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**UNINTENTIONAL DEMOCRATISATION?
THE ARGENTINAZO AND THE POLITICS
OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN
BUENOS AIRES, 2001-2004**

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Unintentional Democratisation? The *Argentinazo* and the Politics of Participatory Budgeting in Buenos Aires, 2001-2004

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We have to revive the utopia, we have to recreate the illusion, we have to build the future from the limitations of our own time.
(Tabaré Vázquez)¹

Introduction

The past decade has arguably seen a significant shift in development discourses emphasising the importance of governance issues. From an initial concern with underlining the fact that governance ‘mattered’,² there has developed a growing interest in the specific forms of meaningful governance that are pragmatically possible in the contemporary era.³ Whether we like it or not, we live in a world that increasingly seems to bear out Francis Fukuyama’s notorious declaration that humanity has reached the “end of history”.⁴ Certainly, in the wake

* I am deeply indebted to a number of individuals for their help, including first and foremost Sergio Borelli, at the time a member of the Government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires *Equipo de la Coordinación del Presupuesto Participativo* (Participatory Budget Coordination team). I am also extremely grateful to Jorge Navarro, Antolín Magallanes, and Ana Titaferante of the *Secretaría de Descentralización y Participación Ciudadana* (Secretariat for Decentralization and Citizen Participation), María Clarisa Rottjer, Rubén Basignana, Luisa Mamani, and especially Edith Szilvassy of the *Consejo Provisorio del Presupuesto Participativo* (Provisional Council of the Participatory Budget), Betania Aprile, Fernanda Clancy, and Ariel Alderete, respectively of the *Centros de Gestión y Participación* (Administration and Participation Centres) nos. 2 Sur, 2 Norte, and 11, Virginia Lencina of *Poder Ciudadano* (Citizen Power), Hector Poggiese of the *Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales* (FLACSO – Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences), Luis Fara, Alicia Pizzabioche, the *Grupo de Vecinos de Boedo y Moreno* (Boedo and Moreno Neighbours’ Group), and several dozen other participants in the Participatory Budgeting process. I also want to thank Ricardo Romero of the *Red de Ciencias Políticas Mariano Moreno* (Mariano Moreno Political Science network) at the *Universidad de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires University) and Laurence Crot of the London School of Economics for very fruitful exchanges, of both theoretical and empirical information relating to the Participatory Budgeting process in Buenos Aires and elsewhere. Finally, I am very grateful to John Harriss for giving me access to his forthcoming volume *Politicising Democracy: Local Politics and Democratisation in Developing Countries* (co-edited with Kristian Stokke and Olle Törnquist).

¹ Tabaré Vázquez, leader of the leftwing *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front), former mayor of Montevideo and newly elected President of Uruguay (as quoted in D. Chavez, ‘Montevideo: From Popular Participation to Good Governance’, in Chavez, D., and Goldfrank, B., *The Left in the City: Participatory Local Governments in Latin America*, London: Latin America Bureau, 2004b, p.67).

² See for example P. Evans, *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995; M. Grindle, *Challenging the State: Crisis and Innovation in Latin America and Africa*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996; and J. Tendler, *Good Government in the Tropics*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

³ P. Evans, ‘Beyond ‘Institutional Monocropping’: Institutions, Capabilities, and Deliberative Democracy’, mimeo, 2002.

⁴ F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: The Free Press, 1992. For a similar idea specifically in relation to Latin America, see also F. Colburn, *Latin America at the End of Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

of what Samuel Huntington has labelled the “third wave of democratization”,⁵ there is arguably little other than democracy on offer in the way of plausible governance options, as is well exemplified by the hegemonic domination of the so-called ‘good governance’ agenda within the development business.⁶ At the same time, however, while there is no doubt that an ever growing number of countries around the world are formally adopting forms of democracy, either as their regime of preference or compulsion, it is also evident that these all too often end up constituting “choiceless”⁷ or “disjunctured”⁸ democracies that provide putative citizens with highly imperfect forms of representation and rule.⁹ Partly as a result of this impasse at the national level, there has developed a growing interest in the transformative possibilities of “a ‘new politics’ grounded in *local* political spaces and practices”.¹⁰ More often than not associated with the political left,¹¹ a variety of successful micro-level forms of participatory governance that can be labelled forms of “empowered deliberative democracy” (EDD)¹² have proliferated throughout the developing world during the past two decades,¹³ explicitly aiming to extend the degree of citizen involvement in local governance matters.

Perhaps the most famous form of EDD is Participatory Budgeting (PB). This paper presents an account of the emergence of PB in Buenos Aires, Argentina, based on information collected during six months of field research carried out in April-September 2003. My aim is not to explore the actual PB process itself, whether in terms of its institutional design or its efficacy,¹⁴ but rather to trace the conditions and context within which it was established. This is of particular interest in view of the fact that PB in Buenos Aires was implemented in the midst of the recent crisis known as the *Argentínazo*, which arguably constituted an unlikely moment for its realisation. I begin with some theoretical considerations concerning the nature of empowered deliberative democracy in general, highlighting the emerging consensus about

⁵ S. P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

⁶ For a synthetic outline, see World Bank, *Governance and Development*, Washington, DC: World Bank, 1992; World Bank, *World Development Report 1997: The State in a Changing World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

⁷ T. Mkandawire, ‘Crisis Management and the Making of “Choiceless Democracies”’, in R. A. Joseph (ed.), *State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999.

⁸ J. Holston & T. Caldeira, ‘Democracy, Law, and Violence: Disjunctions of Brazilian Citizenship’, in F. Aguero and J. Stark (eds), *Fault Lines of Democratic Governance in the Americas*, Miami: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997.

⁹ See also P. S. Pinheiro, ‘Democracies without Citizenship’, *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 30:2 (1996), pp.17-23; and D. Rodgers, ‘Old Wine in New Bottles or New Wine in Old? Conceptualising Violence and Governmentality in Contemporary Latin America’, *Crisis States Discussion Paper 6*, London: Crisis States Research Centre, 2004.

¹⁰ J. Harriss, K. Stokke & O. Törnquist, ‘Introduction: The New Local Politics of Democratization’, in J. Harriss, K. Stokke & O. Törnquist (eds), *Politicising Democracy: Local Politics and Democratization in Developing Countries*, mimeo, forthcoming. See also A. Fung & E. O. Wright (eds), *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*, London: Verso, 2003; and J. Gaventa, ‘Towards Participatory Governance: Assessing the Transformative Possibilities’, in S. Hickey & G. Mohan (eds), *Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation*, London: Zed Books, 2004.

¹¹ See Chavez & Goldfrank (2004).

¹² A. Fung & E. O. Wright, ‘Deepening Democracy: Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance’, *Politics and Society*, 29:1 (2001), pp.5-41.

¹³ For wide-ranging collections of studies, see the recent special issues of *Environment and Urbanization* (vol. 16, no. 2, 2004) on ‘Participatory Governance’, and of the *IDS Bulletin* (35:2, 2004) on ‘New Democratic Spaces?’, as well as Fung & Wright (2003), Chavez & Goldfrank (2004), and Harriss *et al.* (forthcoming).

¹⁴ This will be the subject of a future paper. For existing overviews, see M. Landau, ‘Ciudadanía y Relaciones de Poder: Los Usos de la Participación en los Programas de Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires’, mimeo (paper presented to the II Congreso de Sociología y VI Jornadas de Sociología de la Universidad de Buenos Aires), 2004; and J. Navarro, ‘Presupuesto Participativo en Buenos Aires: Balance y Perspectiva’, mimeo, 2004.

the necessary presence of strong programmatic political parties in order for such initiatives to be effectively implemented, which points to the importance of local political dynamics. I then provide some background to the crisis in Argentina, in order to situate the context within which PB was instituted and show how the conditions theoretically needed for its emergence were effectively absent. I follow this with a detailed account of the politics surrounding PB in Buenos Aires, delineating the contours of its ‘political field’, and showing how and why different actors within this field interacted with each other in relation to the implementation and administration of PB during 2002-2004.

The main line of my argument is that the Government of the (Autonomous) City of Buenos Aires (GCBA) implemented PB as an improvised ‘top-down’ response to the crisis of the *Argentinazo*, and that the different parties involved had distinct, and often contradictory, reasons for promoting or accepting the process, both initially and as it unfolded, that did not necessarily coincide with the PB process’s stated aims of extending citizen participation in local governance. At the same time, the resulting constellation of competing interests that came together did so at a particular moment in time and in a unique context precipitated by the *Argentinazo* that temporarily held them in check *vis-à-vis* each other, and *unintentionally* created a space within which a remarkably effective PB process was able to develop during 2002-2003. In many ways, the very context of crisis that led to the establishment of PB in the first place was therefore key to its successful implementation, to the extent that it could be argued that “in the crisis lay the solution”,¹⁵ to what seemed rather unpromising circumstances for PB to be established. Subsequent shifts in the balance of political power have led to the probably terminal decline of PB in Buenos Aires, however, although certain factors eventually allow a faint glimmer of hope for the future. The Buenos Aires case is important in that it points to a different possible scenario for the successful emergence and implementation of PB, while simultaneously reaffirming some of the central insights of studies of other PB processes and their sustainability.

Empowered deliberative democracy in theory and practice

There is a rapidly expanding literature on what Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright have labelled “empowered deliberative democracy” (EDD).¹⁶ This is an institutional model of participatory governance that is based on a deliberative as opposed to a representational democratic framework, and that seeks to address the “democratic deficit” often associated with the latter, particularly in the developing world.¹⁷ Rather than being organised around the delegation of authority to an elected agent, EDD extends and enhances citizen participation in governance by devolving the exercise of authority through a process of bottom-up public deliberation, which seeks to arrive at a consensual construction of a ‘common good’ through the persuasive transformation of preferences by force of (the better) argument rather than power politics. Deliberation constitutes a bargaining process that occurs through logical reasoning in a local public forum rather than through conflicts of interests, and the public space within which it occurs is one in which “citizens can participate as equals”.¹⁸ At the same time, EDD is not a voluntaristic form of organisation insofar as it is fundamentally a state-centred process, with the state remaining the principal medium for the enactment of the

¹⁵ J. Godio, *Argentina: en la crisis está la solución*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2002.

¹⁶ Fung & Wright (2001), pp.17-25. See also Fung & Wright (2003).

¹⁷ A. Cornwall, ‘Introduction: New Democratic Spaces? The Politics and Dynamics of Institutionalised Participation’, *IDS Bulletin*, 35:2 (2004), p.1.

