

Democratic Elitism in the Name of Participatory Democracy: A Critical-Theoretical Analysis of State Supported “Publics” in Brazil

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Abstract

*The discourse of participation in and about Brazil has contributed to the wider discourse of the public sphere. As an occasion to revise the general concept of the public sphere, it carries its own limitations as well. The public sphere is an arena where citizens come together to discuss matters of general interest and through this discussion are then able to influence the state. The concept public sphere is a challenged concept and is often called exclusive and “unrealistic.” One scholar revises this challenged concept, Leonardo Avritzer, author of *Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America*. Avritzer’s revision claims to take the revision further in the direction of participatory, democratic publics. Yet it adds an administrative dimension to the public sphere that is problematic both conceptually and practically. It allows for state control of the public sphere in the name of “accountability” and “democratic elitism.” The paper offers a critique of such a revision by showing that accountability means elite governance through a reduction of participation to administered publics as a false “necessity.”*

Introduction

The concept “public sphere” is a historically produced idea. In other words, it’s a concept with a historical reason. However, concepts become ways to read history. This makes debates surrounding the concept public sphere relevant to historical and empirical analyses of the “public sphere.” When concepts of the public make the notion of “participation” less and less relevant, consequences from concept to practice shrink to segments of society for whom participation already has been achieved. This has happened in a particular revision of the concept which stresses administrative issues, a conception leading to an administrative public sphere in the case of a Brazilian adaptation of Habermas’s conception to Brazilian communities.

The question then becomes whether an administrative public sphere aimed at “participatory publics” can actually achieve participation when the majority of a potential public realm is dominated by political elites whose experiences with processes of participation have been restricted to the privileged. I argue that incorporating an administrative element from the ranks of elites into the public sphere can set up the range of possible deliberative outcomes in advance of any majorities allowed to “participate.” This can be seen in the theory that still privileges the educated and the wealthy in Brazil, where an otherwise promising practice of community budgeting works not only with monetary allocation, but the allocation of permissible deliberation already defined from above and beyond the community at hand. Addressing the issue of participation requires reviewing the history of the public sphere in Brazil.

Historically Brazil has been a country with few bureaucratic mechanisms in place and little to no participation in governing by a vast majority of its citizenry. The lack of an established bureaucracy can be traced back to the colonization of Brazil by Portugal, which persisted for nearly three centuries until the early part of the nineteenth century (Kohli, p. 422). After the establishment of a sovereign Brazilian nation in 1825, the country experienced industrialization through the duration of the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth century, followed by the creation of a “centralized modern Brazilian state” during the 1930’s and 40’s (Kohli, p. 153). The creation of the modern state did not, however, give people the freedom to elect officials or participate more readily in politics in general. The forty years following, the so-called modernization of the Brazilian state, were plagued with constant regime change occurring through military coups until 1985, when Brazil elected its first

president by majority vote. The regime changes that persisted throughout the twentieth century, while generating marginally positive economic-growth, repressed and stifled the public (Hagopian).

The expansion of the public sphere in Brazil worked in light of the extension of participation to the *hoi polloi*, which elected its first majority democratic government half-way through the decade of the 1980's. Brazil's history of marginalization and repression of the public is an interesting place for the expansion of the public sphere and increased participation because of the limited time in which there has been a majority elected democratic republic. Yet Brazil in spite of its history of colonialism, oppressive regimes, and, most recently, democratic elitism can flourish because of the extension of the right to vote and in some municipalities budgeting decisions to the majority of the citizenry (Nylen).

Since the late 1980's multiple government programs, at the national and municipal level, have made an intrepid effort to increase participation by the majority of its citizenry, most notably in Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil. One such area of increased participation is evident in a program known as "participatory budgeting" (Andersson & Laerhoven, ; J. Guidry). Briefly stated, participatory budgeting refers to the chance for citizens to make decisions that determine the distribution of state allocated funds to municipalities (Wampler & Avritzer). At the municipal level, citizens directly determine what to do with the money allocated. The question is whether greater participation is possible at the level of allocating amounts, that is, at the level of the nation-state.

