliferation of gated enclaves in Latin American cities, Jones (2004: 171) asks 'how can norms be constructed where difference is defensive, diversity is mistrusted, and education, even if it had rarely ever meant learning *with* 'others', now might not impress to learn about others either? What kind of radical or deeper democracy can emerge in societies in which a numerically small but economically significant group is physically isolated, socially less engaged and economically less dependent on the remainder of society?'. Yet the fact remains that participatory democratic initiatives *have* emerged—and continue to do so—in such extremely unlikely contexts, with the Brazilian city of São Paulo a case in point, as Caldeira describes in recent work.

3 'Neoliberal' participatory planning in São Paulo, Brazil

Caldeira is of course well-known for her seminal work *City of Walls* (2000), which traces the way rising crime and insecurity changed the cityscape of São Paulo from the 1980s onwards, transforming it from a space of open circulation to a fragmented archipelago of isolated 'fortified enclaves'. She famously argued that this new urban morphology was most visible in the proliferation of self-sufficient gated communities and closed condominiums for the affluent, and contended that these significantly altered the character of urban public space in São Paulo, as those on the 'inside' of the enclaves no longer related to notions of spatial cohabitation with those on the 'outside', but rather

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[5] To the extent that urban political morphology inevitably reflects the broader societal political economy, Goldfrank's observation is not necessarily surprising, and can in many ways be seen as a re-statement of Evans' 'political economy problem'.

[6] Indeed, the main elements Avritzer (2002: 51) associates with the emergence of participatory publics, that is to say 'free expression and discussion, the formation of plural identities, and free association', can be directly linked to the vision outlined by Louis Wirth (1938: 192) in his classic article 'Urbanism as a Way of Life', whereby 'the juxtaposition of divergent personalities and modes of life [in cities] tends to produce a relativistic perspective and a sense of toleration of difference which may be regarded as prerequisites for rationality and which lead toward the secularization of life'.

to an ideal of separation from them. This in turn impacted on notions of citizenship and politics in Brazil, breeding exclusion, social differentiation, and inequality. It is largely due to Caldeira's work that the relationship between urban fragmentation, citizenship, and democracy has become a key concern of contemporary urban development scholarship on Latin America, as the many studies drawing on her ideas published over the past decade attest well.[7] Caldeira's (2008) recent research has focused on the regulation of São Paulo's urban development, and more specifically on the rise of what she labels 'neoliberal' participatory planning policies, and their consequences for the city. The analysis that she puts forward in this regard offers certain helpful elements to understanding why it is that participatory democratic initiatives have emerged in such an unpromisingly fragmented and segregated context as São Paulo.

Broadly speaking, Caldeira (2008) presents the rise of participatory planning in Brazil as part of a new generation of urban policy that has developed since the country's return to democracy in the late 1980s. This has been underpinned by a new vision for the ordering of urban space, the nature of which is epitomized by the country's *Estatuto da Cidade*, or Law of the City, a federal piece of legislation mandated by Brazil's 1988 constitution and passed in 2001. This established the objective of urban policy to be the realization of 'the social functions of the city and urban property', through a 'just distribution of the benefits and costs of the urbanization process' (Caldeira and Holston 2005: 406). Brazilian municipalities were directed to formulate master plans based on the principles of 'popular participation' and 'democratic management', in order to guarantee 'the right to sustainable cities, understood as the right to urban land, housing, sanitation, infrastructure, transportation and public services, work, and leisure for present and future generations'. As such, the Law of the City establishes 'the production of social equality in urban space as a fundamental objective of urban planning and policy' and turns 'planning into a basic instrument for equalising social disparities and securing social equality'. Over 1,600 Brazilian municipalities have reformulated their master plans in line with this law since it was passed, including São Paulo.[8]

At first glance, this new urban policy would clearly seem to have the potential to promote a much more egalitarian ordering of urban space in Brazil, explicitly allowing for the empowerment of the excluded by placing them on an equal footing with those who have withdrawn into gated communities and closed condominiums. Caldeira (2008), however, contends that the new measures at best legalize existing spatial inequalities, and at worse, actually increase them, because far from constituting any sort of radical intervention, the new urban policies enshrined in the Law of the City—including participatory planning—constitute little more than an epiphenomena of the broader 'neoliberal' model that has been institutionalized in Brazil since the late 1980s. She points, for example, how there exists a definite discursive coincidence between 'neoliberalism' and participatory democracy, insofar as the vocabulary of the Law of the City makes extensive use of 'neoliberal' terms such as 'participation', 'initiative', 'entrepreneurialism', 'autonomy', and most of all, 'management'. More substantively, she also notes clear correlations between 'neoliberalism' and participatory democracy, insofar as both seek to promote grassroots social action and move away from top-down

[7] See for example Borsdorf (2002); Fischer et al. (2003); Rodgers (2004); Sabatini and Arenas (2000); Salcedo and Torres (2004); and Svampa (2001).