¹⁸ L. Avritzer, *Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, p.5.

consensually agreed-upon ‘common good’. Rather, EDD involves “a radical reconfiguration of relationships and responsibilities”,¹⁹ and the ‘local public spheres’ that it constitutes become a privileged means of transformative connection between civil society and political society. Indeed, to a large extent, this is what is distinctive about EDD, in that it is a political process that attempts to link “public reasoning” with the political system in a way that goes beyond just influencing it.²⁰

EDD therefore corresponds to “a conception of the vitalisation of democracy (or the establishment of more meaningful alternatives to it) through popular participation in local public spheres”.²¹ It is a political model that aims to foster fairer, more inclusive, and more efficient decision making in society through processes of joint planning and problem solving that involve ordinary citizens, and in doing so inherently make them better citizens and enhances the quality of their life and government.²² Participatory Budgeting (PB) is perhaps the best-known form of EDD. 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 PB has also been experimented with at the provincial state level. The central goal of PB 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, etcetera – to neighbourhood-level forums. The proportion of the budget controlled by a PB process can vary tremendously, from just a few percent to the whole of the investment budget of a municipality; and some PB processes – such as the one promulgated in Buenos Aires – seek to determine certain priority public works to be taken into account within overall municipal spending, rather than a specific percentage of this spending. Over 250 cities in Africa, Asia, Europe, as well as North and South America, have implemented PB,²³ including the paradigmatic and foundational case of Porto Alegre in Brazil, where it was first applied in 1989.²⁴ This city enjoys better than

¹⁹ Cornwall (2004), p.1.

²⁰ Harriss *et al.* (forthcoming).

²¹ Harriss *et al.* (forthcoming).

²² To this extent, EDD implicitly constitutes a practical realisation of Sen’s “capability approach” (A. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, New York: Knopf, 1999).

²³ Y. Cabannes, ‘Participatory budgeting: A significant contribution to participatory democracy’, *Environment and Urbanization*, 16:1 (2004), p.27.

²⁴ See R. Abers, ‘From Ideas to Practice: The Partido dos Trabalhadores and Participatory Governance in Brazil’, *Latin American Perspectives*, 23:4 (1996), pp.35-53, ‘From Clientelism to Cooperation: Local Government, Participatory Policy, and Civic Organizing in Porto Alegre, Brazil’, *Politics and Society*, 26:4 (1998), pp.511-537, and *Inventing Local Democracy: Grassroots Politics in Brazil*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000; J. Ackerman, ‘Co-Governance for Accountability: Beyond “Exit” and “Voice”’, *World Development*, 32:3 (2004), pp.447-463; L. Avritzer, ‘Democratization and Changes in the Pattern of Association in Brazil’, *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 43:3 (2000), pp.59-76, and (2002); S. Baierle, ‘The Explosion of Experience: The Emergence of a New Ethical-Political Principle in Popular Movements in Porto Alegre, Brazil’, in S. E. Alvarez, E. Dagnino & A. Escobar (eds), *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Cultures: Revisioning Latin American Social Movements*, Boulder: Westview, 1998; G. Baiocchi, ‘Participation, Activism, and Politics: The Porto Alegre Experiment and Deliberative Democratic Theory’, *Politics and Society*, 29:1 (2001), pp.43-72, *Radicals in Power: The Workers’ Party and Experiments with Urban Democracy in Brazil*, London: Zed Books, 2003, and ‘Porto Alegre: The Dynamism of the Unorganised’, in D. Chavez & G. Goldfrank (eds), *The Left in the City: Participatory Local Governments in Latin America*, London: Latin America Bureau, 2004; Evans (2002); T. Genro & De Souza, U., *Orçamento Participativo: A Experiência de Porto Alegre*, São Paulo: Fundação Perseu Abramo, 1997; P. Heller, ‘Moving the State: The Politics of Democratic Decentralization in Kerala, South Africa and Porto Alegre’, *Politics and Society*, 29:1 (2001), pp.131-163; K. Koonings, ‘Strengthening citizenship in Brazil’s democracy: Local participatory governance in Porto Alegre’, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 23:1 (2004), pp.79-99; B. de Sousa Santos, B., ‘Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre: Toward a Redistributive Democracy’, *Politics and Society*, 26:4 (1998), pp.479-497; C. Souza, ‘Participatory budgeting in Brazilian cities: Limits and possibilities in building democratic institutions’,

average infrastructure and better performing public services than other non-PB cities of comparable size and socio-economic profile, and the process has reportedly also “created an enabling environment” in which there has developed “a new relationship between government personnel and local citizens”.²⁵

There is no doubt that instances of deliberative democracy such as PB can make significant differences in a variety of contexts, both in material and infrastructural terms, but also by fostering processes of construction of renewed senses of citizenship and political community.²⁶ The question, however, is to what extent they genuinely constitute processes whereby:

a loosely bounded set of ideas and beliefs that the uncoordinated and highly decentralised actions of civil society entities, market actors and local government agents are engaged in a mutually reinforcing movement to produce all good things for all people.²⁷

Certainly, it can be argued that there is frequently a sense in which EDD in general, and PB in particular, seem to be seen as holistic panaceas to all the ills of underdevelopment, in a manner reminiscent of the way ‘participation’ in the 1990s spuriously became the one-stop, catch-all solution to the so-called ‘development impasse’.²⁸ In this respect, although openly optimistic about deliberative institutions, Peter Evans argues that they have to overcome at least three potential problems in order to fulfil their putative promise. Firstly, they must be socially self-sustaining – in other words, citizens must be willing to participate. Secondly, they must overcome what Evans calls the “political economy problem”, that is to say the opposition of the powerful who have vested interests in existing decision-making structures. Finally, they must not be economically inefficient.²⁹

This last issue we can take as a given; deliberative processes involving economic affairs will in the final analysis be subject to the same laws of accounting as non-deliberative forms of government, and indeed countless examples all over the world have shown that spending beyond your means will simply not work in the long run, whether you are an individual or a state (although in the latter case it is sometimes necessary to adopt what Alfred Marshall called the “long view” in order to appreciate the fundamental truth of this axiom). The first problem, however, that citizens must be willing to participate, arguably relates to a fundamental epistemological question concerning the nature of civil society participation. As Arnab Acharya, Adrián Gurza Lavalle, and Peter Houtzager point out, there exist two major perspectives on this matter, which they label respectively a “civil society” and a “polity” perspective. On the one hand, the former holds that it is relatively unproblematic for individual or collective actors to reach and use institutional arrangements for citizen participation insofar as:

Environment and Urbanization, 13:1 (2001), pp.159-184. The case of Porto Alegre is so paradigmatic that Baiocchi labels it “a school of deliberative democracy” (Baiocchi, 2001, p.55).

²⁵ Abers (1998), pp.529 & 534.

²⁶ Avritzer (2002), in particular, conceives of the “local public spheres” of EDD as transformative “bridges” between civil society and political society that transfer new democratic practices from the former to the latter, thereby contributing to consolidating democracy in transition societies.

²⁷ P. Houtzager, ‘Introduction: From Polycentrism to the Polity’, in P. Houtzager and M. Moore (eds), *Changing Paths: International Development and the New Politics of Inclusion*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003, cited in Harriss *et al.* (forthcoming).

²⁸ See D. Rodgers, ‘Rhetoric vs. Reality: “Participatory Development”, Cooperation, and the case of the AMUL cooperative’, *Cambridge Anthropology*, 19:1 (1996), pp.74-76.

²⁹ Evans (2002), p.17.

authentic civil society actors are a democratising and rationalising force of public action because of their deliberative logic (versus interest-based), decentralised nature and rootedness in the social life of local communities and autonomy.³⁰

The latter “polity” perspective, on the other hand, suggests that participation is a contingent outcome, and that it is “produced as collective actors (civil society, state and other) negotiate relations in a pre-existing institutional terrain that constrains and facilitates particular kinds of action”.³¹ Depending on which approach one adopts, the problem of sustained participation will be viewed very differently.

Put simply, from the ‘civil society’ perspective civil society participation in deliberative institutions emerges almost automatically from what is implicitly conceived as an ebullient and vibrant mass of autonomous individual agents and collective actors that want to become engaged in a meaningful manner, and will force engagement to occur in an egalitarian way.³² As Günter Schönleitner emphatically demonstrates in his meticulous comparative case study of deliberative health councils in four Brazilian municipalities,³³ it is rarely quite so simple, however. He shows how different combinations of different types and levels of government commitment on the one hand, and civic organising on the other, produce distinct political outcomes, ranging from situations with highly unequal relations and top-down incorporation to situations of political equality and bottom-up political integration. This points to the fact that social actors are institutionally embedded within larger contexts, and that they will be connected to spaces and actors other than those involved in a given deliberative process. This fundamentally challenges the idea that civil society consists of autonomous social actors, and suggests that adopting a ‘polity’ approach makes more sense. Certainly, this is what Acharya, Gurza Lavallo, and Houtzager do in their study of PB and deliberative policy councils in São Paulo. They specifically focus on what factors increased or decreased the propensity of civil society actors to participate in these deliberative processes, and trace the existence of dense linkages between civil society and what they term “political society”, identifying affiliations with traditional institutional actors such as political parties as being particularly significant.³⁴

This brings us squarely onto the problem of ‘political economy’ identified by Evans. There are two possible ways of approaching this issue, which can respectively be labelled ‘endogenous’ and ‘exogenous’. The ‘endogenous’ approach examines the issue of who participates from inside the deliberative process. For example, both Baiocchi and Fung and Wright point out that inequality within the EDD process is one of the biggest threats to effective deliberation, as it can subvert deliberative arrangements in a variety of different ways.³⁵ 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. Powerful participants may also attempt to exclude or avoid issues that constitute a threat to their interests, to the extent that in cases where deliberative democratic arrangements seriously challenge their power and privileges, they may seek to dismantle them. This latter point implicitly underlines a critical

³⁰ A. Acharya, A. Gurza Lavallo & P. P. Houtzager, ‘Civil Society Representation in the Participatory Budget and Deliberative Councils of São Paulo, Brazil’, *IDS Bulletin*, 35:2 (2004), p.41.

³¹ Acharya *et al.* (2004), p.41.

³² See, for example, Avritzer (2002).

³³ G. Schönleitner, ‘Can Public Deliberation Democratise State Action? Municipal Health Councils and Local Democracy in Brazil’, in J. Harriss, K. Stokke, and O. Törnquist (eds), *Politicising Democracy: Local Politics and Democratisation in Developing Countries*, mimeo, forthcoming.

³⁴ Acharya *et al.* (2004).

³⁵ See, respectively, Baiocchi (2001), pp.49-54; and Fung & Wright (2003), pp.18-20.

dilemma concerning the nature of deliberative institutions insofar as it demonstrates starkly that the criteria upon which deliberative democratic processes are designed is by no means objective. As Schönleitner points out, “one must postulate either a benign *deus ex machina* to design the institution in question”, or else a process of subjective choice that is inextricably linked to external power relations.

This relates directly to the ‘exogenous’ dimension of the political economy problem. It is an exogenous dimension insofar as it has little to do with the deliberative process and its institutional design *per se*, but rather relates to the origins and sustainability of the process. Power relations are the key factor here, with the basic issue being that “if powerful actors do not renounce their power over others as a means for shaping collective decision-making, deliberation can hardly be sustained”.³⁶ Certainly change is generally very difficult to achieve when certain individuals and organisations have disproportional bargaining power as a result of an existing institutional framework, as they will obviously have a stake in perpetuating the system, and the crucial question to ask is therefore “what political context is necessary to carry out such an experiment in the real world”?³⁷ At one level, it is not completely implausible to imagine circumstances in which traditional political actors are prepared to spontaneously “give up part of their power in favour of institutions that incorporate citizens and try to establish a new relationship between state and society”,³⁸ mainly because power lost because of, for example, diminished scope for using public works as resources for patronage could be compensated for by “power and legitimacy gained through increased ability to deliver public goods in general and the increased engagement of constituents in the political process”.³⁹ However, this kind of self-induced transformation is relatively unlikely except in very specific contexts and under particular circumstances, as the introduction of new – or the recomposition of existing – institutional arrangements generally tends to be fraught with uncertainty,⁴⁰ and consequently it is much more the case that the successful implementation of EDD processes requires some sort of challenge to existing power structures, or in other words, that it is a question of politics.