Greater participation is possible at the level of the nation-state in Brazil; however, "the very poor" have not gained influence because their basic needs are not being met (Souza, p. 180). This keeps the majority of the population either unwilling or unable to participate in the political process (Oxhorn). For these marginalized citizens the willingness to participate is overshadowed by other more important needs, such as food, shelter and overall security. The cost of participating for marginalized groups is not worth losing the basic necessities. In other words, participation in the democratic processes at the level of the nation-state is not worth the effort for marginalized groups because the cost of doing so means they may not be able to feed their family. As Fraser says, "Subordinate groups sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do, they discover they are not heard" (p. 119). The problem is exacerbated by the domination of political elites in the public realm because they are serving their private interest rather than the public's interests.

However, the discourse of participation in and about Brazil can contribute to the wider discourse of the public sphere. The implementation of economic programs like participatory budgeting, under citizen control, is precedent for incorporating the voices of citizens throughout Brazil and as the discursive interaction with one another. This makes Brazil an occasion for exploring prospects for the concept of the public sphere in its participatory dimensions of discursive decision-making.

Yet the occasion to revise the general concept public sphere, such as a participatory budgeting program, carries limitations for the concept of participatory publics, especially the administrative nature of the concept-in-practice. The notion of "participatory publics" *vis-à-vis* "participatory budgeting" highlights an administrative dimension to the public sphere that is problematic both conceptually and practically. That is the claim of this research project. It requires a review of the debate over the concept "public sphere" itself.

Many scholars have challenged the concept public sphere. One important challenge contains the critique of "participation" on the score of authenticity. The critique is a friendly critique for the concept "public sphere," and makes claims about its exclusive and "unrealistic" dimensions. Nancy Fraser claims that Jürgen Habermas' bourgeois conception of the public sphere fails to account for alternative public spheres—e.g. plebian spheres (Fraser). Leonardo Avritzer, whose concept of "participatory publics" is applied directly to Brazil, revised the concept of the public sphere in an administrative direction. Avritzer, author of *Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America*, claims to take the revision further in the direction of participatory, democratic publics. This paper shows that Avritzer offers a perspective on "realism" that allows for state control of the public sphere even while pluralizing, as Fraser does, the concept of the public sphere. Avritzer's stress on "accountability" and his analysis of "democratic elitism" do much more than revise the concept of the public sphere. Avritzer's revision means that accountability invites elite governance through a reduction of participation to administered publics. Considering "accountability" as a managerial practice, this paper calls for an examination and critique of an overly administrative conception of the public.

Participation by citizens should not be limited to discussing what to do with allocated funds from the state. Limiting the participant's communicative interaction with one another to budgeting matters sets the stage for control of the public realm by elites who understand the processes of participation. Moreover, Avritzer's revision of the public sphere's position from its designated space between private citizens and the state and repositioning it between the market and the state reduces the public sphere to an arena where transactions occur. Finally, the aim of the administered public sphere, "participatory publics," is greater participation. However, theoretical and pragmatic

issues occur when an administrative element is presented as necessary in the name of efficiency, speed and time. This requires consideration of the meaning and role of “participation” in the idea of the public sphere.

The Idea of Participation in the Concept of the Public Sphere

Although Habermas’ concept of the public sphere has been contested and debated by multiple scholars, most notably in *Habermas and the Public Sphere* Calhoun (1992), it is particularly useful to use the framework drawn from the historical context of the French, British, and German bourgeois spheres, to note themes of participation as they are drawn from that history. Additionally, the concept public sphere provides a way to read and debate that history.

Habermas writes about the transformation of the public sphere in these countries as a progression from a space where citizens were subjected to the rule of the monarchy, to one of participation within a public space. Habermas’ concept of the public sphere begins with a description of how it was transformed from one of rule by the state to that of a public body situated between the private citizens and the state. He explains that the public sphere during the medieval period “referred to the ‘representative’ court of a prince endowed with authority” (Habermas, 1974, p. 52). Moreover, the public realm was not used for deliberation amongst citizens about the common good, but rather as a space where the rulers displayed their power before people. However, in the eighteenth century, private individuals, who once were subjected to the authority of the monarchy, now comprised a public body that could make demands on the state with consequences reflecting their interests. “The public space establishes a dynamic within politics driven neither by the defense of particularistic interests nor by the attempt to concentrate power with the aim of dominating other individuals” (Avritzer, p. 41). Habermas calls this newly formed body of private individuals *the bourgeois public sphere*.

