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Conflicts and paradoxes in the rhetoric of participation

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of participation processes and techniques around the world in recent years takes place under the rhetoric of citizen empowerment. This rhetoric has been questioned by many scholars, who often point out the weak impact of such practices and the new games of domination to which participation is submitted. This article examines this dilemma from the expansion of participatory budgeting in the global North. We propose a study of assembly processes involving the local public administration in the cities of Chicago and Córdoba. This process reveals conflicts and paradoxes that often remain hidden in the research, but nevertheless show struggles to appropriate and define the meaning of participation.

KEYWORDS

Participation; empowerment; democracy; Chicago; Córdoba; public administration

A ‘participation age’

There is no doubt that today we are living through a veritable ‘participatory revolution’. From citizen juries to plebiscites, e-forums of various sorts, and participatory budgeting processes, across the global North and global South over the last two decades citizen participation in government has become ubiquitous. Today, as Lee, Mcquarrie, and Walker (2015, p. 7) note, ‘across the political spectrum, increasing citizen voice is viewed as a necessary counterweight to elite power and bureaucratic rationality’. More sanguine advocates, like Leighninger (2006, p. 2), argue that ‘(i)n the 20th century, public life revolved around government; in the 21st century, it will center on citizens’.

Whether or not citizen participation is actually successful, a remarkable consensus has emerged around its desirability. Participation, as a way to give voice to citizens in public affairs, has become an imperative of our time and the subject of countless international conferences, government projects, and policy reforms, and is at the centre of much recent contemporary political thinking (Blondiaux & Sintomer, 2002; Peck & Theodore, 2010). From the World Bank and Occupy-type movements in the global North to political parties and non-governmental organizations worldwide, political participation today occupies an exceptional position as a privileged prescription for solving difficult problems and remedying the inherent flaws of democracy (Ancelovici, Dafour, & Nez, 2016; Newton, 2012; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2000).

This rise of enthusiasm for participatory democracy has also inspired scepticism. Critical voices protest that while participatory democracy's scope has expanded, its emancipatory dimension has all but disappeared from policy discourse on the subject. If in the 1960s, participation was understood as prefigurative of a new, 'radically democratic society' (Poletta, 2005, p. 275), this is no longer the case. If once activists expected participation to bring about emancipation for citizens in a world otherwise dominated by political and economic elites, today participation is understood as complementary to the social order. Participation in this age is no longer a counter-power; it has become part of the planning of how power functions.

Our purpose in this article is to analyse the conflicts and paradoxes generated by the implementation of participatory processes from above. Is it still possible to talk about emancipation in this context? While participation is often associated with an emancipatory rhetoric by its promoters, who frequently argue that participation will bring social justice, equality and better policies (Ganuza, Nez, & Morales, 2014), its implementation is more ambiguous. Generally speaking, participatory reforms have little impact on public policies, do little to increase social justice, sometimes increase existing inequalities among participants, if not outright used to justify neoliberal politics (Lee et al., 2015; Poletta, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2005). Yet, the implementation of participatory processes can be conflictive, because they expose the gap between an idealized image of participation linked to empowerment and a public administration that is usually wary of opening the decision-making process. The outcome of this struggle is generally taken as a symptom of a decline of participatory processes, and their ability (or not) to empower citizens. But while the results may be disappointing, as many scholars have shown in their case studies (Ganuza & Frances, 2012; Sintomer, Herzberg, & Röcke, 2008; Talpin, 2012), we think that the difficulties and conflicts generated in participatory processes reveal a ceaseless struggle to expand democratic borders (Smith, 2009). We agree that this struggle may not always represent a transformational policy, but we suggest that it can nonetheless mark a step forward in democratic thinking and equality between the members of a political community.

The article has several sections. We first present a theoretical framework as a point from which to start thinking about participation and subsequently analyse participatory phenomena. Faced with the idea of highlighting the quality of participatory processes to discuss the impact and place of participation in contemporary societies, we understand participation as a process of struggle in which it is inevitable to perceive it as part of the power games surrounding the definition of the state and its limits. Then we move onto the results of ethnographic research in two cities in the global North (Chicago in the US and Córdoba in Europe) in order to detail the struggles and conflicts in both places resulting from the implementation of a concrete participatory process, surrounded by a strong emancipatory rhetoric and poor results (participatory budgeting). Finally, we conclude by discussing the possibilities offered by participation today as seen from this perspective.