Certainly, this is the conclusion of Patrick Heller’s ground breaking comparative study of EDD initiatives in Kerala, South Africa, and Porto Alegre, where he underlines these sorts of processes were:

given life ...because they were underwritten by ...the political initiative of a programmatic party ...that could successfully circumvent traditional powerbrokers and build direct political ties with local forces.⁴¹

As a recent collection highlights, such programmatic parties are generally associated with the left of the political spectrum, to the extent that in many ways it can be argued that the proliferation of EDD initiatives has become inextricably associated with left politics in Latin America.⁴² Certainly, at the very least, “since the early 1980s, local politics have become a privileged space for the left experimenting with social reforms”.⁴³ What this points to in relation to EDD processes and their implementation is that they will invariably emerge from

³⁶ Schönleitner (forthcoming).

³⁷ Baiocchi (2001), p.45.

³⁸ Avritzer (2002), p.170.

³⁹ Evans (2002), p.25.

⁴⁰ See J. Knight, *Institutions and Social Conflict*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

⁴¹ Heller (2001), p.158.

⁴² Chavez & Goldfrank (2004).

⁴³ D. Chavez, ‘Introduction: Local Left Politics in a Democratising Region’, in Chavez & Goldfrank (2004a).

what Evans labels “local political dynamics”.⁴⁴ As Harriss, Stokke and Törnquist remark, this is something that has tended to be relatively under-examined in the literature, which has generally focused more on the institutional design aspects of EDD initiatives (often with the implicit aim of determining their eventual replicability).⁴⁵ However, as Heller emphasises, “we need to develop models of analysis that explicitly unpack the configurations and conditions under which social forces and political actors become agents of transformation” in order to truly understand the factors that enable EDD initiatives to come about and to be sustainably implemented,⁴⁶ and to this end Harriss, Stokke and Törnquist propose a four point agenda for researching the “local political dynamics”. This involves:

- a) Examining the local power relations and politics surrounding the establishment and implementation of a given EDD process;
- b) Determining the factors that open up the “local political spaces” of a given EDD initiative;
- c) Establishing what factors influence the capacities of actors to operate within these spaces; and
- d) Exploring the ways in which social actors try to master and alter their conditions of power by employing and developing – or avoiding and undermining – EDD in other political spaces.⁴⁷

My intention here is to focus principally on the first of these four points, paying particular attention to the origins and the establishment of PB rather than its implementation, although I will inevitably make some comments about this latter issue.⁴⁸ What I aim to do, in other words, is to explore the nature and workings of the politics that surrounded the establishment of PB in Buenos Aires. Following Pierre Bourdieu, I conceive these in terms of a “political field”,⁴⁹ that is to say a relational space constituted of positioned actors, connected by relations of power that variably accrue them on the basis of the different forms of capital – economic, social, cultural, and symbolic – that they possess, and who compete in order to accumulate further capital and change existing balances of power. The interactions between different actors within a political field and the changing relations of power that connect them shape the range of possibilities for strategic practices and decision making,⁵⁰ and the issue that I want to elucidate is how it is that a “window of opportunity” that permitted the development of PB in Buenos Aires came to emerge.⁵¹ This is particularly critical to examine considering

⁴⁴ Evans (2002), p.29. See also Harriss *et al.* (forthcoming); and P. Houtzager, A. Gurza Lavallo & A. Acharya, ‘Who Participates? Civil Society and the New Democratic Politics in Sao Paulo, Brazil’, *IDS Working Paper* 210, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2003.

⁴⁵ See Harriss *et al.* (forthcoming).

⁴⁶ Heller (2001), p.159.

⁴⁷ See Harriss *et al.* (forthcoming).

⁴⁸ Dealing with the other three points would require setting out a detailed analysis of the actual PB process itself, which will be the subject of a future paper.

⁴⁹ See P. Bourdieu, ‘La representation politique: Eléments pour une théorie du champ politique’, *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 37 (1981), pp.3-24, and *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

⁵⁰ For Bourdieu, “the political field is one of the privileged sites for the exercise of the *power of representation or manifestation* [in the sense of demonstration – trans.] that contributes to making what existed in a practical state, tacitly or implicitly, exist fully, that is, in the objectified state, in a form directly visible to all” (Bourdieu (1981), p.235, as translated by L. Wacquant, ‘Pointers on Pierre Bourdieu and Democratic Politics’, *Constellations*, 11:1 (2004), p 4).

⁵¹ Abers (1998), p.530. See also Harriss *et al.* (forthcoming).

that PB was established and implemented in Buenos Aires in the face of highly unlikely circumstances of overwhelming economic and political crisis.

Conceptualising the nature of the *Argentinazo*

Following a decade in which it was held up as a developmental showcase for the IMF's prescriptions and a role model for the rest of Latin America to emulate, Argentina dramatically fell from economic grace in December 2001. Although the country had been in the grips of a profound economic crisis from the mid-1990s onwards, events accelerated suddenly in November-December 2001. Widespread concerns – both internal and external – about the impending collapse of the Argentinean peso's fixed one-to-one exchange rate with the US dollar (the so-called 'convertibility'), possible default on external debt, capital flight of some US\$25 billion during the preceding eight months, and worsening economic recession led to President Fernando de la Rúa's government desperately imposing draconian measures that limited withdrawals from private bank accounts. This precipitated massive social protests that culminated in a two-day period of widespread violence, looting, and police repression on 19-20 December 2001 that has come to be known as the '*Argentinazo*'. De la Rúa resigned on 20 December 2001 and there were three different Presidents in ten days before Senator Eduardo Duhalde became president on 1 January 2002, to serve the remainder of de la Rúa's term until December 2003. Duhalde oversaw the end of the peso's fixed exchange rate regime, a subsequent sharp devaluation, and default on Argentina's public and private foreign debt of US\$132 billion (the largest default in history). Not surprisingly, he also presided over a dramatic contraction of the Argentinean economy, as GDP fell by 16 percent in the first quarter of 2002, and industrial production by 17 percent during the first seven months of 2002. The peso collapsed to one quarter of its pegged value, and inflation spiralled. Unemployment soared to over 30 percent of the workforce, schools closed down for several months, and state pensions and public sector workers' salaries went unpaid. The proportion of the Argentinean population living below the poverty line increased to 57 percent by October 2002, compared to 37 percent in October 2001.⁵²

The crisis cannot be fully understood without an appreciation of its politics.⁵³ As Laura Tedesco points out, a critical factor to understanding the origins of the crisis was the chronic weakness and fragmentation of the Argentinean political system:

Limits to Argentina's democratic culture have played a significant role in the crisis. [A] kind of 'informal politics' ...has contributed to the unleashing of political and social turmoil ...The social protests that brought down Fernando de la Rúa's government ...signal an awakening of civil society after a decade of supine tolerance of an institution-weakening, Executive-oriented democracy. At the same time, however, they also reflect and further reinforce the absence of

⁵² See E. Galasso & M. Ravallion, 'Social Protection in a Crisis: Argentina's Plan Jefes y Jefas', *Policy Research Working Paper Series* 3165, The World Bank, 2003; L. Manzetti (ed.), *Regulatory Policy in Latin America: Post-Privatisation Realities*, Coral Gables: North-South Center Press, 2000; and L. Tedesco, 'Introduction: Crisis in Argentina', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 22:2 (2003), pp.165-169.

⁵³ P. Oxhorn, 'History Catching Up with the Present? State-Society Relations and the Argentine Crisis', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 15:3 (2002), pp.499-514; E. Peruzzotti, 'Civic Engagement in Argentina: From the Human Rights Movement to the "Cacerolazos"', mimeo, 2002; and L. Tedesco, 'Argentina's Turmoil: The Politics of Informality and the Roots of Economic Meltdown', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 15:3 (2002), pp.469-481.

political channels capable of providing for the more systematically and proactively deliberative articulation of interests.⁵⁴

Both Raúl Alfonsín of the *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR), who became the first elected president of the post-dictatorship era in 1983, and Carlos Menem of the the *Partido Justicialista* (PJ), who succeeded him in 1989 and was president until de la Rúa came to power in 1999, had ruled in highly personalised ways, to a large extent drawing their legitimacy from the traditional Argentinean cultural figure of the '*caudillo*', or 'big man'.⁵⁵ They governed by means of alternating confrontation and cooperation, building fluctuating and tactically motivated temporary alliances which led to:

an informal system of implementing policies, forming shifting coalitions, and arriving at decisions that undermined the working of the state as a set of formalised institutional procedures.⁵⁶

This 'politics of informality' delegitimised both horizontal and vertical mechanisms of voice, accountability, collaboration and consensus building, thereby transforming Argentinean democratic politics into a glorified form of '*personalismo*', with politicians at all levels following their own agendas rather than attempting to implement a programmatic political agenda, and most tending to draw their power from personalised forms of local clientelism rather than affiliation to a political party or ideology.⁵⁷

Borrowing from Paulo Sergio Pinheiro and his description of post-dictatorship Brazil,⁵⁸ in many ways it can be contended that Argentinean post-dictatorship democracy rapidly became a form of "democracy without representation", or in other words a democratic system that displayed all the formal trappings of democracy but offered very little to its constituents in the way of actual representation and even less in terms of accountability.⁵⁹ The question of political accountability in Argentina arguably took a turn for the worse during the 1990s as a result of the government's adoption of certain economic policies that 'locked' the country into a particular societal model and effectively 'disconnected' economic issues from political issues. Menem's accession to the presidency coincided with a period of hyperinflation that was the culmination of a decade of extreme economic turbulence in Argentina, and after some initial hesitation, his government turned to policies frequently designated as 'neo-liberal' in order to successfully bring the country's rampant inflation under control. The centre point of

⁵⁴ Tedesco (2002), p.469.

⁵⁵ R. Romero, 'Presupuesto Participativo y Formas de Recuperar la Democracia: Viabilidad en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires', mimeo, 2001.

⁵⁶ Tedesco (2002), p.478.

⁵⁷ See J. Auyero, 'The Logic of Clientelism in Argentina: An Ethnographic Account', *Latin American Research Review*, 36:1 (2000), pp.55-81; and S. Levitsky, 'An "Organised Disorganisation": Informal Organisation and the Persistence of Local Party Structures in Argentine Peronism', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 33:1 (2001), pp.29-61.

⁵⁸ Pinheiro (1996).