[8] See Caldeira and Holston (2005), Earle (2009), and Fernandes (2007) for fuller discussions of the *Estatuto da Cidade*.

forms of governance. However, 'neoliberalism's primary concern lies with the dismantling of the interventionalist state', rather than the promotion of social justice inherent to participatory democracy, and it seeks to allow 'entrepreneurial citizens to organize themselves and formulate the initiatives that will implement their interests', which Caldeira suggests will effectively benefit those wielding most power in society, since the dismantled 'neoliberal' state in contemporary Brazil is no longer able to act as an impartial and egalitarian arbitrator between various interests groups in the way the previous developmental state was.

Caldeira (2008) illustrates this through a detailed analysis of the 2002 São Paulo Master Plan. This ostensibly sought to address the issue of socio-spatial inequality in the city by promoting the densification of areas that were already legally provided with infrastructure, and slowing down the illegal expansion of the city towards new areas in the periphery. In line with the ideals of the Law of the City, the master plan stipulated that all planning, implementation, and control of urban policy was to be participatory, through active engagement and partnership with civil society, and the proposed Plan was debated at a series of participatory public hearings that were held over the course of several months. These principally involved three coalition groups of *Paulista* citizens: the *Frente pela Cidadania* (Front for Citizenship), which was principally made up of real estate developers; the *Frente Popular pelo Plano Diretor* (Popular Front for the Master Plan), made up of popular movements, planners, consultants, and university-based researchers; and the *Movimento Defenda São Paulo* (Defend São Paulo Movement), which represented the interests of affluent upper-middle class neighbourhood associations.

All three groups actively sought to modify the content of the master plan proposal put forward by the São Paulo municipality, but did so in ways that would initially seem quite distinct. The real estate developers and affluent neighbourhood associations, for example, acted quite explicitly in line with their own parochial interest. The real estate developers' group, for example, sought to have the radical proposal of unifying land use regulations in the city and subjecting vertical construction to extra taxation abandoned, and successfully lobbied for a heterogeneous zoning regime that would allow for variable land utilization rates, albeit with higher construction standards for more intensely used land, thereby making city centre property more valuable. The affluent neighbourhood associations, for their part, successfully fought proposed changes in zoning regulations that would have affected the privileges of the exclusive residential areas they represented, spuriously justifying their endeavours by invoking concern for environmental issues, amongst other things. The *Frente Popular pelo Plano Diretor*, on the other hand, advocated for the establishment of *Zonas Especiais de Interesse Social* (Special Zones of Social Interest—ZEIS) that would identify currently illegal low-income areas for state intervention in the form of legalization and upgrading, while simultaneously protecting them from real estate speculation by formally establishing them as areas devoted to low-income housing.

On the face of things, this latter development would seem to be squarely in line with the basic principles theoretically underlying the master plan, that is to say the promotion of social and spatial justice, and therefore very different to the more parochial proposals pushed through by the real estate-dominated Front for Citizenship or the Defend São Paulo Movement affluent neighbourhood association coalition. Caldeira (2008) however points out that the ZEIS proposal effectively subjected low-income neighbourhoods to different land use rules than the rest of the city, thereby making it as

parochial as the other proposals put forward. As a result, the new zoning regime adopted by the São Paulo Master Plan—following participatory democratic deliberation—ended up protecting richer areas of the city as exclusively residential or by making them more expensive to occupy, while institutionalizing low-standards ZEIS in poorer areas of the city, and thereby impeding any possible gentrification in these areas. The creation of these different urban standards constituted 'a clear reiteration of the legal distinctions between centre and periphery that the new rationality of planning was intended to extinguish', according to Caldeira (2008), and as such can be seen as a 'legalization of inequality' which contrasts strongly with the past, where inequality was intimately associated with illegality (see Earle 2009). In other words, a participatory democratic initiative intended to reverse pervasive urban inequality ended up institutionalizing it.[9]

4   Separate but equal democratization?

Bénit (2006) describes a very analogous process to the *Paulista* one detailed by Caldeira in an insightful article on the relationship between participatory democracy and spatial justice in Johannesburg, the capital of South Africa. She focuses on the debates that surrounded attempts to implement participatory urban planning in the township of Alexandra, and contrasts them with those put in motion in the nearby rich business district of Sandton, highlighting in particular how different pressures impacted in both locations on the debate over whether to keep the two areas segregated or to integrate them in view of their intimate economic links, Alexandra township providing much of the menial labour for Sandton. Bénit suggests that this debate points to a forgotten question concerning urban participatory democratic governance, namely the issue of scale, which she contends has important political implications. According to Bénit (2006: 58-59):