Re-framing participation

Critics of participation have called into question the enthusiasm for participation because its advocates often fail to address questions of power, inequality, and politics (Cooke &

Kothari, 2001). More broadly, scholars have begun to point to participation, and participatory prescriptions in particular, as part and parcel of neoliberal governmentality (Leal, 2007; Swyngedouw, 2005). In general terms, local governments had introduced participation as a way to improve the economic management of public administrations that found themselves in financial difficulties rather than as a source of citizen empowerment (Crenson & Ginsberg, 2004). As part of a new rationality of government that calls forward an entrepreneurial citizen, participation indeed emphasizes some of the most important characteristics of that citizen: Self-regulation, responsibility for individual problems, and a non-conflictive partnership with the state (Li, 2005; Ong, 2006). In this formulation, people are conceived as individuals who are to be active in their own government (Rose, 1996). By stressing its compatibility with conventional power structures, participation may lose its transformative quality, neutralizing the emancipatory ideal of the 1960s and leading us, at best, towards a kind of 'ordered change' (Allegretti, 2014).

While these critiques are useful, we should not dismiss so easily the impact of the expansion of participatory democracy (Rosanvallon, 2011). Setting aside for a moment the question of whether participation makes for effective public policy, we should be attentive to the possibility that the very act of participation can shift power relations in particular contexts. At least, we should not forget that any participatory project is built around some ideals which are usually put in motion within complex settings. Participation usually implies a collective space and also presumes certain equality between participants (Barber, 1984; Fung & Wright, 2003; Pateman, 1970). As Ranciere suggests, this political space marked by equality facilitates the ability of anyone to imagine themselves as a partner in a shared world, 'presupposing that one can play the same game as one's adversary' (1998, p. 91). There is always something potentially subversive, and unpredictable, in arrangements that imply this equality, even if projects are only driven by rhetoric, in a world marked by inequalities, where citizens are only seen as clients and users of public services.

While the critical literature covering this topic is insightful, it often relies on retrospective accounts of 'a series of inevitable stages moving from the abstract to the concrete' (Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007, p. 10). In fact, both critics and proponents of participation tend to overlook how any participatory project requires allies, and how any such project provokes tensions and conflicts. That is, whether scholars describe it a priori as a neoliberal project or celebrate it as a *prima facie* democratic advance, participation seems to arrive on the scene as ready-made and then tested for its effects. We, instead, take our cues from critical studies of science and technology, which insist that construction of facts is always 'a collective process' in which heterogeneous actors come together around issues and agree to work on them jointly (Latour, 1987). Participatory projects are never the work of a single omnipotent and authoritative actor. These projects usually involve a range of participants from different levels of government—'stakeholders' broadly defined—and a wide range of experts. With each additional participant, there is always some redefinition of what participation will consist of. The very definition of participation—the project's goals, or who can be a legitimate participant—represents the power of some agents to define those agendas. Participation also calls forth laborious efforts made by the organizations of government to mobilize resources, allies, and agents, with the aim of fixing its limits, of defining a proper field of operations, and of neutralizing runaway participatory arguments.

Much literature has treated the analysis of participation in terms of quality, usually assessed by the procedures which promote equal distribution of opportunities among citizens to have a voice or facilitate their impact on policies (Bryan, 2004; Font, Della Porta, & Sintomer, 2014; Ganuza & Frances, 2012; Geissel & Joas, 2013; Talpin, 2012). We understand, however, that participation implies conflicting elements that go beyond its assessment merely from this point of view, which imagines an ideal process against which to measure and evaluate a particular process. We understand that in addition to quality, participation raises a debate on democratic borders: Who has access to all the information, who can influence the decision-making process, how is it done? This implies taking participation studies to a conflict scenario, where one has to understand the resistance to participation, the conflicts arising around it and why they arise, the reasons of those involved, as well as dynamics or practices that fall within the processes designed.

We thus propose to reframe this spread of participation globally—this ‘participation age’—as profoundly paradoxical. To make sense of the potential of participatory democracy today, we will consider how the spread of participatory democracy—rather than being a route to the early demise of democracy, or a guaranteed step forward—is in fact an invitation to debate its very boundaries. Our focus is on how participatory democracy does—or does not—expand the boundaries of democracy and the kind of problems and paradoxes involved in it. We believe that the failures and successes of participation are related to profound questions about democracy and its limits in a complex society.

Given this ambiguity, and given our purpose of identifying how and when participation can expand the boundaries of democracy, we analyse the arrival of participatory budgeting (PB), one of the main participatory devices at disposal for government around the globe, in the global North. PB sets in motion a relatively simple idea: That ‘ordinary citizens’ should have a direct say in public budgets that impact them (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2016). Chicago was the first city to launch PB in the US (2009) and Córdoba was one of the first European cities to launch PB (2001). Each city played a crucial role in the adoption and replication of the experience elsewhere. Chicago’s PB was the model for New York’s, started two years later, and Vallejo, California’s, a year after that, and provided the template for the dozen or so experiences in the US at the time of writing. PB has even received mention at the federal government level in the US in President Obama’s Second Transparency Plan. And after Córdoba’s success, PB spread throughout Spain and Europe to prominent cities like Berlin, Cologne, Seville, Edinburgh, Rome, and, most recently, Paris and Madrid. Hundreds of smaller towns throughout Europe also attempted their own PB processes. Today, the governments of Poland and the UK drive participatory budgeting projects. On both continents PB has transcended local boundaries and for many observers has become a harbinger of new possibilities for democratizing current structures and bringing government closer to citizens. In the case of the US, for example, the Penn Medal of Democracy has described PB as ‘the most important democratic innovation of the 21st Century’.¹