⁵⁹ The issue of accountability was starkly reflected by the manner of Menem's presidency, during which he abused executive power by ruling by decree in an unprecedented manner, issuing 335 decrees during his first term, and 210 in his second, compared to the mere 30 decrees issued by all the prior democratically elected presidents of Argentina since 1853 put together. He furthermore increased the number of judges on the Supreme Court from five to nine judges, thereby allowing him to curtail the Judiciary's independence, and effectively emasculated the Legislative by taking levels of clientelism and political patronage to unprecedented levels, in particular through the targeted redistribution of federal funds. Seven out of the ten provinces receiving the most federal funds during his presidency were under the control of his party, the PJ, with Menem's home province of La Rioja receiving most. At the same time, the overall transfer of federal funds to the provinces increased from about US\$7 billion at end of Alfonsín's presidency in 1989 to US\$17 billion in 1998.

his efforts was ‘convertibility’, whereby the Argentinean currency was devalued and then pegged at parity to the US dollar, with the government backing up each newly (re-)introduced peso in circulation with a dollar reserve. This allowed the government to control the national money supply and brought stability, thereby encouraging international investment while at the same time permitting the restructuring and technological modernisation of the most productive sectors of the economy in order to increase their productivity and international competitiveness. Inflation fell from four to single digit figures and there was an unprecedented economic boom. Per capita GDP increased by 40 percent between 1990 and 1998, exports more than doubled, and the economy expanded by 60 percent.⁶⁰

Menem won re-election in 1995 essentially campaigning on the fact of Argentina’s newfound economic stability. This was not to last, however, as the country’s deficit worsened (partly due to excessive borrowing necessary to back ‘convertibility’) and when the country entered into a prolonged recession around 1995-1996 – precipitated by the knock-on effects of global financial crises – its fiscal base began to erode unstoppably. This inexorably weakened the government, which effectively found itself in a situation where it had very few credible policy options to exercise in order to try and roll back the recession without causing a profound shock to the country’s economy, since due to ‘convertibility’ it had little control over fiscal policy – indeed, this was *de facto* in the hands of the head of the US Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan – which meant that it could not lower interest rates to attempt to mitigate the effects of the recession that hit it in the second half of the 1990s.⁶¹ The country’s mounting fiscal problems were accompanied by a sharp rise in unemployment, as well as the increasing pauperisation of a large swathe of the population and a dramatic rise in inequalities. Unemployment rose from 6 percent in 1991 to 15 percent in 1997, the percentage of the population under the poverty line increased from 17 percent in 1993 to 26 percent in 1998, and income disparities rose dramatically, with the poorest 10 percent of the population sharing 21.5 percent of national income in 1990 but only 1.5 percent in 1999.⁶²

De la Rúa’s election to the presidency in 1999 on the *Alianza por el Trabajo, la Justicia y la Educación* (Alliance for Work, Justice, and Education) ticket was widely considered a signal that the Argentinean electorate wanted a change of direction. The *Alianza* was a coalition of two forces, on the one hand the UCR, which had now been in opposition for ten years, and the *Frente del País Solidario* (Frepasso), a centre-left coalition founded in 1993 of anti-Menem Peronists, dissident Radicals, Socialists, Christian Democrats, ex-Communists, as well as a variety of local community leaders, militants, and human rights activists. Although the extent to which the Radicals constituted a force for change is debatable, the Frepasso certainly embodied this potential, and the 1999 elections generated widespread expectations as a result. However, the *Alianza* was very much an alliance of convenience, and proved unable to convert itself from an electoral to a governing coalition, partly because it failed to properly institutionalise decision-making processes within the alliance, but also because personalised forms of organisation continued to predominate in both the UCR and the Frepasso, although in different ways. The UCR was a traditional Argentinean political party, constituted of *caudillos* with clientelistic power bases (indeed, it was and still is dominated by ex-President Raúl Alfonsín), while Frepasso represented a new, more free-floating kind of political party,

⁶⁰ Manzetti (2002).

⁶¹ Manzetti (2002).

⁶² CEPAL (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe), *Anuario estadístico de América Latina y el Caribe*, Santiago de Chile: CEPAL, 2004; Galasso & Ravallion (2003); Nora Lustig, *La crisis y la incidencia de la pobreza: macroeconomía socialmente responsable*, Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank, 2000; and figures from the Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos (INDEC), at <http://www.indec.mecon.ar/>.

which in addition to being very much Buenos Aires-based, had very little in the way of a party apparatus or territorial base and relied much more on the charismatic aura of its leaders – including in particular Carlos ‘Chacho’ Alvarez and Graciela Fernández Meijide – and access to media for turning out the vote.

Perhaps not surprisingly, within less than a year of taking office, the *Alianza* had split, with the Frepaso passing into the opposition, leaving de la Rúa and the UCR to govern alone. Following Frepaso’s departure, de la Rúa resorted to increasingly desperate measures to shore up the country’s failing economy within the constraints of the existing economic model. This culminated in his installing Domingo Cavallo, the architect of Menem’s economic reforms including ‘convertibility’, as Finance Minister. Cavallo’s first action was to institute a ‘zero deficit’ plan, which included a 30 percent cut in the salaries and pensions of all state workers earning more than 500 pesos. The anger at these measures was palpable in the October 2001 elections, which saw what was left of the *Alianza* lose heavily to the PJ, although the most significant result of the elections was perhaps the so-called ‘voto bronca’, or ‘angry vote’, which saw an unprecedented number of spoiled and blank votes (21 percent of all votes), as well as a high rate of absenteeism (25 percent, despite voting being obligatory in Argentina), both of which arguably signalled a generalised rejection of ‘politics as usual’. Despite this clear political slap in the face, the de La Rúa government continued to implement increasingly desperate measures to try to stabilise the economy, which – to a large extent prompted by a process of capital flight that on 30 November 2001 saw US\$1.3 billion withdrawn from Argentinean banks in 24 hours and the country’s reserves slumping to a mere US\$1.7 billion – culminated in a decree installing what became known as the ‘*corralito*’ (the playpen), a measure that limited cash withdrawals from bank accounts to 250 pesos per week and transfers abroad to 1,000 pesos per month. This hit the poor and the middle class particularly hard, and led to three weeks of civil strife which ultimately culminated in the *Argentinazo*.

Although the *Argentinazo* was arguably a process rather than an event, in the Argentinean collective consciousness it concerns principally 19-20 December 2001. At 11pm on the evening of the 19th, following a day of rioting and looting in the provinces, De la Rúa took everybody by surprise by announcing on national television that he was declaring a state of emergency. His intervention, coming after two years of ineffective government and constant denials that something was wrong with the state of the country, was the spark for the largest mass demonstration ever to occur in Argentina, as hundreds of thousands of people in Buenos Aires and its surrounding suburbs spontaneously converged on the Plaza de Mayo and the Presidential palace, many angrily banging pots and pans (a traditional form of protest known in Argentina as ‘*cacerolazo*’) in order to vocally signal their discontent, crying slogans of protest including the emblematic anti-politician slogan “*que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo*” (“out with the lot of them, not a single one must remain”), which rapidly became a universal rallying cry. The protest brought together men and women, young and old, crowds from shanty towns, middle-class families, organised groups of the unemployed known as ‘*piqueteros*’, trade unionists, human rights activists, academics, businessmen, shopkeepers, street cleaners, and more. As people continued to take to the streets, at 1am on the 20th Domingo Cavallo resigned. At the same time, the police began to attempt to disperse the crowds, which rapidly lead to violent repression during which twenty-nine demonstrators were killed, hundreds injured and arrested, and which caused even greater numbers to mobilise in indignation. In the early morning of the 20th, De la Rúa resigned the presidency and fled the presidential palace in a helicopter, creating a power vacuum. The country was wracked by uncertainty and continuing protests for the better part of two weeks, until Eduardo Duhalde was installed as president on 1 January 2002.

As Marcela López Levy remarks, the *Argentinazo* was:

a heady time steeped in a sense of shared destiny when people bypassed politics as usual. ...It was a spontaneous uprising nobody had called for and no organisation could take credit for. The moment of overflowing rage is remembered now as ...the time when the majority said ‘*Enough!*’.⁶³

Exactly what the Argentines were saying ‘enough’ to is a complex question, however. There were clearly a number of intertwined issues. One obvious factor that the demonstrators were protesting against was certainly the increasing pauperisation of Argentinean society and in particular the economic erosion of its traditionally very large middle class. Another important factor was, in a context of increasing economic disparities and rising unemployment, a marked decline in the high levels of social mobility that had characterised Argentinean society since the turn of the twentieth century. But more importantly than either, perhaps, and as was reflected in the slogan ‘*que se vayan todos*’, Argentines were arguably marking their profound disillusion with politics and politicians. At the same time, however, this protest implicitly constituted a challenge not only to politicians and political parties, but also to the ineffectiveness – and the absence of horizontal and vertical accountability – of existing institutional (i.e. state-based) channels of political representation and governance in Argentina. As protests and demonstrations continued unabated into the first quarter of 2002,⁶⁴ they increasingly began to take on new forms, ranging from the constitution of cooperatives and land occupations by *piqueteros* and acts of vandalism against banks by ‘*ahorristas*’ (individuals whose savings were first blocked in the banks and then effectively devalued when their accounts were forcibly converted from dollars to pesos), to the establishment of ‘*asambleas populares*’ (spontaneous neighbourhood assemblies) and ‘*clubes de trueque*’ (barter clubs), as well as the spread of ‘*empresas recuperadas*’ (‘recovered’ – i.e. worker-occupied – enterprises),⁶⁵ all of which arguably constituted themselves in opposition to a deficient Argentinean state.

⁶³ M. López Levy, *We Are Millions: Neo-liberalism and New Forms of Political Action in Argentina*, London: Latin America Bureau, 2004, pp.10-11.

⁶⁴ According to Petras, between two and three millions Argentines participated in some kind of public protest during the first half of 2002 (J. Petras, ‘Argentina: 18 Months of Popular Struggle – A Balance’, *Social Policy*, 34:1 (2003)). Levels of social engagement in Argentina have since dropped dramatically, however, as many of the varied forms of protest clearly constituted temporary ‘moments in time’ that peaked almost immediately within the first six months of 2002 before beginning to lose ground in the latter half of that year, and in an even more accelerated manner through 2003 and 2004. To a certain extent this has been due to the very heterogeneity of these diverse forms of protest, and the fact that they often represented very particular interests. But perhaps more importantly it can be said that since about the middle of 2003 Argentina has more or less ‘normalised’. In March 2003, bank accounts were unfrozen and although most of those who had mobilised in protest lost out due to the devaluation and forcible conversion of dollar accounts into peso accounts, many decided to simply take the blow to their savings and determine how best to maximise what was left. The socio-economic situation of the country similarly began to pick up, both at the macroeconomic level, with the national growth rate for 2003 reaching over 10 percent, as well as at the microeconomic level, with the proportion of the population under the poverty line falling significantly, from 57 percent in October 2002 to 48 percent in October 2003 (<http://www.latinnews.com>, 2004). Politically, the election of Nestor Kirchner to the Presidency in April 2003 – the first nationwide election to be held post-December 2001 – also signalled something of a return to ‘normality’. While many predicted a huge ‘*voto bronca*’ (angry vote) and there were multiple calls for voters to abstain, the number of spoiled and blank votes was less than 2 percent and 79 percent of the electorate voted, which certain commentators interpreted as indicating that people were willing to engage with the formal political system again.