The formation of this new liberal model became the medium for public discussion and was unique “without historical precedent” (Habermas, 1989, p. 27). Once this transformation took place private autonomous citizens “claims to power *vis-à-vis* public authority were thus directed not against the concentration of power which was to be ‘shared’” (Habermas, 1974, p. 52). In turn this allowed the newly formed public body the freedom to assemble and through the “vehicle of public opinion” was able to “put the state in touch with the needs of society” (Habermas, 1989, p. 31). However, the needs of society in the bourgeois conception of the public sphere only applied to affluent men.

The bourgeois conception “assumes that a public sphere is or can be a space of zero degree culture” (Fraser, p. 120). This is problematic because the citizens participating in the public sphere are not of equal status in society. Moreover, in theory a democratic society is assumed to be a place where all citizens are free to participate in the political system, the citizens are more often than not given the opportunity to share their views without actually being heard. This happens according to Fraser because of the “bracketing of inequalities” (p. 120).

The occurrence of this type of bracketing sets aside the differences of the participants. Discourse in the public sphere thus depends on neutralizing differences when discussing matters of general interest. This is complicated because what is a matter of general interest to one person may not be to another: the communicating subject as a subject with interests is at risk of disappearing as well. Furthermore, the differences are the driving force of discourse in the public sphere, but when bracketing occurs a power dynamic is created. In turn, this creates a wall between the bracketed participants. This shapes the way the dialogue will go by creating an unseen barrier between the participants. The barrier is what keeps the interlocutors from participating in discourse in their own interests. Thus it is difficult to know what actually constitutes the public sphere (Habermas, 1992, p. 447). Where does this discursive interaction take place (Fraser)? Do coffee shops, the Internet, or town halls allow for such discourse? The presence of a potential space is here, but authority restricts usage of this space.

For example, in Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil the use of a town hall to discuss budgeting matters is one space that is used by citizens to discuss what to do with the allocated money from the state (Novy & Bernhard). However, a facilitator appointed by the municipality monitors this space. The appointment of a facilitator is problematic because these public meetings are meant to be a space for deliberation without influence from the state. This space is available to use for discursive interaction, but it is not free from the backflow of state influence on the process of deliberation about the budget. In addition, actual dissidences among the participants are restricted to monetary allocation as it is given by the state.

The concept public sphere is often co-opted in the name of democratic participation by political elites because they understand the inner-workings of the system better than the average citizen. The co-optation of this space affords the political elites an opportunity for un-due influence on the discussions in the public realm. Adding an administrator at the public level then compromises the public sphere. Furthermore, administration in the public sphere deprives the participants of an arena for discursive interaction amongst citizens. In this case the public

sphere is being reconciled with democratic theory through the creation of the concept called, “participatory publics” (Avritzer, p. 52).

The Discourse about Brazil as an Occasion to Revise the Concept “Public Sphere”

The claim of this paper is that revisionist tendencies take us further away from the concept public sphere in the name of increased democratic participation through administration. The revision of this concept to include an administrative element is both problematic practically and conceptually; practically because of the implanted administrator in the processes of deliberation; and conceptually because the ideal nature of the public sphere is “lost in translation” from that of influence to one of “authentic” participation in the name of accountability. Authenticating participation via administrative supervision in the public realm does not; however afford greater participation to the majority of the citizenry. This is where the revision in the name of increased participation i.e., “participatory publics” takes what it wants from the concept “public sphere.” Figure 1 taken from *Democracy and the Public Space*, by Avritzer, compares the two concepts and shows the administrative nature of the participatory publics.