In order to understand how the first local PB experiences set in motion the abundance of current projects in the global North, we must pause to examine the conflicts that have shaped the development of this participatory instrument. Underlying struggles for power and authority—between and among participants and city officials—were negotiations over profound questions about democracy, who represents certain communities, and who can determine the legitimacy of citizen demands.

The democratic turn: how to give power to ‘the people’?

Alderman Joe Moore’s decision to introduce participatory budgeting to the 49th ward in Chicago in the summer of 2009 was novel. His constituency had not demanded more opportunities to participate in local politics. His goal, however, as he described it at public events, was to put power back into the hands of ‘the people’ who had given it to him in the first place. This goal became complicated throughout the process, as the PB ‘recipients’ asserted different ideas about what it meant to give power to ‘the people’. Moore had learned about participatory budgeting at the 2007 US Social Forum and through his connections with Cities for Progress, a national network of progressive city officials. He was excited by the idea of implementing a process that would be the first of its kind in the US. Knowing his activist constituency, he also believed the community would receive the project well. He contacted the Participatory Budget Project, a nascent network of volunteer experts interested in implementing PB in North America, and the group provided him with guidance based on experiences elsewhere.

Maria José Moruno launched Córdoba’s first participatory budgeting endeavour in 2001. Moruno was a schoolteacher who had gained popularity through her activism in the city’s feminist movement. She was elected to the municipal government in 2000 after leftist parties widened their platform to include new activists. For her, as for Moore in the US, PB ‘was a way to give real power to citizens’.² Moruno learned about PB directly from the architects of Porto Alegre’s PB. The Federation of Neighbourhood Associations, in late 1999, invited the Porto Alegre practitioners to Córdoba. The head of the Federation proposed participatory budgeting as part of a larger effort to encourage citizen participation in the city. Additionally, PB would enable these movements to play a definitive role in public decisions. In practice, however, Córdoba’s PB project turned out to be more complicated than these activist groups originally anticipated. As in Chicago, there were conflicting views about how to give power to the people. Moruno sent a government colleague to the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2000 and began a dialogue with a group of academics from Complutense University of Madrid, led by an expert in participatory methodologies, Tomás Rodríguez Villasante (1995), with the aim of launching PB.

For Maria Jose Moruno and Joe Moore, participatory budgeting signified more than the natural evolution of participatory traditions. For Moore, it meant something ‘very radical in the US, as people will be able to decide directly how tax dollars will be spent in the ward’.³ For Moruno, PB was different as ‘you bring participation to people’.⁴ They saw this new tool as a way to reform the political system in a political context marked by disaffection. On the one hand, both Moruno and Moore identified a need to address what they saw as the limited representative practices of civil society organizations. On the other hand, they felt it was necessary to bring citizens closer to government. They envisioned a new collaborative space in which everyone had the same voice to engage in government processes.

Moruno and Moore encountered several obstacles as they attempted to implement participatory budgeting in their communities. Because current modes of participation had failed to revitalize politics, Moore and Moruno had decided to propose a radical change. They both continuously referenced the importance of ‘equal space’ in their defence of PB, questioning the organization of civil society and the bureaucratic and

elitist perspectives underlying the structure of political representation. Reflecting on her experience years later, Moruno expressed, ‘I believe that participation was already reflecting the habits of purely representative democracy. Citizens were mimicking the operation of representative democracy. I think we should welcome fresh approaches and new modes of behaviour.’⁵ These new modes of behaviour were the same modes that Moore wanted to achieve in Chicago when he explained during one of the initial meetings with people in the 49th ward that the project aimed to transfer power to the people in the spirit of a more ‘democratic democracy’.

For Moruno and Moore, the residents’ political disaffection created the conditions for these experiments. Because the projects were new, Moruno and Moore could narrate the process as if it were happening in a lab. They could test different models and ideas. In this context, Moore and Moruno imagined PB as a battle to conquer new spaces in advance. Moruno remembered in an interview in Córdoba in 2009, ‘[I] used to say that PB was a plant we were watering, and that many would want to cut down this plant, but as long as we were able to protect its roots, we could succeed.’ Moore expressed something similar in a conference in Brown University in 2011 about PB in Chicago: ‘I tried to do things differently; I like to keep things fresh; we need to improve democracy and experiment with new ways of engagement.’ While PB was part of a long-term vision to enhance democracy, Moruno and Moore had to take more immediate steps. This short-term political environment encouraged them to present the process as politically neutral and widely accessible. Moruno used to emphasize the rhetoric of PB as a ‘space of equals’, while Moore used to describe PB as ‘widely popular’.