⁶⁵ See, for example, López Levy (2004) for a particularly good overview.

Seen in this way, it can be contended that in many ways what the *Argentinazo* more profoundly reflected was a fundamental breakdown in state-society relations in Argentina. As Atul Kohli and Elisabeth Shue highlight, the interconnection between state and society is arguably one of the most fundamental relations constituting the structure of sociological reality in the modern era.⁶⁶ It is of course a highly variable connection, as neither the state nor society are monolithic entities, and the boundaries between the two are generally blurred (indeed, there is a tendency for state-society interaction to be inherently ‘recursive’, or in other words, mutually transforming). Moreover, state-society relations are not necessarily always obvious, often encompassing both direct forms of connection as well as more indirect ones. The dynamics of this relationship are therefore frequently opaque, and the ways in which it can break down even less clear. Yet it is arguably of critical importance to understanding the predicament of contemporary Argentina, where it can be contended that there has occurred a fundamental shift in the nature of state-society relations during the past two decades, with the *Argentinazo* constituting the point of culmination of this alteration.

The transformation of state-society relations in Argentina can be related firstly to the post-1983 failure to create sustainable institutional configurations of the state able to effectively channel democratic political competition, participation and representation due to the spread of a “politics of informality”.⁶⁷ This was reflected not only at the level of party politics, but also in relation to the wider polity, including perhaps most paradigmatically the lack of response to demands that perpetrators of human rights violations during the military dictatorship (1976-1983) be held legally accountable.⁶⁸ Also important to understanding the process of breakdown of state-society relations in contemporary Argentina is the Argentinean state’s declining ability to fulfil certain socially expected socio-economic functions over the past twenty years. As Guillermo Cortés and Adriana Marshall highlight, one of the most significant characteristics of post-Second World War Argentina is that it had a working welfare state based on the universal provision of public education and health, as well as a social security system linked to full employment and backed up by protective labour laws, that continued well beyond the global crisis of the early 1970s that signalled the end of the welfare state model elsewhere around the world.⁶⁹ Partly as a result of this exceptionalism, there exists within contemporary Argentinean society a deep and widespread attitude that the state is the privileged vehicle for social justice.⁷⁰ The Argentinean welfare state began to unravel in the 1990s, as the Menem government’s economic policies eroded the state’s institutional and financial capacities – already weakened by the widespread ‘politics of informality’ – which meant that the state became increasingly unable to fulfil its expected welfare functions in a context of increasing poverty and unemployment where these functions were becoming increasingly urgent.⁷¹

⁶⁶ A. Kohli & E. Shue, ‘State Power and Social Forces: On Political Contention and Accommodation in the Third World’, in J. Migdal *et al.* (eds), *State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. See also Evans (1995) and Manor (1991).

⁶⁷ Tedesco (2002).

⁶⁸ See Peruzzotti (2002) for a discussion of this point.

⁶⁹ R. Cortés & A. Marshall, ‘Estrategia económica, instituciones y negociación política en la reforma social de los ‘90’, *Desarrollo Económico*, 39:154 (1999).

⁷⁰ This is of course also linked historically to the political ideology of Peronism – see, for example, J. Auyero, *Poor People’s Politics. Peronist Networks and the Legacy of Evita*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001; and D. James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

⁷¹ The changing nature of the Argentinean economy and the state’s increasing inability to respond were clearly at odds with the “social imaginary” (C. Taylor, ‘Modern Social Imaginaries’, *Public Culture*, 14 (2002), pp.49-90), as was succinctly encapsulated in a conversation I had with a ‘*remis*’ (unlicensed taxicab) driver in the poor Greater Buenos Aires suburb of La Matanza in June 2003. We were talking about the economic situation in

Another way of looking at this process would be in terms of a ‘disbundling’ of formal and substantive citizenship rights. T. H. Marshall defines citizenship as “a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed”.⁷² However, he makes a distinction between formal and substantive aspects of citizenship, with the former referring to civic rights such as membership within a political community, while the latter refer to the array of socio-economic rights that individuals possess and can exercise, thereby providing them with the means through which to operationalise their formal citizenship. Meaningful citizenship is therefore constituted through the ‘bundling’ of formal and substantive rights in such a way that they interact and mutually reinforce each other, as formal rights alone are not sufficient to guarantee effective citizenship, while substantive rights by themselves do not provide a basis through which to exercise what Albert Hirschman calls “voice”.⁷³ At the same time, Marshall underlined how socio-economic inequalities undermine the ability of people to coherently express their agency in a way that political powerlessness in a context where socio-economic rights are met does not. From this perspective, it can be argued that although the 1980s saw an undermining of formal political rights in Argentina, due to the spread of the ‘politics of informality’, it was not until the 1990s and the weakening of socio-economic rights, both as a result of the rise in unemployment, inequality, and the decline in social mobility, as well as the erosion of the welfare state, that state-society relations in Argentina properly began to unravel, accelerating until reaching breaking point in December 2001 and the *Argentinazo*.⁷⁴

The politics of participatory budgeting in Buenos Aires

The introduction and implementation of Participatory Budgeting (PB – or ‘*presupuesto participativo*’) in Buenos Aires has to be first and foremost understood against the context of the socio-political fracture that culminated in the *Argentinazo*. Notwithstanding Ana Dinerstein’s somewhat optimistic assertion that “Argentina has become a political laboratory” in the wake of the *Argentinazo*,⁷⁵ with a groundswell of unprecedented bottom-up grassroots mobilisation forcing the establishment of new forms of political organisation, PB was very

general, and he began to tell me how he had been unemployed for three years after the factory he had been working for went bankrupt. I asked him how long ago that had been, and he answered June 2000. Doing the maths quickly in my head, I congratulated him on having recently secured work again driving a *remis*. He replied forcefully that he had been driving the *remis* for two and a half years now, but that it could not in any way be considered a proper job, because his salary was not fixed, he did not have the right to a paid annual holiday, he received no social security or pension contributions from the *remis* owner, there was not state regulation of his job, etc. Compared to most of the rest of Latin America, such expectations were obviously very high ones but reflected well the particular nature of Argentinean state-society relations and starkly illustrate the rupture that arguably crystallized in the *Argentinazo*.

⁷² T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class, and Other Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950, p.92.

⁷³ A. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.

⁷⁴ Another plausible analogy would be to conceive the *Argentinazo* as representing the culmination of a process similar to what Polanyi characterised as the “double movement” of history, with a disaggregation of the Argentinean state-society relations – roughly corresponding to what Polanyi termed the “disembedding” of the economic from the political – on the one hand, and a concomitant social reaction against this process on the other (K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1944).

⁷⁵ A. Dinerstein, “‘*Que se vayan todos!*’ Popular Insurrection and the *Asambleas Barriales* in Argentina’, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 22:2 (April 2003), p. 187.

explicitly a ‘top-down’, *ad hoc* response to the *Argentinazo* by the Government of the City of Buenos Aires (GCBA), as the official 2003 information brochure on the process makes clear:

We live in an epoch in which the institutions of democracy lack representation and legitimacy in unprecedented ways. The citizenry demands new answers, new channels of accountability and participation, new ways of doing politics. Bridging the gap that today separates the State from society is the key to maintaining a fully democratic life. In this context, the Government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires has opened a space for the direct participation of local neighbourhood inhabitants in public affairs. The Participatory Budget Plan has the objective of canalising the demands of society and granting citizens a central role in the democratic life of the City. Citizen participation is the best means possible to attain a more democratic control over the Government’s administration of the City.⁷⁶

To this extent, PB can be said to have constituted a form of crisis management on the part of the GCBA in the face of the *Argentinazo*. In many ways, considering the profound nature of the Argentinean crisis as a manifestation of the disconnection between state and society as well as the underlying logic and aim of EDD, it can even be said to have constituted a rather logical one.

At the same time, PB was by no means an obvious initiative to implement in the face of the crisis. The origins of the concept of PB in Buenos Aires can be traced to the *Central de Trabajadores Argentinos* (CTA – Argentinean Workers’ Central), an independent trade union founded in the late 1980s. It essentially seems to have been the lovechild of one man, Claudio Lozano, at the time head of a CTA think-tank, the *Instituto de Estudios y Formación* (IEF – Institute of Studies and Training), who encountered PB on a fact-finding mission to Porto Alegre in 1994, and had come back extremely enthused with the whole process. The CTA’s web-based documentation clearly reflects the fact that the CTA’s enthusiasm for PB is due not only to its potential as a means of social empowerment that is in correspondence with the leftwing values espoused by the CTA, but also its manifest promise as a powerful means of political mobilisation and raising consciousness. Indeed, the web-based documentation makes frequent mention of the important role PB had played in the electoral success of the Brazilian Workers’ Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* – PT). From 1995 onwards, the CTA organised workshops, lectures, and seminars about PB, published documents about PB, and even produced a video about the experience of PB in Brazil. However, despite this proliferation of outputs they seem to have had a limited impact, except in one major respect: the CTA significantly influenced the nature of the 1996 constitution that established Buenos Aires as an autonomous city by successfully lobbying not only for the inclusion of PB, but indeed making participatory democracy the keystone of the constitution.⁷⁷

Indeed, the concept of participation thoroughly pervades the Constitution of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, which is arguably one of the most progressive in Latin America. Article 1 of the constitution opens by declaring that the city government “organises its autonomous institutions as participatory democracy”,⁷⁸ and participation is explicitly referred to in a

⁷⁶ GCBA (Gobierno de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires – Government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires), *Presupuesto Participativo: Una Realidad*, Buenos Aires: GCBA, 2003a, p.4, my translation.

⁷⁷ Although to a certain extent this seems to have been at least partly due to the force of personality and powers of negotiation of the CTA delegate to the Constitution-writing Constituent Assembly, Martin Hourest.

⁷⁸ GCBA (Gobierno de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires – Government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires), *Constitución de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires*, 5th edition, Buenos Aires: Ediciones del País, 2003b, p.7.

further 15 out of a total 140 articles.⁷⁹ Article 52 relates specifically to PB: “The participatory character of the budget is established. The law will fix the consultative procedures regarding the assignation of resource priorities”.⁸⁰ However, while there is extensive mention of participation in the constitution, it should be noted that its concrete institutionalisation has been much less obvious, particularly in relation to PB. The law referred to in article 52, which was to establish the practical procedural mechanisms for PB, was supposed to have been ratified before the end of 2001, but none of the various legal projects proposed have been voted on by the City Legislature,⁸¹ and the present PB process is actually legislated for by decree.⁸² In 1999, the CTA organised the *Multisectorial de Organizaciones Sociales por la Democracia Participativa* (MOSDePa – Multi-sector Coalition of Social Organisations for Participatory Democracy), a convergence of 30 NGOs of varying size and importance, in order to try to better promote the implementation of PB. The results were clearly rather limited – particularly in relation to the GCBA – as a May 2001 CTA document on PB rather pathetically reflects as it somewhat plaintively calls on the citizens of Buenos Aires to exercise their right to trigger a referendum on the issue of PB by collecting petitions with signatures equivalent to a total of 0.5 percent of the city’s electoral roll.⁸³

In other words, although PB was not completely unknown in Buenos Aires – a small number of limited PB pilot projects were carried out on a local basis in different parts of the city in 1997-98, 1998 and 2001, principally through collaborations between the GCBA and NGOs⁸⁴ –

⁷⁹ These are articles 11, 21, 24, 27, 29, 32, 34, 38, 39, 40, 46, 47, 52, 58, and 104.