> participation is by definition local in scale, while a metropolitan vision can only be articulated from above. To expect local negotiations to lead to the emergence of coherent citywide governance (as most theorist of participation seem to expect) reduces—whether by default, convictions, or cynicism—what is a fundamentally political issue to a simple aggregation of preferences. Spatial justice cannot be built from the local level alone, and therefore participatory urbanism cannot exist coherently without explicit top-down urban planning.[10]

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[9] Although Caldeira (2008) also contends that the Law of the City and the master plans it has spawned—and even to a certain extent the idea of ZEIS—can be seen as potentially providing powerful instruments to help foster social justice and reduce spatial inequality if deployed in a slight more enabling context, the reality is much more ambiguous. As the work of Earle (2009) on housing movements in São Paulo highlights well, the particular political conditions to which the provisions of the master plan have contributed mean that they end up making their claims through illegal acts of civil disobedience rather than the institutionalized channels of democratic participation.

[10] I have taken some liberties with my translation. Original French: 'La participation est par essence d'échelle locale et quotidienne ; il est au contraire du ressort des politiques de définir, de présenter et de soumettre au débat la vision d'un ou de plusieurs avenirs métropolitains possibles. Attendre du concert des négociations locales et localistes l'émergence d'une vision d'échelle métropolitaine (comme le préconisent la plupart des théories de la participation) conduit bien souvent à réduire le politique—par défaut, conviction ou cynisme—à un simple accompagnement des dynamiques de marché. Pas

In other words, participatory planning in cities necessarily requires a unifying, integrating framework.

My invocation of Bénit's South African research in this respect is not fortuitous. In many ways, the differentiated participatory democracy that she describes bears an uncanny resemblance to the South African apartheid regime's notorious 'separate but equal development' policy.[11] Based on the spurious notion that the different racial groups of South Africa could only develop to their full potential if they were separated from one another, the idea of 'separate development' underpinned the apartheid regime, but the initial fiction of different races developing separately in their own 'homelands' quickly gave way to an unambiguous policy of white domination (see Posel 1991). It is only a small step to think of Caldeira's 'neoliberal' participatory planning in São Paulo as being based on an analogous form of 'separate but equal democratization', particularly in view of the way that it legitimizes and reinforces existing patterns of elite domination in the city, with its differentiated land use regulations and the creation of the ZEIS. The analogy is arguably all the more pertinent when one considers that the apartheid policy of 'separate but equal development' was originally a 'response to urbanization perceived to have run wild' (Jensen 2008: 16-17), a concern that the São Paulo Master Plan explicitly raises as a justification for instituting participatory planning practices.

Although the parallel may seem a little extreme, it is arguably a necessary one to make considering the way that participatory democratic initiatives often have a significant depoliticizing effect, as Pieterse (2008) points out. By advancing the ideal of a locally-built consensus over and above any systemic considerations, they obscure the real determinants of city governance, which are less the institutional mechanisms that are put in place (or not), but rather the systemic relations of power within urban society. It is this issue that I particularly want to highlight by drawing a parallel between participatory democratic initiatives and apartheid's 'separate but equal development' policy. In order to understand the dynamics of participatory democratic initiatives, we must consider the overarching urban political economy within which they are implemented. This is arguably particularly important to take into account in a contemporary Latin America where participatory democracy is flourishing despite exclusion, fragmentation, and segregation. The conventional view is that participatory democratic initiatives are proliferating because they will mitigate these phenomena. Caldeira's account of participatory planning in São Paulo, however, suggests that they can institutionalize them instead, and although she doesn't make the link explicitly, it can be contended that this is likely why such measures are being implemented. They serve the purposes of the elite in São Paulo who can decide whether or not to implement them, and it is this, more than anything else, that explains the rise of participatory democracy in the seemingly unpromising circumstances of São Paulo, as well as other cities in Latin America.

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d'urbanisme participatif sans urbanisme: …la justice spatiale …ne saurait se construire à la seule échelle locale'.

[11] The parallel between apartheid and post-apartheid urban planning and development is something that also has also been noted in the work of Lemanski (2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007).

5   Conclusion: extraordinary events and contingent democratization

The above analysis is admittedly a rather depressing one, especially when considered in relation to the practical possibilities for promoting social justice in contemporary urban Latin America. I therefore want to turn my attention in this concluding section to the question of how truly emancipatory democratic practices might nevertheless emerge in the face of the overwhelmingly unfavourable socio-political circumstances. In this respect, it is worth remembering, as Jones (2004: 172) reminds us, that while urban public spaces inevitably reflect broader power relations, they are also

> the sites of the contestation of power. Spaces are made public when they inform others about the discourses of the groups that physically occupy them or symbolically invest them with meaning. Public space therefore is performative, where identities are exposed and communicated, interpreted, understood, and transformed.

