

]bref[ALBERT, VICTOR. *The limits to citizen power: participatory democracy and the entanglements of the state*. x, 207 pp., tables, figs, illus., bibliogr. London: Pluto Press, 2016. £21.99 (paper)

]rp[*The limits to citizen power* looks at the unfulfilled promises of participatory democracy in Santo André, Brazil, within the context of three different policy-making municipal councils (Urban Development, Participatory Budgeting, and the Housing Council). This is an ethnographic account of the common problems in participation: the state-led management of meetings; political intimidation; bureaucratization; and technical language that minimizes the possibility of effective citizen participation. Victor Albert guides us through examples and literature, concluding that participation can be used to give legitimacy to decisions that are still 'regulated by the state and filled with civil society' (Nogueira, *As possibilidades da política*, 1998: 222, cited on p. 175), because, as he notes earlier: 'Participatory democracy [is] organized in spaces organized by the state' (p. 13).

]rp1[The introduction and chapter 1 are particularly relevant to readers interested in Brazil's post-dictatorship politics. The author contextualizes participatory practices in Brazil and beyond and the role of international institutions, as well as domestic ones, such as new constitutions that support citizen participation. Albert also describes how the Workers' Party supports participatory practices. Santo André is the birthplace of Brazil's workers' movements, yet the public criticism of political and economic elites frequently has been muted since the surreptitious death of a former mayor, making this a great site for an ethnographic examination of grassroots meetings.

]rp1[In chapter 2, the author describes 'rituals of participation', starting with the council members' induction ceremony and the voting processes. The analysis of participatory rituals extends throughout chapters 3 and 4. In chapter 3, Albert analyses the functioning of each different council; explains the processes of agenda-setting and decision-making; and gives space to key participants' narratives. The views discussed range from pragmatic opinions to a more frustrated perception that the state organizes meetings and participants are merely present (p. 83). The view that emerges, then, is that participation consists of a 'stage', or surface, where there are opportunities for the coexistence of diverse political views; and a 'backstage', where deep-seated inequalities taint the ability to create collaborative decisions. In chapter 4, however, the author discusses how rituals are spatially ordered and how this may create possibilities for more effective participation.

]rp1[Albert carefully describes meeting rooms, discussing how a cinema-style room empowers those at the front, whereas in a round-table discussion citizens are ordered in a more democratic way. He also suggests that there are more factors that explain why some councils succeed or fail, such as the leaders' personalities and participants' socioeconomic background, all of which influence discussions and outcomes. Nevertheless, councils with different settings and leadership styles still faced a similar outcome: consensual decisions.

]rp1[The concluding chapters are more orientated towards problem-solving. Discussing power imbalances and false hopes across chapters 5 and 6, the author studies participants found in the backstage in order to reveal episodes of intimidation and fear. Participatory institutions in Santo André, he states, are still 'intimately caught up with the local state administration' (p. 167). Albert suggests some methods, such as secret voting and recorded meetings, which could provide more security for council members. In conclusion, he approaches participation as a process, where partaking should not be taken as a synonym for horizontality (p. 169), as it needs a 'set of organizational and cultural materials that are not so indebted to the existing political order' (p.187).

]rp1[This is a valuable political ethnography of contemporary politics in Brazil. As an ethnographic approach to bureaucracy, it sheds new light on old practices and for that reason raises many questions – some of which remain unanswered. The effectiveness of the suggestions offered by Albert to improve participation (e.g. secret voting or video recording) is not supported by evidence. Secret ballots could weaken accountability and video recording might lead to further intimidation in such a small social network. The use of the terms 'stage' and 'backstage' in the context of participation may suggest two separate realms, but in reality in participatory meetings employment and personal relationships entwine. Finally, since councils are supposed to represent different city segments and therefore interests at a given time, it is important to examine these meetings while also discussing which possible urban interventions could allow for flexible and reversible compromises. That said, anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists, and urban scholars will find this book a good source for both practical examples and an interesting theoretical framework for their own investigations into citizen participation in Brazil and beyond.

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