Expanding democratic boundaries

Politicians at all levels of government have come to promote and endorse ‘participation’—broadly defined—and favour the expansion of participatory experiences. This widespread support of participation has fostered the standardization of participatory practices around the world (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2016). However, those who worked to bring PB to Chicago and Córdoba were operating in a different context. In Córdoba and the 49th ward of Chicago, Moruno and Moore faced political resistance to their participatory budgeting experiments from the beginning. Their projects transformed political coordination from an abstract concept intended to mitigate political apathy to a particular activity requiring civil servants and politicians to change the way they functioned. They had to socialize this new space within the public administration. As we will see, this new conception brought about internal resistance to prevent the expansion of participatory spaces. To fully understand the rhetoric of participation we should not leave out what PB meant at the beginning, as well as the efforts made by its promoters to keep it going.

These early PB experiments sought to replace representation with collective deliberation. Leaders of the PB efforts hoped to create spaces where everyone had an equal right to speak. More than that, they aimed to generate a collective process of decision-making, expressing a vision that displaced politicians and technicians from their established roles. Rather than a process that aggregated organizations’ interests and then conveyed them to political officials—privileging the role of urban social movements or of politically prominent individuals in the community—here citizens could directly submit proposals to their local governments. The emancipatory rhetoric that accompanied

the political messages of Moruno ('to give real power to citizens') and Moore ('to put power back into the hands of the people') envisioned a long-term scenario from the start. As in a laboratory, the action then was guided by trial and error logic. This prudence tried to offset the initial resistance to the participatory process, minimizing its effects. 'The important thing is to create that democratic culture', Moruno used to say during those years. The immediate result was to limit the ability of citizens to influence the participatory process to small-scale infrastructure, something that has become a common element of PB experiences everywhere. But at the beginning, Moore's dream was to be able to manage more budgets, including the City Hall operational budget.

Implementing an experiment in which participants have no significant power to influence the administrative structure compounds some contradictions. By allowing participants to make only small decisions, public administrations can give the impression of empowerment while foreclosing other political possibilities. Opening one avenue of political expression can close off others, like public protests and other manifestations of political discontent. For example, within PB processes, citizens can usually only discuss and decide upon what the government permits. From the point of view of government officials, these are often insignificant issues, as demonstrated by the purview of participatory budgeting projects in Córdoba and Chicago. While this is a general criticism of many PB projects and democratic innovations (Lee et al., 2015; Polletta, 2014), we think that it does not entirely void the emancipatory rhetoric of participatory spaces.

Córdoba's and Chicago's results may be minor, but the conflicts preceding their implementation uncover a tense process and hard-fought struggles for empowerment. Throughout the process of establishing 'political reform'—the term PB promoters in Córdoba and Chicago used to justify the experiments' implementation—participants encountered obstacles at every turn, even if they had little influence on the administration's outcomes. Thus PB often introduces situations that are more complex than originally anticipated, as we will see in the conflict surrounding experts and citizens. PB was not only about giving a voice to citizens, something that is usually accepted in a political atmosphere marked by disaffection, but also about the impact these new spaces could have within administration. It marks a cornerstone of democratic boundaries. In other words, new participatory devices such as PB go through old styles to open the way for new habits in government. The conflicts arising from their implementation highlight the fact that participation is always related to profound democratic questions and how we shape them.

The rule of experts?

In Chicago, the 'transportation committee' within PB was the site of one of the most active groups of participants. The committee, composed of about fifteen members, drew a mix of activists demanding increased bikeways on the streets, recreational cyclists and walkers who wanted more pathways along the lake, and individuals motivated by a general concern for the community and improved transportation. The committee met twice a month as a full committee and also broke into various subcommittees (such as a 'sidewalks committee'), some of which met separately. One of the issues the transportation committee addressed early on was the perceived lack of usable and safe bike lanes in the Ward. Committee members repeatedly expressed concern about the need to find a way to

‘separate bikes from cars on the street’. The committee searched for creative, innovative solutions to the problem. They researched other cities’ models, and were surprised to uncover a range of alternative biking infrastructure models already in use. Excited by the possibilities, they developed a project proposal, based on a combination of features from these designs and involving a wide stretch of bike lanes that would be separated from the streets by an additional curb that would divide biking and car traffic. ‘Curb shifting’, as the structure is widely known, is already used in several cities recognized for their bike friendliness, such as Portland, Oregon (US), and Paris.