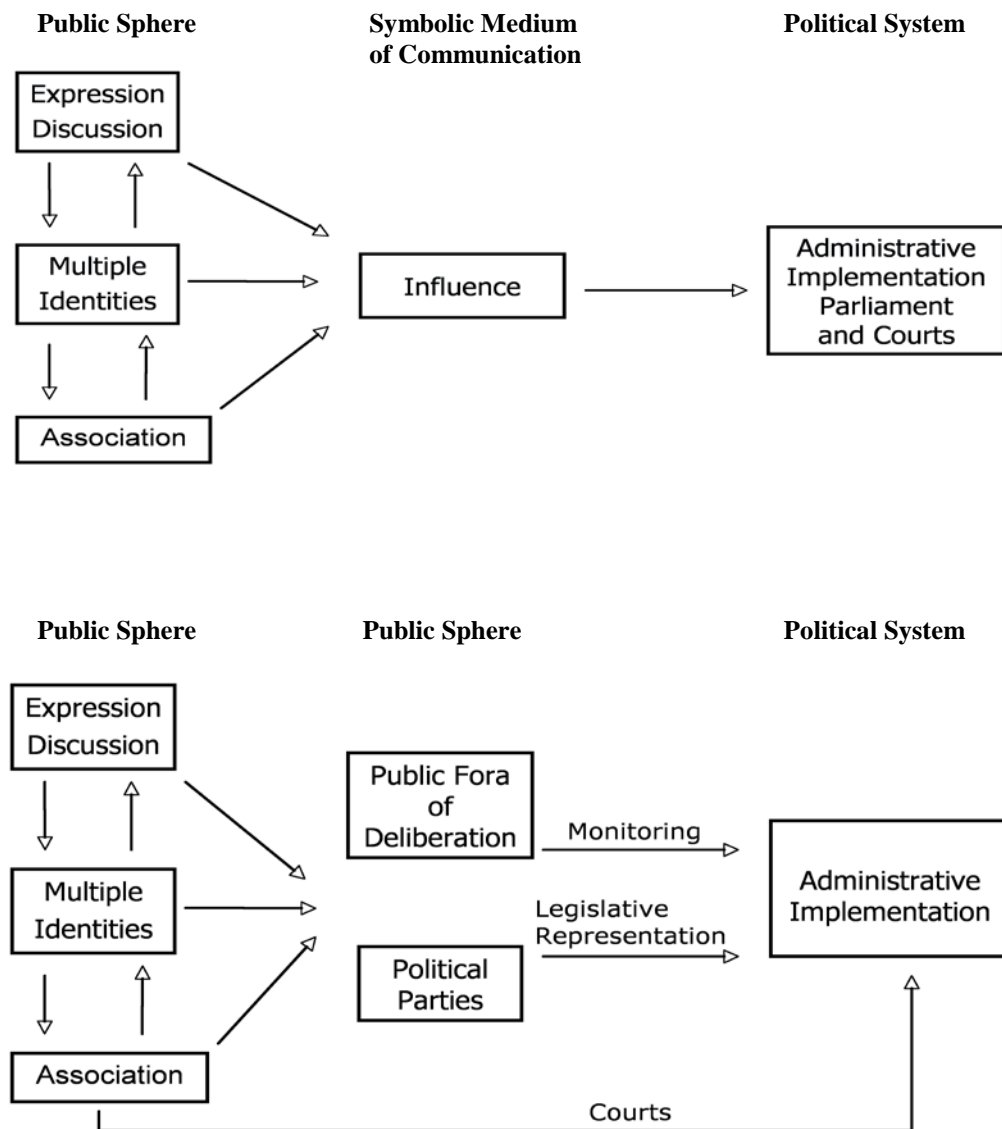


Figure 1.

Participatory publics can be defined in part by exploring distinct characteristics of the public sphere. As mentioned in the first section of this paper, the public sphere is a discursive space where people gather to discuss matters of general interest. This arena is no longer bound by physical dimensions, but rather is bound only by people's willingness to participate in discursive action with one another. Avritzer explains the public sphere space as a place where individuals interact and "debate the actions taken by the political authorities, argue about moral acceptability of private relations of domination, and make claims against the state" (p. 40). To be clear the public sphere is not synonymous with the state, they are interconnected pieces with the public sphere's function being one of influence on the state. People's participating equally infers that they want to or have the education to participate, coupled with the importance of finding their voice and expressing it.