⁸⁰ GCBA (2003b), p.19.

⁸¹ See Romero (2001) for an overview of eight of these.

⁸² At the same time, articles 9, 10 and 29 of the 1998 administrative law regulating the procedures for establishing the annual City budget – the *Ley 70 de Sistemas de Gestión, Administración Financiera y Control del Sector Público* (Law 70 concerning Systems of Public Sector Management, Financial Administration and Control) – explicitly refer to the participatory nature of the city’s budgeting process, and mention that this will be achieved through “foros temáticos y zonales” to determine “prioridades de asignación de recursos” through “la consulta a la población en el proceso de elaboración y seguimiento”, which is effectively the basis upon which participatory budgeting in Buenos Aires has been established. It should be noted that article 127 of the constitution also provides for the eventual division of the city into “communes”, which are to be participatory in their modes of governance. Although several laws relating to the communes have been proposed, none have been ratified, principally due to bickering over the delineation of the boundaries of the future communes, which is of course a profoundly political issue as the division of the city would disturb the existing political balance.

⁸³ E. Arceo, *El Presupuesto Participativo en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires*, Buenos Aires: Instituto de Estudios sobre Estado y Participación (IDEP)-Asociación de Trabajadores del Estado (ATE) & Central de Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA), 2001. Three other early adherents and promoters of PB were the NGO *Poder Ciudadano* (Citizen Power), the *Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales* (FLACSO – Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences) led *Redes de Planificación Participativa y Gestión Asociada* (Co-governance and Participatory Planning networks), and the *Centro de Implementación de Políticas Públicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento* (CIPPEC – Centre for the Implementation of Public Policies for Equity and Growth). They seem, however, to have been much less influential and certainly less visible than the CTA in promoting PB. Nevertheless, together with the CTA, these four organisations were invited to become organisational members of the *Consejo Provisorio del Presupuesto Participativo* (Participatory Budgeting Provisional Council) when this was set up in September 2002, due to their historical links with the promotion of PB in Buenos Aires.

⁸⁴ The 1997-98 pilot project was a very limited and schematic application of PB with 101 inhabitants of the La Boca and Barracas neighbourhoods of the CGP no. 3 (the CGPs – *Centros de Gestión y Participación*, or ‘Administration and Participation Centres’, are decentralised administrative units within the city of Buenos Aires; there are sixteen in all). The 1998 experience consisted of participatory workshops with representatives of civil society in the neighbourhoods of Agronomía (CGP no. 11), Monserrat (CGP no. 1), Palermo (CGP no. 14 Este), Saavedra (CGP no. 12), and Villa Luro (CGP no. 7), which reportedly failed to produce results. In 2001 a full scale PB pilot project was carried out over the course of one month in the CGP no. 13 (Belgrano-Nuñez), with the assistance of the ex-Mayor of Porto Alegre, Raúl Pont (Navarro, 2004). For a detailed description of the 1997-98 project in La Boca and Barracas, as well as the 1998 workshops, see Goday, L., ‘Presupuesto Participativo en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires: Primera Experiencia en La Argentina’, article published in the

it definitely did not rate very high in terms of political visibility when the *Argentinazo* occurred. How, then, did it come to be implemented in 2002? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to delve beyond the *Argentinazo* and consider the historical emergence of the *Frente Grande* (Large Front) and Frepaso political parties in Buenos Aires during the early to mid-1990, their integration into the *Alianza* in 1996, and the subsequent break-up of the *Alianza*. Prior to 1993, although there were a veritable plethora of other parties, it can be said that there were basically two predominating political forces in the city, the UCR and the PJ. In 1993, the *Frente Grande* was formed when a small group of PJ congressmen, who were later to be called ‘*los Ocho*’ or ‘Group of Eight’, expressed their disquiet over the direction the Menem administration was taking and decided to find a means of challenging *Menemismo* from outside the PJ.

The ‘Group of Eight’ rapidly built alliances with others feeling dissatisfaction for the hegemonic economic model, and together established a programmatic platform emphasising the growing social problems of Argentina, the need for a renewal of politics, and highlighting ethical problems surrounding corruption and the institutional weakness of the Argentinean state. By December 1994, what had originally simply been eight dissident Peronists had swollen to include more dissident Peronists, Socialists, Christian Democrats, ex-Communists, dissident Radicals (some of whom were gathered under the banner of the wonderfully named *Partido Intransigente*, or Intransigent Party, founded as a Radical splinter group in the 1950s, and also those opposed to Raúl Alfonsín, who despite the hapless end to his presidency in 1989 had retained a strong grip on the UCR), as well as a variety of local community leaders, trade unionists, militants of all ilk, and human rights activists. Much of the anger that brought this disparate group together was fuelled by the so-called *Pacto de los Olivos* (Olivos Pact) between the UCR leader Raúl Alfonsín and the PJ President Carlos Menem, whereby they agreed to reform the constitution in order to allow Menem to run for a second term, while guaranteeing the largest losing minority party in provincial elections an automatic parliamentary or senatorial seat (something that would effectively give the Radicals a permanent quota of power outside urban areas), as well as the principle of autonomy for the city of Buenos Aires (essentially turning it into an extra province which the Radicals were theoretically likely to dominate considering their historical domination of the city). The *Frente Grande*, or rather Frepaso as it was now called, was the lone dissenting organisational voice against this bipartisan pact between the two dominating parties, and its standing rose accordingly. In the May 1995 presidential elections, the Frepaso candidate, dissident Peronist senator José Octavio Bordón, finished second behind Menem with 30 percent, beating the UCR to an unprecedented third place as they turned in their worst ever electoral showing with less than 17 percent of the vote.

Although this seemed to be an encouraging result, Frepaso now found itself at a crossroads. Frepaso was fundamentally different from the two traditional Argentinean parties in that it did not have much of a national party structure and very little in the way of a militant base. Indeed, Luis Alberto Romero has called it “a party of leaders”,⁸⁵ depending to a large extent on the charisma of its principle figures, such as Bordón – who in fact ended up rejoining the PJ shortly after the 1995 elections – Carlos ‘Chacho’ Alvarez (originally a dissident Peronist), or Graciela Fernández Meijide (a prominent human rights activist). Partly because of this, Frepaso’s votes had come disproportionately from urban middle class voters, and it hardly

Revista de la Asociación Argentina de Presupuesto, mimeo, December 1999; and for comments specifically on the 2001 pilot project in the CGP no. 13, see Romero (2001).

⁸⁵ L. A. Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002.

existed across large swathes of the interior of the country. Moreover, many of the voters were clearly not long-term converts but UCR-sympathizers who were punishing their party for the Olivos Pact. However, faced with the long-haul enterprise of creating a strong and viable third party or the possibility of more immediately rewarding returns, the Frepaso leadership decided on the latter and began exploring the prospects of a partnership with the still bruised and reeling UCR.

The result was the *Alianza*, formed in 1996. The combination of the charisma of Frepaso leaders and its anti-establishment bent with the old and efficient Radical party machine proved irresistible, and it was no surprise when the *Alianza* won the first congressional elections it contested in 1997. The coalition then prepared for a run at the presidency in 1999. There were two obvious frontrunners for the nomination, the Radical Fernando de la Rúa who had recently been elected mayor of Buenos Aires on the one hand, and Graciela Fernández Mejjide, now a Frepaso senator and still one of its most prominent figures, on the other. It was eventually decided that the *Alianza* would hold open primaries to decide who would be their presidential candidate, which effectively handed the nomination to de la Rúa, Frepaso not having the constituency-mobilising local-level apparatus that the UCR had. Following Fernández Mejjide's withdrawal, the vice-presidential *Alianza* slot went to 'Chacho' Alvarez, the original leader of the Group of Eight that had come together as the *Frente Grande*, and now also a major figure of Frepaso.

The de la Rúa-Alvarez team campaigned on three major issues: the elimination of corruption and the promise of transparency, ending the economic recession, and finally, promising growth with equity. The *Alianza* coalition won handsomely, but was strained almost immediately upon taking power. There were big differences between the UCR and Frepaso ideologies, and they had not agreed on the policies to put into application in any detail. De la Rúa rapidly decided to push Frepaso into the background, offering it just two second-tier cabinet posts in his government and manoeuvring to isolate 'Chacho' Alvarez. At the same time, however, these tensions did not prevent the *Alianza* from winning the mayorship of Buenos Aires in 2000, this time with a Frepaso candidate called Aníbal Ibarra, who had previously led the *Alianza* group in the City Legislature in 1996-2000. However, in late 2000, less than a year after the *Alianza* had come to power, a scandal broke out due to the Minister of Labour bribing Peronist senators to ensure the easy passage of a bill in the upper house which the *Alianza* did not control. 'Chacho' Alvarez – who had made the fight against corruption his trademark – asked for the resignation of the Minister of Labour and other close presidential aides involved. De la Rúa refused, and moreover reshuffled his cabinet in a way that explicitly rewarded those that Alvarez had denounced. 'Chacho' Alvarez resigned, and Frepaso, which was heavily reliant on its high profile and popular leader, abandoned government. This fundamentally altered the nature of the government, and de la Rúa desperately tried to build new coalitions, but these failed to stem the tide and ultimately culminated in the *Argentinazo* and his resignation.

These events form a critical backdrop to understanding why and how PB came to be introduced in Buenos Aires in 2002. 'Chacho' Alvarez's resignation saw him to all intents and purposes withdraw from public political life, and critics within the *Alianza* in Buenos Aires – including within his own party, Frepaso – charged him with political irresponsibility for having resigned impetuously and contributed to destabilising de la Rúa's government. The resulting effective collapse of the *Alianza* at the national level was mirrored at the city level, but its effects were in some ways worse, as Aníbal Ibarra, the Frepaso mayor of Buenos Aires elected on an *Alianza* ticket, had been a close ally of 'Chacho' Alvarez, and the latter's

resignation deprived him of his major political support both within Frepaso and in relation to the wider population. The fact that the *Alianza* was disintegrating complicated the situation even more for Ibarra, as the city of Buenos Aires political apparatus was essentially controlled by the UCR, and a nervous Frepaso began to fragment in the face of uncertainty.

Ibarra therefore faced an urgent and delicate task of rebuilding a territorial support base for himself within Buenos Aires. He rapidly began to build bridges both across the spectrum of political groups that made up Frepaso, trying to pull the party back together again, as well as reaching out beyond in order to broker new sources of support. He did so especially through a personal style, cultivating friendships, connections, and relations. In particular, he managed to broker an alliance with a wing of the Buenos Aires UCR led by Gabriela Gonzalez Gass, whom he appointed Secretary for Social Affairs in his government in November 2001, hoping that she would be able to swing a significant proportion of the Radical-leaning local organisations in his favour in the 2003 mayoral elections. Gonzalez Gass however promptly lost the Buenos Aires UCR primaries to select the party's candidate for the elections to Christian Caram, and found herself in the political wilderness (as well as something of a lame duck in Ibarra's government). The events of December 2001 complicated matters further for Ibarra. To add to his problems of being a politician elected to office on a ticket that was now associated with a fallen government, having no figure of national stature supporting him, and lacking a territorial power base in Buenos Aires, Ibarra found himself facing massive popular mobilisation that threatened to bring his government down. At this point Ibarra started trying to pull together a much wider range of political affiliations into his orbit.