In every way, their particular style of local innovation was in line with current decentralized governance philosophy: They wanted to develop an ambitious and sustainable bike lane project, based on best practices but tailored to local needs. Yet, the project still needed the city’s blessing in the form of a feasibility approval before it could be placed on the ballot. In theory, this should have been a minor step in the process.

Once the participants in the transportation committee had developed their idea for the project, they arranged a meeting with the City of Chicago Bicycle Program. The meeting was held in the evening at Rogers Park, after weeks of preparation. They felt confident about the project’s goal—segregated bike lanes—and also had collected detailed information about cost and regulations from city planners. The representative from the city, a planner in his mid-twenties from CDOT (City of Chicago Department of Transportation), arrived at the meeting with his standard presentation in hand. He began by giving an overview of the CDOT Bicycle Program and followed with a PowerPoint of the city’s bikeways programming. The latter involved a description of the typical bike lane design, with which all of the representatives were more than familiar: Lanes separated by painted lines on streets that met certain width requirements. To the participants, the presentation was uninformative and elementary, if not downright insulting.

The transportation committee had also prepared their own presentation on their project. They explained the curb-shifting design they wanted to propose, outlined how and why they thought it could work, and gave a brief overview of the implementation schemes in other cities. The CDOT planner, surprised by the presentation, responded by dismissing their ideas as ‘creative but unfeasible’ (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2016). Curb-divided bike lanes would have to be at least ten feet wide, he said, because city snowplows have a ten-foot clearance. Lanes of that size were cost prohibitive, not to mention unsuitable for most streets. For this reason, Chicago was limited to designated bike lanes and a few other options. Curb-shifting lanes simply could not receive feasibility approval, he said. The representatives were frustrated and disappointed.

Over the next weeks the committee continued to contest the merit of the city planner’s assessment. Rather than accept and adapt to the logic of the planner, they argued that he was making a technical issue out of something that was in fact political. The city requirements were, in the words of one committee member, ‘chosen policies, not naturally imposed limitations’. The representatives also resented being shut out of the debate. Even though they were not professional technocrats, engineers, or planners, they were citizens. As residents of the city affected by its policies, they felt entitled to a legitimate voice and influence over city planning. On another level, the representatives felt that the city official’s claims to superior authority over policy decision-making were unjustified because their ‘expert knowledge’ was shallow. The bikeways planner had asserted that curb-shifted bike lanes were unfeasible, yet cities around the world had implemented

them. The representatives saw a clear way around the snowplow issue and proposed it as an alternative: To buy smaller plows and then build smaller bike lanes.

The city government did not relent from its judgement, however. Despite repeated pleas by participants, CDOT did not deviate from the original position. The transportation committee then became embroiled in its own controversy—should it accept the watered-down version of bike lanes on the street, or should it not submit a bike lane proposal at all? Was it worse to capitulate to bureaucratic mandate or to not have new bike lanes at all? For some of the younger activists committed to a ‘post-carbon lifestyle’, capitulation was seen as treason to the greater cause. For others who adopted a more ‘pragmatic’ stance, a watered-down proposal still represented progress because it would lead to greater awareness about biking and might lead to better bike lanes in the future. A difficult compromise position eventually emerged: The restricted bike project would go on the ballot, under the title ‘– PHASE I’, thus signalling future expectations. Some of the activists left the participatory budgeting process at this point, but all agreed that the city’s explanation did not reflect expertise, but rather bureaucratic impotence and stifled creativity.

The several months of debate and controversy over the project resulted in these participants questioning the politicization of technical criteria. They recognized that engineers and city planners had a role to play in the development of sound infrastructure policy, but came to feel that these experts had overstepped their role. They also felt the city used ‘expertise’ to justify the insulation of policy decisions. The city had always based decisions like these on internal technical expertise not subject to outside scrutiny. The halls of the Chicago Department of Transportation and the Chicago Park District were filled with city planners, engineers, and bureaucrats whose jobs were to determine the parameters for infrastructure development. They defined what sorts of projects fit within these parameters. The ward offices were simply supposed to choose from among the pre-determined sets of options. In short, city officials believed there was a definite line after which there was no room for politics or the citizen mandate. In their view, some realms of decision-making belonged to experts, not citizens.

More intriguing than the bureaucratic logic of the city’s planners are the ways in which participants in the process resisted what has been described elsewhere as the ‘rule of experts’ or ‘expert closure’ (Latour, 1987). For the most part, participants came to see ‘feasibility’ as a mask for the political priorities of other existing governance bodies. Thus, as the process unfolded, rather than acquiescing to a universal adaptation to the logic of governmental expertise, the PB process constantly challenged the status quo. Instead of moulding communities to align with the priorities of government institutions, PB generated significant friction around the priorities themselves. If city agencies viewed expertise as definitive, specific, and authoritative, participants considered expertise qualified and general, and informative rather than prescriptive (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2016).