When people participate equally within the public sphere, it affords them the opportunity to acknowledge differences amongst community members through affirming the cultural distinctiveness of the members of the community. Once this has been established a new participatory network is created, which allows the participants to come to collective decisions about matters that "systemic actors would like to keep private" (Avritzer, p. 48).

However, systemic actors are able to influence the deliberations in the public sphere by conflating democratic theory and the public sphere with the intermediary conception participatory publics. Avritzer admits that conflating "deliberative decision-making with public administration" is exactly what the theory of the public sphere seeks to avoid (Avritzer, p. 52). However, it is exactly what Avritzer does with his concept "participatory publics."

Participatory publics act as an intermediary to transform, as Avritzer puts it, the theory of the public sphere from one that seeks to increase democratic participation into a "truly democratic and deliberative theory" (p. 52). By conflating these two areas the public sphere is no longer the intermediary between the private citizens and the state, but rather a space that is fused with administration. This fusion does not allow for unmediated discussion amongst individuals in the designated public space, which often leads to the public sphere being used as a place for politicians to influence the decision-making of the general public.

To give a better picture of what participatory publics entail Avritzer lays out the four key elements of this concept.

- First participatory publics operate at the public level through the formation of mechanisms of face-to-face deliberation, free expression, and association. These mechanisms are meant to address specific elements in the dominant culture by identifying problematic issues and placing them on the political agenda.
- Second, social movements and voluntary associations address contentious issues by introducing alternative practices that are compatible with human rights.
- Third, participatory publics preserve a space for administrative complexity while challenging the exclusive access of technicians to decision-making fora. They strike this balance by reserving the right to monitor the implementation of their decisions.
- Fourth, the deliberations of these publics are bound up with the search for institutional forms capable of addressing the issues raised at the public level (p. 136)

These four elements that constitute participatory publics explain how participatory publics and the public sphere are conjoined. However, the first element directs the public's discourse in light of themes provided by the dominant culture. Focusing on face-to-face deliberation and free expression avoids the question of freedom to advance interests not necessarily of the dominant culture. Moreover, the restriction to face-to-face associations rules out possible public participation virtually, via other media of communication. Matters of general concern may not be discussed, even though the public sphere is "an instance of open-ended and public-spirited communication" (Baiocchi, p. 55).

Communication in the general interest is difficult to achieve, especially with Avritzer's positioning of the public sphere between the market and the state rather than between the private citizens and the state. How are citizens who have nothing to do with the market supposed to have a voice in the public sphere if it is situated between the market and the state and not between private citizens and the state? The concept public sphere is co-opted in this way, and is used in favor of a few private citizens for financial gain. The market is not private citizens, but a place where financial transactions take place. So if the public sphere is positioned between the market and the state the transactions that occur on the market level are taken to the public level, then the discursive process in the public sphere is transformed to fit the discussion about what to do with the ideas on the market level. This replaces private citizens with the market and policies are made to benefit the few who understand how the public sphere can be used for financial gain. This is historically familiar in Brazil. The lack of participation by the general public has at best a tenuous or failed separation between the state and the public. Throughout the history of Brazil it has been difficult if not impossible for marginalized citizens to participate. In turn, this takes the control out of the hands of

the majority and puts it in the hands of the elite. This creates a separation according to Oxhorn (2001) between the majority of the population and the political elite who have been put in power by influential societal actors. Although the idea of participation is extended to the mass majority full participation is only achieved by the few who have the proper education and the money to affect the laws being made. What this creates is a marginalization of the majority of the population.

Accessing the public sphere is difficult for marginalized groups because of the transformation that needs to take place. Guidry and Sawyer (2003) contend that modern democracies take into account the power relationships that challenge the promises of democracy; however the problem is encountered in democracy because the idea promises more than it can deliver. Democracy gives the impression that it is able to empower groups and ordinary people, but since democracy's inception and implementation more than 200 years ago this has not been the case. Democracy has been employed by affluent men to train the public to follow and accept the laws that are made for the "benefit" of the majority. In addition Francois Furet (1998) says that "one is necessarily struck by the gap between expectations that democracy arouses and the solutions it creates for fulfilling them", the fulfillment of the democratic promise is elusive for most (p. 66). In spite of this, as the marginalized public gathers in these social spaces, are able to communicate with community members and with political elites, it is possible for the public sphere to be dramatically altered.