He in particular refocused on the Frepaso, which in the wake of the *Argentinazo* underwent a severe process of fragmentation as several smaller groups incorporating the coalition decided to strike out alone in the wider context of political uncertainty, although the major coalition partners stayed together within a group that readopted the name *Frente Grande*. However, Ibarra's task was complicated by the fact that the recomposed *Frente Grande* was divided into three currents. The first of these was a group called the *Movimiento de Justicia Social* (MODEJUSO – Social Justice Movement), a combination of various leftwing Peronists. The historic leader of this group had been 'Chacho' Alvarez, and since his resignation a variety of lower level local leaders were in the process of asserting themselves but none of them making much headway, although in some cases they were very well implanted at the local level. The second group was known as '*La Banda*' ('The Gang'),⁸⁶ and included mainly Radical dissidents (in particular those associated with the *Partido Intransigente*) and was led by Raúl Fernández. The last group was a loose congregation called the *Grupo Espacio Abierto* (Open Space Group), which had coalesced around the ex-communist Ariel Schifrin, who was the ex-leader of the *Alianza* bloc in the City Legislature.

Ibarra had links with all three groups but decided to make overtures to the *Grupo Espacio* first, partly prompted by his historic links with Schifrin, with whom he had been to university and had joined the Communist party in his youth (although Ibarra subsequently quickly left it, while Schifrin went on to become a major party political operator). Moreover, Schifrin had served as administrative secretary to the City Legislature in 1996-2000, and had effectively been Ibarra's right-hand man when he had been head of the City Legislature. Ibarra therefore offered Schifrin a place in his government in order to secure his support and that of his group, which Schifrin agreed to but only on the condition that he be put in charge of what was then the sub-Secretariat of Decentralization and Citizen Participation – but was quickly upgraded

⁸⁶ I was never able to discover the reasons for this name.

to the *Secretaría de Descentralización y Participación Ciudadana* (Secretariat for Decentralization and Citizen Participation) – and that he be permitted to implement PB. Although initially sceptical, Ibarra was won over by Schiffrin’s arguments that firstly, PB could constitute a means of ‘pacifying’ the masses, and secondly that if it worked like it worked in Porto Alegre, it could only strengthen the *Frente Grande*’s, and therefore Ibarra’s, re-election chances. Schiffrin took up his post in February 2002, and moved quickly to implement PB. Schiffrin of course had his own agenda for implementing PB, namely to use it as a means of consolidating and expanding *Grupo Espacio Abierto* political networks in order to establish a coherent and stable local territorial base for the group. This in particular meant displacing or co-opting UCR local organisations – the historically dominant ones in the city – and Schiffrin began to insert loyalists into Buenos Aires CGPs in order to begin processes of localised networking through the PB process.⁸⁷ Many of these loyalists were indeed special PB delegates who were generally linked either to the *Grupo Espacio Abierto* or the MODEJUSO, with whom Schiffrin had begun to build bridges.⁸⁸

This manifest will towards the politicisation of the PB process notwithstanding, however, in many ways it can be argued that to a large extent PB in Buenos Aires worked very well, at least during the first two years of its application, and generated a range of very positive effects. The PB process in Buenos Aires began with a limited one month *Plan de Prioridades Barriales* (Neighbourhood Priorities Plan) pilot project that was successfully carried out in June 2002. 4,500 individuals in 16 neighbourhoods participated in 250 meetings and identified 338 budgetary priorities that were then incorporated into a special annex of the city’s 2002 budget that was approved by the City Legislature. By May 2004, 165 of these priorities had been executed (49 percent), 101 were in the process of being executed (30 percent), and 22 were being disputed (7 percent). A full scale *Plan de Presupuesto Participativo 2003* (2003 PB Plan) followed this pilot project between July and September 2002, where 9,450 individuals in 43 neighbourhoods participated in 450 meetings and voted 189 priorities that were integrated into the city’s 2003 budget. By May 2004, 65 of these priorities had been executed (34 percent), 45 were in the process of being executed (24 percent), and 10 were being disputed (5 percent). The *Plan de Presupuesto Participativo 2004* (2004 PB Plan) was carried out between July and September 2003 in 51 neighbourhoods. 14,000 individuals participated in the identification and voting of 1,000 priorities, 600 of which were incorporated into the city’s 2004 budget (those that were not incorporated were rejected as unfeasible or inappropriate).⁸⁹

When considered against the backdrop of cut-backs and financial scarcity due to the economic crisis precipitated by the *Argentinazo*, the achievements of the PB process in Buenos Aires are arguably extremely impressive. To a certain extent, this can be partially attributed to intelligent institutional design. Like other PB processes, at its most basic, the Buenos Aires PB process was essentially a devolution of authority for the determination of municipal action from the city government to local neighbourhood inhabitants. These debated and established budgetary priorities in neighbourhood-specific participatory budgeting assemblies and

⁸⁷ As one CGP employee – openly affiliated with the *Grupo Espacio Abierto* – told me in an interview: “the Open Space [Group] now has a better territorial development, precisely because Ariel is the Secretary of Decentralization and he’s worked the CGPs well, and of course the PB is a good tool to extend the presence of the party and impose ourselves at the local level, especially vis -à-vis the Radical”.

⁸⁸ In a revealing exchange with Ariel Schiffrin in the City Legislature on 16 December 2002, the City legislator Sr. Mercado raised the question of a rumour that said that the PB process was being used to mobilise political groups and federate local political groups, and following Schiffrin’s rather brief and dismissive denial that this was the case, accused him of being well-known for his shrewd Machiavellian political operating.

⁸⁹ Navarro (2004).

thematic commissions, which were then voted on. If the priorities voted on were judged feasible by a technical commission, the priorities that have been voted were then ranked and sorted out according to a formula that took into account population difference, percentage of voters, and the relative wealth and poverty of a neighbourhood, among other things, in order to put all neighbourhoods on an equal level.⁹⁰ A ‘matrix’ for the whole city would then be drawn up, listing the priorities by rank, thereby providing the order in which city public resources must be expended until depleted. It is at this level that the PB process in Buenos Aires was crucially different from the Porto Alegre PB process, for example, in that it did not concern a specific sum of money but rather the specific actions of the city government, and as such avoided the likely problem that the lack of money would have probably meant that the PB would have received very little in the way of independent resources.⁹¹

More generally, however, although the PB process suffered a number of teething and design-related problems in its two rounds in 2002, by 2003 it really did seem to be generating a genuine sense of local autonomy and empowerment, and was certainly delivering at least some of the goods generally associated with such forms of EDD, for example constituting a valuable channel for communication and the rebuilding of trust between local neighbourhood groups and inhabitants on the one hand, and city government officials and bureaucrats on the other.⁹² This arguably had little to do with the institutional design of the process, which was actually either continuously being tinkered with by the Technical Coordination team or the council of locally elected neighbourhood representatives and NGOs representatives called the *Consejo Provisorio del Presupuesto Participativo* (PB Provisional Council) that theoretically supervises the whole PB process, or else was often ignored as they improvised in response to variable situations.

In many ways, much more important to the success of the PB process was the actual nature of the composition of the Technical Coordination team. A number of members of the central team in the Secretariat and some of the key local teams based in the CGPs arguably shared what can be termed a certain ‘anti-politics’ outlook in that they saw themselves not as political activists but much more as government functionaries. This was more often than not linked to their generally very similar trajectories of disgruntled Frepaso militancy – and in many cases pre-Menem Peronism before that – which had seen them become disillusioned with politics, and turn to an ethos of public service instead, reinforced by the fact that many of them rapidly became converted to the PB process and its potential. Furthermore, both the central and localised coordination teams were traversed by small mini-networks of individuals who had known each other for a long time, either as friends, co-workers, or in some cases by having been on training courses together, and were therefore linked together by common outlooks and values that meant that they worked very effectively as a team. In many ways, following Sudipta Kaviraj, one could even go so far as to argue that the Technical Coordination team constituted something of a positive Trojan horse within the Decentralisation and Citizen Participation Secretariat, which as a result had been:

⁹⁰ Although to a certain extent the PB process can be said to have been dominated by the middle classes, this reflected the middle class make-up of the city and moreover was not universally true, as PB assemblies were set up by the local authorities in many of the poorer areas of the city – including some of the poorest, such as the *Villa 31* slum – and furthermore the authorities also targeted a substantial proportion of their meagre resources to reaching and mobilising the poor.

⁹¹ In many ways, one could actually say that the Buenos Aires PB process was less an exercise in PB and more one in participatory planning.

⁹² Although it should be noted that this varied considerably, with the responsiveness of bureaucrats to the PB process to a large extent depending on whether the head of the relevant department or secretariat was a political friend or enemy of Schifrin’s.

forced to recruit personnel from the groups who [spoke] and interpret[ed] the world in terms of [a different] discourse [to Schifrin's politicising one]. Since major government policies have their final point of implementation very low down in the bureaucracy, [this latter vision was] reinterpreted beyond recognition.⁹³

Other important factors to take into account, though, were the nature of local politics in Argentina and the balance of political power between Schifrin and Ibarra. In relation to the first of these, as Steven Levitsky has pointed out in a seminal article on the “organised disorganisation” of political parties in Argentina, there is arguably a missing middle ground in the country's political panorama insofar as the PJ (though the same logic also applies to the UCR) can be conceived as an “informal mass party” based on:

a dense collection of personal networks – operating out of unions, clubs, non-governmental organisations, and often activists' homes – that are often unconnected to (and autonomous from) the party bureaucracy.⁹⁴

This meant that the politicisation of local networks by the *Grupo Espacio Abierto* was not quite as simple as it might have initially seemed. Certainly the PB process overlay a variety of existing social forms in the city. Buenos Aires is a city with very strong local neighbourhood identities, and each neighbourhood is populated by a constellation of civil society organisations, activist groups, cooperatives, etcetera. As both Steven Levitsky and Javier Auyero point out, these are the local-level organisations that informally constitute the base of traditional political parties, but they are in fact highly autonomous and difficult to federate coherently.⁹⁵ Local-level ‘big men’ and ‘big women’ – variably called ‘*referentes*’, ‘*punteros*’ and ‘*punteras*’, or ‘*manzaneras*’, depending on the level at which they operate – all had their own agendas, of course: sometimes focused around obtaining resources; but often – particularly after a certain exposure to the process – actually wanting to engage in PB to its full potential. Neither of these necessarily coincided with *Grupo Espacio Abierto* interests, and nor did cases where local-level bosses saw in PB a potential means of consolidating their own positions (as was the case of certain politicised CGP directors).