Engaging in city politics provoked several profound questions. For example, does ‘expertise’ or citizenship lend itself to more legitimate claims to speak for and on behalf of others? If expertise prevails, then what constitutes an expert, and to what extent does expertise trump politics? If citizenship matters more, what values does ‘citizenship’ demand of the citizen? Both city experts and citizen participants’ views on these questions did not necessarily predate these conflicts, at least not in their fullest forms. Rather, interacting within the contested process of PB defined, refined, and crystallized their perspectives.

Beyond the line

The Chicago story demonstrates the complex dynamics between citizens and the administrative machinery of local governments. PB in the 49th ward revealed an otherwise hidden line of separation between the rule of experts and collective citizen knowledge. PB opened up a new space of autonomy for citizens to empower themselves, often in opposition to the local administration. The 49th ward's struggle around expertise and citizen voice is not specific to the US. Other contemporary democracies experience similar frictions around the site of the demos. PB allows citizens, many of whom are accustomed to their marginal role in public service, direct contact with their local government officials. This contact, and its resulting tensions and debates, challenges the legitimacy of the status quo. Rarely do observers notice the plethora of resources administrations employ to maintain the line of separation between experts and citizens. Their goal is to minimize PB's 'collateral damage' of opening up new political spaces to citizens. In Chicago and Córdoba, these conflicts represent the administrations' fear of a different political configuration.

Within government administrations, civil servants are often the first to recognize how PB changes their daily work. More than encountering new participatory spaces, they experience a transformation of the nature of their work. It is the technicians who must explain why the administration rejected certain citizens' proposals. And, of course, they must respond to citizens' concerns and allow them to feel as if they have some power over the meeting's agenda. Most technicians do not intentionally oppose this new scenario. They are civil servants who are aware of the public administration's hierarchy. Therefore, political representatives' choice to implement PB does not concern them directly. They behave in the Weberian sense of 'honest officials'. However, technicians can shape the political agenda through their technical knowledge. Citizens do not have the same electoral legitimacy as politicians, so technicians feel less obligated to follow their political mandate. These dynamics turn PB's implementation process into a discussion about different types of knowledge. It positions the 'vague, selfish and contingent' citizen against the 'objective and accurate' expert.

In Córdoba, the city offered a PB training course to technical staff early on in the process. The training brought up many of these frictions. The course aimed to teach the staff how to disseminate and socialize the process in such a way as to reduce internal resistance in its implementation. City workers in positions relevant to PB (finance, infrastructure, and participation) had priority, but the training was not limited to them—30 other city officials joined. The Director of the Education Department, with a career spanning more than thirty years in public service, conveyed that '[PB] beautifully opens spaces to the public. [But] we cannot do everything they say'. She articulated the concern, shared by other administrators, that citizens would operate in a 'consumerist' mentality. She worried that 'they are unable to think about the city; they make many self-interested proposals and this could be a disaster'. Technical staff perceived the public's lack of information and ignorance as hindrances to legitimate participation. Including officials, such as this director, in the PB process is thus always a complicated move. In Córdoba, for example, the history of domestic construction illustrates the administration's bitter effort to continuously separate the spaces that the participatory process attempted to inter-vene in.

In February 2002, the General Director of the Presidency of the City of Córdoba, the highest public administration authority, called a meeting (with relevant technicians within the administration) to define the city management's strategy in the participatory budgeting experiment. After a year, the PB facilitators began to demand resources from the administration because citizens demanded them. When participants inquired about the record of decisions made during the previous year, municipal officers complained to their superiors about these 'new' responsibilities. As the administration expanded their requirements to address PB demands, critical voices within the administration began to emerge. The process now involved the work of a growing number of municipal employees in different areas of management.

The tension between citizens, who demanded a voice through the new process, and technicians, who were suspicious about these new dynamics, necessitated an external and authoritative figure to make final decisions. The city, the Director General told the attendees, valued the PB project and had deemed it successful after its first year. Three thousand people had taken part. The Director General also asked the group what role politicians could play in the participatory process. He wondered how significantly citizen participation had pervaded the administrative machinery. The Director General of the Presidency, rather than Moruno, who was the political representative for participatory budgeting, defended a circumscribed role for participation:

The aim of participatory budgeting is to promote the budget proposals, and citizen participation is a secondary effect [or something derived from it]. In this sense, we must always strive to achieve the ultimate goal: that participants submit proposals. Then, the politicians do what they want. Politicians do not know how to make a budget. Up to now they have used a technique, but they weren't aware of doing so. This participatory budgeting is another technique. The budget is the end and participation the means, the instrument, not vice versa.