However, altering the public sphere does not mean adding an administrative element. Although, Avritzer suggests participatory publics moves the country away from democratic elitism, the concept leaves us with the notion that a facilitator is necessary to ensure the decisions being made at the public level are carried out at the administrative level.

Democratic Elitism vs. Participatory Democracy

Democratic Elitism is a top down approach to governance (Faulks). It is a hegemonic approach to governance because it gives the general public the idea that they are participating while they are simply choosing between elite-defined options. The opportunity to vote provides citizens with the misconception that they are putting candidates into office that, in return, will create policies for the benefit of the people. The elected delegates are chosen on the promise that they will represent the people and the needs of the community. In reality the elected officials do not necessarily use their positions in politics to create policies to benefit the majority that elected them. Instead, some politicians create policies to benefit a few constituents who funded their campaigns.

Moreover, this top down approach allows clientelism to dominate the landscape of politics (Roniger & Güneş-Ayata). This creates a "patron-client" relationship that is perpetuated by the political leaders promising goods and services to the masses, in exchange for votes (Norris). This creates a "debt-peonage" relationship, in that, if the general public no longer votes for the officials then it is possible the goods and services supplied by the politician will no longer be available (Burns). This marginalizes the citizen's participation in the public space to that of voter rather than participator. This restricted access to the public space does not afford the *hoi polloi* much say over what policies are being made. However, by restructuring the way people participate in the political process it is possible to combat this approach to democracy.

Participatory democracy can be characterized by the ability and willingness of individuals to engage with political actors in the democratic process. The participants have a sense of "personal responsibility to struggle against systemic exclusion and domination" and believing that one can be successful against this domination (Nylen, p. 28).

Advocates for participatory democracy claim that this is a form of "empowerment." Meaning that through participation people are able to stand up for what they believe in. This opportunity is not one that is easily taken, especially in countries where authoritarian regimes have been the mainstay or where participation is limited to that of voter for specific politicians who in turn are given the responsibility of following through on their promises made during campaigning.

Political debate in the public sphere should "foster deliberation" that will increase the chance of arriving at legitimate, rational, or true decision (Bohman, p. 6). Similarly this should provide the basis that holds the persons in positions of political power accountable to implement the policies that have been reached by consensus. The private citizen has the ability to influence the laws being made, but this is problematized when the agreement reached in the public sphere is disregarded by the state.

A key aim of participatory publics is to combat the resistance of the state to act on decisions made in the public realm. One program that employs the concept of participatory publics is participatory budgeting.

Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre

Participatory budgeting is fundamentally popular meaning that the participants are mostly community members who do not hold legislative positions. “It is an “instrument of empowerment” through participation by social actors within the public space who now become politically active and aware of the implications of not participating (Nylen, p. 60). Through this newfound level of participation community members “represent the broader interests of their neighborhoods, their associations, and of people ‘like them’” (Nylen, p. 60).

However, it can be needlessly “antagonistic to the legislative body and to existing representative organizations in civil society” (Nylen, p. 91). The large majority of citizens do not participate and the few that do participate do so minimally and therefore the idea that participatory budgeting is considered one of popular participation is actually not true. Furthermore, most average people don’t have the knowhow or the capacity to understand such matters as complicated as “budget-making” and nonelites are not capable of participating in “political decision-making” (Nylen, pp. 94, 119).