This is an insight that goes to the core of the 'extraordinary events' framework recently proposed by Irazábal (2008), which seeks to explain how urban spaces can come to be (re)configured in contemporary Latin America in ways that go beyond hegemonic relations of power within society. In particular, she argues that certain political and social events, which she labels 'extraordinary events', can actively (re)frame urban space in ways that challenge existing patterns of domination. Her edited volume details a range of such events, some mundane, others more obviously exceptional, but all of which involve a reshaping of the urban public sphere through the creation of often highly contingent alternative meanings and occupations.

A concrete example of the way an 'extraordinary event' led to meaningful social change that is particularly germane to the discussion of participatory democratic governance is the highly unlikely implementation of participatory budgeting in the city of Buenos Aires in 2002, which occurred in the face of significant opposition from the dominant urban political class, and within a context known for its particularly complex and even byzantine political dynamics (Levitsky 2001). This was a direct result of the crisis known as the *Argentinazo* that affected Argentina in December 2001, which upset the political balance of power in the city of Buenos Aires, and which led to the crystallization of unique and temporary political circumstances that *contingently* created a space in which a truly emancipatory participatory budgeting process was able to emerge, at least for a while (see Rodgers 2010). The different actors involved interacted in particular ways that, first, produced a space within which a participatory budgeting process could be introduced, before, second, holding both top-down and bottom-up attempts to politically manipulate the process in check, thereby allowing a genuine sense of local autonomy and empowerment to flourish during the first few years of the process, as I have described in ethnographic detail elsewhere (see Rodgers 2007). Subsequent shifts in the Buenos Aires political field upset this delicate balancing act, and led to the gradual erosion of the city's participatory budgeting process, but it remains an important case to consider because it highlights how 'politics is an "instituted process", embedded in institutions political and non-political', which cannot 'be understood simply through the analysis of formal arrangements for representation, decision-making and policy implementation' (Lowndes 2001: 1960 and 1955).

In particular, the implementation of participatory budgeting in Buenos Aires highlights a critical but underestimated dimension of the politics of 'instituted processes', which is

that they are frequently much less purposeful and directed than we often imagine them to be. Although most of the diverse actors involved in the Buenos Aires participatory budgeting process, whether acting top-down or bottom-up, had relatively clear aims and aspirations, the very fact of interacting with each other in the context of a 'moment of shock' such as the *Argentinazo* meant that their actions inevitably became imbued with a significant degree of 'contingency',[12] both intrinsically as well as in relation to the way they came together. This was true in a way that goes beyond the fact that social practices will inevitably have unanticipated consequences—as Robert Merton (1936) classically pointed out over seventy years ago—or accepting that institutional arrangements will be imbued with 'a certain degree of opacity …that cannot easily be modelled, predicted or managed' (Cleaver 2000: 382). Rather, what the contingent implementation and execution of participatory budgeting in Buenos Aires illustrates very well is how institution-building can often occur less as the result of purposeful socio-political action and more as the consequence of contextually and temporally specific articulations of both conscious and unconscious intents and practices, that in turn have both intended and unintended meanings and consequences that are beyond the control of the actors involved.

This is crucial when considered in relation to the analysis offered in this paper regarding the introduction of participatory democratic initiatives in contexts of extreme inequality such as those characteristic of the vast majority of Latin American urban contexts. Although under such conditions instances of participatory governance often become little more than forms of 'separate but equal democratization' that legitimize and sustain highly unequal and iniquitous structures and systems of power and domination, the Buenos Aires case illustrates how enabling environments can emerge contingently as a result of 'extraordinary events', and how participatory democratic governance does not necessarily have to stem from purposeful social action, to the extent that it can make sense to talk of processes of 'contingent democratization'. Understanding and potentially harnessing these moments, however, requires a fine-grained understanding of the dynamics of urban contexts and the social actors that inhabit them, and therefore 'any analysis of the limits and opportunities for participatory governance needs to start from particular places and issues on which citizens *act*, rather than with abstract notions of citizenship and participation. This requires narrating and situating stories of citizen action, and working back from these stories to explore what was going on in terms of relationships and positioning, and what understandings and analytical tools might make best sense of these forms of engagement (and whether the notion of citizenship has any place in this at all)' (Robins, Cornwall and von Lieres 2008: 1082). Only through this kind of detailed vision are we likely to be able to identify avenues through which to meaningfully promote measures to overcome the deep segregation of Latin American cities, and thereby uphold the civic benefits of urban life.

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[12] I use the term in relation to 'the condition of being free from predetermining necessity in regard to existence or action' (see 'contingency', *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://dictionary.oed.com/).

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