This statement reflects how government officials in Córdoba viewed PB as a threat to their established order. In this context, the General Director drew from the logic of new public management: Participation offers new inputs to a governance process. This view neutralizes PB as a source of democratic reform. It implies that citizens have needs that guide their decisions and technicians are simply neutral intermediaries. Given the risk that different spheres of power (political, technical, and citizen) overlap, the General Director defines 'participation [as] a secondary effect'. In this arrangement, PB serves as the mechanism of the administrative logic of input-output. The process allows the administration to gather information about citizens' needs in a new way. Thus, the General Director was able to easily change the input-process style to fit PB's model. So, if PB participants in Córdoba constantly demanded politicians' involvement in the process and civil servants' assessment in popular assemblies, the municipal staff asserted that the participatory process should be composed of neutral procedures for collecting citizens' needs.

Do PB processes establish new relationships between administrative instruments and citizens? The Director General's statement offers some clues on how public administrations interpret participatory budgeting. Administrative assumptions include: (1) PB is an experience outside of the dynamics of management, and is another way of understanding the inputs that contribute to any administrative process; (2) PB has more to do with citizens' needs than with collective regulation; (3) PB is not political, rather, it is a technical process, so long as it provides new material for the administration to

connect inputs and outputs; and (4) the emancipatory rhetoric of participatory budgeting becomes part of technical rhetoric, focused on operating in the interest of individual citizens' needs.

From this point of view, the emancipatory dimension we usually associate with democratic innovations is compromised because citizen involvement is not tied to political change. At least not in the short term, as expressed by the General Director:

Now you can perfectly maintain the formal structure (political parties) separate from the informal structure (participatory budgeting). In the future [we] will inevitably articulate them but for now they should function as parallel structures. If we speak of participatory budgeting as inconsistent with representative democracy, participatory budgeting is only an instrument. With participatory budgeting we are not talking about deepening democracy; that would be something else.

Governments in Córdoba and Chicago demonstrated an explicit desire to mark a line of separation between the inside and the outside, between civil society, as an informal schematic structure, and government, including political parties, as a formal structure. Public administrations must continuously work to maintain this division. It is not easy to reconcile the emancipatory rhetoric of participatory budgeting propagated by its proponents (to put power back into the hands of the people), with the neutral rhetoric of the public administration. From this approach, the deliberative organization of new participatory spaces generates much ambivalence. In addition to empowering citizens and giving them a voice, these new spaces make it impossible to ignore political conflicts.

As we saw in the case of Chicago, these processes produce constant tensions, forcing administrative staff to constantly monitor the line of separation. Participants insist on the political dimension of their experience, persistently demanding that politicians and technicians attend public assemblies. Yet the public administration instructs their employees to avoid this dimension. This dissension causes frustration among technical employees and provokes suspicion among citizens. Most of the municipal staff responsible for facilitating the PB process in the neighbourhoods of Córdoba, for example, resisted its implementation. They were aware that this new instrument bolstered citizens' expectations but did not significantly change technical or political discourse. As a way to regulate the rhetorical representation of PB among municipal employees, the General Director in Córdoba explained: 'technical staff works within the administration and assemblies do not. Assemblies are made up of citizens; technical staff does not have anything to do there'. Public administrators tried to justify these claims with obscure definitions about skill. They described the difficult and complex functions of the administration. In a response to a group of participants about city decision-making in 2002, the General Director of the City of Córdoba explained,

The budget is made up by items, rather than projects, and then politicians decide what is included. It may be that part of the infrastructure budget has no projects, but that money is in another part of the government team, so perhaps the project that you demand is not in the area of infrastructure and maybe they [those responsible for infrastructure] do not know it. If you knew the inner workings of City Hall, you would see that sometimes it is not possible to give all the information.

The struggle for voice, as we see, became the struggle for legitimacy to be heard as citizens in a political, not technical, space.

Participation, small things, and democratic boundaries

In both cities, a year of messy politics followed the genesis of participatory budgeting. The line between expert knowledge and popular mandate can create tensions and divisions. The participatory budgeting stories of Chicago's 49th ward and the city of Córdoba confirm the existence of this tension, but they also shed light on how it impacts the process and its outcomes. Our point is not simply that the contestation exists—it most certainly does—but rather that it is productive. It is the space in which new political groups and relationships emerge, evolve, and come into conflict; as such, its trajectory is crucially determinative and shows us the paradox of this 'participation age'.

Over the course of the long process of developing PB proposals, citizens in Chicago and Córdoba stepped into the work of governance. They debated priorities, probed questions of feasibility, and delved deep into seemingly simple issues of cost. In so doing, they acted in spheres normally occupied by other representative bodies—the Alderman or Councillor and their offices, the City of Chicago or Córdoba agencies, and others. Their work signalled that new modes of representation might not merely indicate new faces of power, but could also introduce new forms and styles.