Wampler & Avritzer (2004) explain participatory budgeting as a “deliberative format that incorporates citizens into a yearlong decision-making process based on the negotiation and deliberation of public goods” (p. 299). This means that ordinary citizens play a vital role in deciding what will happen with part of the budget. Within the process of decision-making participants are responsible for making suggestions and “ranking of the proposed projects” (Novy & Bernhard, p. 2028). Participants choose what is important to them through discursive interaction with one another. Participatory budgeting is a type of decision-making system in which citizens have the authority to vote on general revenue streams and on specific policy outlays. Participatory budgeting programs create public decision-making formats that enable citizens to engage in policymaking. These institutions explicitly seek to enhance accountability, curtail corruption, end arbitrary allocation of public resources, and overcome the disempowering legacies of clientelism (Fung & Olin Wright, ; Koonings, ; Melucci & Avritzer).

One of the main issues with participatory budgeting is that this is still a government sponsored proceeding, meaning that the state allocates the money to the municipalities, which is controlled by the local government, and then taken to the local town hall where the voluntary associations and private citizens meet and discuss what to do with the budget (Goldfrank & Schneider).

Conclusions

The public sphere in Brazil took on a similar transformation as the bourgeois public sphere did in France, England and Germany. Under the rule of the monarch the public realm was an arena for the princes, kings, or queens endowed with authority to display their power before the people. However, the transformation that took place in Brazil differs from that of the afore mentioned countries in that the sovereignty granted to Brazil in the middle of the 19th century did not spawn a bourgeois class that was capable of coming together to discuss matters of general interest for the community. This occurred for many reasons, most notably because of the enormity of the country of Brazil and the unequal distribution of resources throughout the country (Kohli).

However, the expansion of the public sphere in Brazil can contribute to the wider discourse of the public sphere because of the historical context from which it was formed. In other words, it is historically significant because of the extension of participation to the majority of its citizenry with the first election, by majority, of a democratic republic in 1985.

Participatory publics has the ability to extend greater participation to citizens throughout the state of Brazil, but falls short of achieving greater participation because of the inability to incorporate citizen’s voices in matters other than the budgeting process. Often times the budgeting meetings are overtaken by discussions about more pressing matters in the community unrelated to the participatory budgeting process. An example of this can be seen in one such meeting in a poorer region of Porto Alegre. In this poorer region the participatory budgeting meeting was used to voice concerns about matters that were more important to the community than discussing what to do with the year’s allocated funds from the state.

In one meeting mothers were upset about the school shooting that occurred the day prior and that took precedent over how to distribute the budget. The facilitator is supposed to keep the participatory budgeting meetings on track by sticking to the agenda, but even with the facilitator present community concerns override the budget.

If the administrator was taken out of this process community members could use this space for discussion about what is important to them and then influence the state. The mothers, through discursive interaction at this participatory budgeting meeting decided to demonstrate at the police station the next day and demand that a police

officer be placed at the school to ensure the safety of their children (Baiocchi). Even with an administrator present it is still difficult to keep the participatory budgeting meetings on task, when concerns about community issues take precedent over the budget.

Participatory publics are a good starting point for increasing participation from the general public and more importantly marginalized groups. However, to say that this is a good stopping point for participation is false. Avritzer is not claiming that administrative public spheres are the end of the line for participation, but with the concept of participatory publics and in the case of Brazil, the municipal program in Porto Alegre, it is easy to see that elites are capable of running over the groups that struggle to understand the processes aimed at participation. Understanding the process of budgeting is difficult for people who are well-educated and have the resources, stability and understanding of the workings of the budgeting process. For those who struggle to survive daily it is challenging, if not impossible to concern themselves with the budget because of they lack the basic necessities.

The bourgeois conception of the public sphere is a contested concept because it does not account for “subaltern” spheres and two because it is seen as unrealistic and ideal (Eley, p. 321). However, if the liberal model of the public sphere is viewed from its historical perspective it can be seen as something to strive for or an idea that is useful for reading history. Taken out of context the concept public sphere can be claimed to only be useful for explaining how affluent landowning men were able to participate within the public realm.

“The public sphere is central to reconstructing a participatory conception of democracy...it provides a framework that overcomes the elite-masses dichotomy” while striving for greater participation from the majority (Avritzer, p. 48).

Greater participation is the aim of concept public sphere as participatory publics. However, an administered public creates a sphere that can be infiltrated by the state in the name of increased participation, through requiring of participation restrictions of efficiency, speed, and time.

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