Furthermore, many individual local neighbourhood inhabitants engaging in the PB process saw in it a means of gaining access to government bureaucrats rather than politicians, as they were concerned to be able to talk to those who could concretely deal with their problems. Some enlightened government bureaucrats also enthusiastically embraced the process as a wonderful tool for determining exactly what local neighbourhood inhabitants wanted, which others, perhaps more cynically (and disruptively of Schifrin's hopes to build up *Grupo Espacio Abierto* networks) saw in PB a means of resisting the demands of politicians, as clearly the voice of the people, as embodied in participatory budgeting, could be said to take precedence. The participatory budgeting initiative also overlay over other, more ‘bottom-up’ local-level organisational forms, including ones that had emerged as a result of the *Argentinazo*, such as the *asambleas populares* that sprung up all over Buenos Aires after December 2001. Although the vast majority of these disappeared within a year, according to a survey carried out by the CEOP research consultancy, 47 percent of participants in the 2002

⁹³ S. Kaviraj, ‘On state, society, and discourse in India’, in J. Manor (ed), *Rethinking Third World Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p.91.

⁹⁴ Levitsky (2001), p.30.

⁹⁵ Auyero (2001); and Levitsky (2001).

participatory budgeting process pilot project had participated regularly in *asambleas populares*.⁹⁶

Anecdotal evidence seemed to suggest that upwards of 25 percent of participants in the 2003 participatory budget process had previously belonged to a neighbourhood assembly, with several saying that they felt a greater sense of actually being able to influence the management of their own city through the participatory budgeting process than they had had when they were simply debating in the *asambleas populares* (a point which further reinforces the idea that the neighbourhood assemblies were in some ways doomed to fail since they did not control anything substantial in terms of resources). This is not to suggest that the participatory budgeting process constituted an institutionalisation of *asambleas populares*, however. The overlap between them was small in institutional terms, and mainly occurred on an individual membership basis. A more accurate of portraying the relationship between the participatory budgeting assemblies and the popular neighbourhood assemblies is of the former institutionally superseding the latter. But the two are very different institutions, with the participatory budgeting neighbourhood assemblies being set up by the local authorities, while the *asambleas populares* were spontaneous.

While such bottom-up ‘interference’ meant that the process of territorial construction of a political base for the *Grupo Espacio Abierto* progressed slowly, Schifrin was simultaneously also concerned with countering what he saw as the most important challenge to the *Frente Grande* in its quest for control of the city, namely the Radicals, and this frequently led to local standstills and compromises having to be reached which further prevented the effective politicisation of the PB process and provided it with space to operate within interference. Certainly, although the UCR was to a large extent moribund – failing spectacularly to garner a significant share of the votes in the presidential elections of April 2003 – the non-UCR Radical factions were displaying a certain vivacity, particularly those associated with the *Partido Intransigente*. Ibarra, always the consummate political operator with an eye to building bridges and alliances, moved to connect with these Radical groups, including in particular the so-called ‘*Banda*’, and he named their leader, Raúl Fernández, his Chief of Cabinet. This precipitated a conflict with Schifrin, although there is evidence to suggest that Ibarra was always somewhat wary of Schifrin and subtly trying to undermine his PB implementation efforts by providing the Decentralisation and Citizen Participation Secretariat with very little in the way of material resources to organise the process. Certainly, later public pronouncements by Ibarra suggest that he was never really a convert to the PB process and only saw it as one of several means to try to ‘pacify’ a restless Buenos Aires population in the aftermath of the *Argentinazo*. On the other hand, for all his attempts to use the PB process to try and build a *Grupo Espacio Abierto* political base, there is a distinct sense in Schifrin’s public pronouncements about PB that at one level, for a while at least, he was rather enthusiastic about it as a form of popular democratisation.

This conflict remained more or less contained, with Ibarra essentially ignoring Schifrin and the PB as much as he could. The first public spat between the two really emerged during the 2003 presidential elections campaign, when Schifrin decided to publicly back the eventual winner, Nestor Kirchner of the PJ, at a relatively early stage in the campaign, while Ibarra maintained a diplomatic silence in order to not damage any of the bridges he had built up with the parties of other well placed candidates, including most notably Elisa Carrió of the *Alternativa por una República de Iguales* movement (ARI – Alternative for a Republic of

⁹⁶ *El Clarín*, 24 November 2002.

Equals). Kirchner's election placed Schifrin centre-stage in political terms, particularly as Ibarra and the *Frente Grande* were up for re-election in September 2003 and faced a strong opposition from the populist right-wing businessman Mauricio Macri, nominally running on a PJ ticket. Schifrin – who was standing for election to the City Legislature, and therefore personally concerned with securing victory for the *Frente Grande* – negotiated an agreement with Alberto Fernández, Kirchner's chief of staff, whereby Kirchner would weigh into the elections by campaigning for Ibarra, which he did, and Ibarra duly won re-election as a result, Kirchner riding a wave of unprecedented popularity at the time.

Kirchner of course had his own agenda, which was to build a political support network that would allow him to challenge former president Eduardo Duhalde – who had hand-picked him as a putatively easily manipulated figurehead – for the control of the PJ. Kirchner sought very early on to build a counterpoint to Duhalde's powerful grip on the Province of Buenos Aires (as opposed to the autonomous city), and his support for Ibarra against Macri – supported by Duhalde – was part of this strategy. It was widely thought that Kirchner's price for supporting Ibarra would be to influence the composition of Ibarra's new government, and indeed, when he operated a reshuffle after the elections, Ibarra appointed Héctor Cappacioli, who was known to be closely linked to Alberto Fernández, Kirchner's chief of staff. The post Cappacioli took up was Secretary of Decentralisation and Citizen Participation, which had been vacated by Schifrin following his winning a seat in the City Legislature. This appointment led to something of a revolution in the Secretariat, as – with a single exception – all those that had been involved in implementing the PB process in 2002-2003 were pushed out by April 2004, and a new and highly inexperienced team had moved in. According to some accounts, after initially attempting and failing to control what was a relatively anarchic process (the original technical coordination team had worked very much through improvisation and informality, with the aim of making PB work, but hardly a recipe for institutionalising the process), Cappacioli decided that it required too much of an effort and decided to bring the PB process to an end by slowly cutting the central PB implementation budget and making sure that the process was implemented in 2004 in an opaque, haphazard, and piecemeal manner.⁹⁷ Certainly, participation levels fell compared to 2003, with just 9,000 people involved.⁹⁸

Conclusion

As Vivien Lowndes remarks (paraphrasing Karl Polanyi), “politics is an ‘instituted process’, embedded in institutions political and non-political”.⁹⁹ Certainly, it can be argued that the case of PB in Buenos Aires reflects this very well, but the case study presented arguably also reflects a further dimension about ‘instituted processes’, which is that they are frequently much less purposeful than we often imagine them to be. PB in Buenos Aires was arguably implemented and worked as an *unintentional* consequence of the interaction of different interests, networks, and incentives of specific political actors that come together in a broader context of crisis of the *Argentinazo*. This combination of factors produced the space within

⁹⁷ Landau (2004: 10).

⁹⁸ One factor that also contributed to this was the development of tensions between Ibarra and Kirchner, with the City Legislature essentially polarising between these two poles. Upon taking his seat in the City Legislature, Schifrin rapidly converged to the pro-Kirchner, anti-Ibarra bloc. It is worth noting that he has said little about PB since leaving the Secretariat of Decentralisation and Citizen Participation, and indeed there is no mention of PB on his website (<http://www.arielschifrin.com.ar>).

⁹⁹ V. Lowndes, ‘Rescuing Aunt Sally: Take Institutional Theory Seriously in Urban Politics’, *Urban Studies*, 38:11 (2001), p.1960.

which the PB process could develop in such a way as to assuage the evident democratic deficit in the city of Buenos Aires,¹⁰⁰ and genuinely foster processes of positive social change. But it was a process that was ultimately enabled as a result of a particular constellation of competing and contradictory interests and practices that each sought to do different things and in doing so held each other in tension. Borrowing from Mary Douglas, it can therefore be argued that PB in Buenos Aires was a social outcome that emerged as a result of an *ad hoc* process of “bricolage”.¹⁰¹

Seen in this way, one could argue that PB in Buenos Aires stands in stark contrast to other instances of PB, such as those instituted in Porto Alegre or São Paulo. While politics very obviously matter in relation to the emergence of PB in Buenos Aires, they were clearly not important in the same way as the programmatic politics associated with the PT that is considered important by much of the literature on the factors contributing to the emergence of EDD initiatives. Politics matter in relation to the PB process in Buenos Aires, but they matter differently. This suggests that in order to understand such political processes, what we need to focus on are the specific contexts in which these outcomes emerge and the ways in which the actions of different social actors interact with each other in order to construct these contexts. This is a crucial question, because, as Rebecca Abers highlights:

people mobilize when there are windows of opportunities that lead them to believe that action will more likely bring results. Often, such *enabling environments* have to do with changes in the state power structure, such as the weakening of a powerful elite or the strengthening of reformist policy makers. Obviously, the creation of a responsive, participatory policy represents a particularly radical change in the ‘opportunity structure’ for collective action.¹⁰²

What the experience of PB in Buenos Aires suggests, however, is that an enabling environment can also emerge *unintentionally* rather than through some form of conscious purpose.

This insight also provides a glimmer of hope to what might on the surface seem like a rather depressing story about a process that resulted from a contingent ‘moment in time’, but which is slowly but inexorably dying a slow death. Although it is clear that PB in Buenos Aires will probably not survive further than next year at best, thinking in terms of the unintentional consequences of political processes does allow us to look beyond this time horizon. Certainly, at one level, as Andrea Cornwall highlights:

participation, like citizenship, is something that is learnt through practice. While many invited spaces remain harsh testing grounds for beginners, they are part of a shifting institutional landscape in which longer term changes in the way people perceive and engage with governance may be taking root.¹⁰³

Even within two short years of coherent implementation, the practice of PB does seem to have left some traces among those that participated; this was something that came out strongly in interviews with ordinary participants, who although realising the precariousness of the process (the political story I have outlined above was not a secret) definitely felt that they had experienced something different.

¹⁰⁰ On this issue, see P. Pérez, ‘Buenos Aires: Fragmentation and Privatization of the Metropolitan City’, *Environment and Urbanization*, 14:1 (2002), pp.145-158.

¹⁰¹ M. Douglas, M., *How Institutions Think*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, p.66.

¹⁰² Abers (1998), p.530.

¹⁰³ Cornwall (2004), p.4.

Obviously, the total number of such militant ex-participants will inevitably be relatively small in comparison to the city population as a whole. Perhaps more encouragingly – in view of the general consensus within the literature that EDD initiatives tend to emerge under the impulse of small, committed group – the PB councillors of 2003, together with members of the Technical Coordination team and the NGOs involved in the process, have set up an organisation called *Comunidad Activa* (Active Community) to promote PB as a form of local governance, with a specific agenda to intensify it in Buenos Aires and spread it to other urban centres in Argentina. Perhaps most encouraging, however, is the fact that several of the members of the Technical Coordination who have moved on or been moved from the now moribund PB process have been autonomously experimenting with participatory forms of governance in the new institutional posts they occupy. This suggests that while the impact of the PB experiment on the city population may ultimately have been relatively small, it might well in the long run have contributed to initiating a change in the political culture of (local) governance in Buenos Aires.

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