The process of determining the feasibility of projects and estimating their costs in PB spurred intense disputes between citizens and Chicago municipal agencies. In Córdoba the process of rank-ordering projects generated intense conflicts within the administration. The latter were accustomed to deference on these issues. These engineers, city planners, and technocrats believed that their experience working on municipal projects accorded them a certain degree of authority. Examining the PB experiments in Chicago and Córdoba offers us an overlapping view into this conflict over expertise and citizen knowledge. This conflict underlies the scope of participatory projects and their ability to give a sense of empowerment. In Córdoba, the officials who coordinated the participatory process within the public administration desperately avoided the internal spread of a new style of governance under the pressure of citizens for more administrative involvement in the process. They sought to neutralize participatory spaces and their influence within the administration. The PB structure in Chicago, on the other hand, endowed with a sense of political license, had little respect for insulated sites of power. They questioned the validity of municipal agencies' expertise, and also challenged the view that expert knowledge generally trumps politics to a greater extent when the officials who coordinate the process attempt to get a balance between administration experts and citizens. The stories of both cities illustrate the struggles that took place between representatives and city agencies over expertise- versus citizenship-based claims to power.

A major organizing principle of democratic innovations is the centrality of participation. But if our gaze is limited to participation itself we lose sight of how it is connected to governance. Attention to citizen participation in new democratic spaces must be coupled with an examination of how administrations themselves structure the avenues of participation. The participatory experiments implemented in both Chicago and Córdoba were modest. Participants made decisions about small infrastructure projects. Like in many other cases, democratic innovations took place at the margins of government functions and were treated as informal adjuncts to the governance process. Their installation in both places occurred without shifting

administrative practices, but they nonetheless enabled citizens to engage in new sites of participation. The simple act of opening new spaces for citizen participation and creating deliberative processes did transcend the decision-making processes on infrastructure, but again and again administrators circumscribed this transformation to minimize its structural scope.

The local government in Córdoba avoided accountability and established a line between the public administration and the participatory project. City officials gave several reasons for this division. Sometimes they cited the complexity of the technical architecture; other times they noted the inability to address demands due to legal reasons never made explicit. Sometimes they referred to guiding principles ('to work for the city as a whole' or 'political priorities') that structured the budget, displacing citizens' priorities into a secondary space. Sometimes they simply declared that 'participatory budgeting is not the same as the legislature'. From the city officials' point of view, dealing with participatory budgeting required an ongoing effort to maintain a precarious balance. They had to negotiate between safeguarding the political representatives from changing their way of doing politics while trying to appease the citizens who believed that participatory budgeting meant doing things differently.

In the 49th ward in Chicago, after the first year of PB, the relationship between the city councillor's office and the city agencies was somewhat formalized. Experts from city agencies played a more immediate role in the process, vetting projects earlier. But they also reasserted their technical authority. In no uncertain terms these experts notified the ward office that their technical vetoes were final and not up for discussion. Despite participants' attempts during the first year to transcend the boundaries of the process by re-defining some of the terms of engagement, the enduring version of the process was one in which technical expertise subordinated citizen knowledge. And, notwithstanding some early ideas of transcending the restrictions of menu money, or allocating greater portions for infrastructure, or even seeking other pots of money, the process remained tied to the small discretionary infrastructure budget.

Therefore, to understand the scope of participatory spaces we must look beyond participatory procedures, and consider their relationship with the structures of local governments and public administrations. Concentrating on this relationship allows us to analyse the conflicts that arise over new principles of political coordination. Moreover, it speaks about the influence these spaces have in connecting or disconnecting citizens to or from governance structures.

It is important to note, too, that political representatives like Moruno in Córdoba or Moore in Chicago are not the only relevant actors. Though they speak of political renewal and reform, they do so against a backdrop of government structures that are resistant to the transformation. They confronted city officials who wanted to protect their traditional practices and who could deploy disciplinary techniques aimed at neutralizing the influence of new participatory spaces. Administrations' resistance to change leads to impotent participatory projects, even if their procedures are effective. But resulting tensions between citizens and city officials provoke unprecedented battles over access to political spaces. Participatory spaces certainly allow citizens to speak and, beyond seeking agreements within particular projects, empower participants to challenge the defiance of administrations.

Notes

1. <http://news.psu.edu/story/312850/2014/04/23/impact/participatory-budgeting-project-selected-brown-democracy-medal>.
2. Interview with Maria Jose Moruno in Cordoba, Spain, 27 April 2009.
3. Interview with Joe Moore in Providence at Brown University, US, 14 April 2011.
4. Interview with Maria Jose Moruno in Cordoba, Spain, 27 April 2009.
5. Interview with Maria Jose Moruno in Cordoba, Spain, 27 April 2009.

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