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**Democracia participativa y modernización de los servicios públicos.  
Investigación sobre las experiencias de presupuesto participativo en Europa.**  
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In 1989, the city of Porto Alegre launched the participatory budget (PB). Since 2001, when the *First World Social Forum* was celebrated, the PB has been spreading around Europe. *Democracia Participativa y modernización de los servicios públicos* (2011) deals, precisely, with this wave of participatory budgeting in Europe. As the book shows, political parties from the left wing, social movements, international institutions (EU, Central Bank, etc.), city networks and experts have lead the process of diffusion of PB in Europe, and all these actors have played an active role in the “learning activities”. According to the authors, the number of participatory budgets implemented in European cities has been increasing from thirteen experiences in 2001 to fifty-five in 2005 and over a hundred in 2008. Thus, it is time to ask ourselves which are the successes and weaknesses of this extraordinary process of transmission from the South.

Fist, what accounts for this proliferation of participatory budgeting in “the North”? Is it just the effect of an attractive method or a shared discourse across hemispheres? And, to what extent does the term “participatory budgeting” (PB) have the same meaning in both sides of the Atlantic, in Porto Alegre and Rome? Can we observe any real change in terms of administrative modernization, redistribution of wealth and the deepening of democracy in the cities that use PB?

With these questions in mind, Sintomer and Ganuza undertake a wide-range qualitative study that analyzes over fifty PB experiences performed in 2005 in ten European countries. According to the authors “it was necessary to undertake a research in Europe that used a methodology able to go beyond speeches and well-intentioned statements” (p.9). Based on an extensive and rigorous fieldwork, in which seventeen researchers from ten different nationalities have been involved, the work transcends the traditional case study and explores the reality of participatory democracy in Europe by using comparative analysis. The research strategy is based on four dimensions, “four concentric circles” according to the authors. At the center, a circle provides the bulk of qualitative data by using participant observation in participatory processes (twelve cities from five countries). In this case, the ethnographic material have been addressed to reveal the key connections between the political and social arenas, as well as to get knowledge of the institutional and cultural context surrounding PB’s. In a second circle, there was an intensive fieldwork dominated by semi-structured interviews to key stakeholders (politicians, civil servants, association’s members, etc.). The third stage of investigation was devoted to case-studies. Finally, the last circle consists of secondary sources, reviewing the literature and integrating the results.

At the beginning of the book, participatory budgeting is defined as the involvement of unelected citizens in the allocation and distribution of public expenditures (p. 18). As this is a very broad category, the authors establish five basic criteria to ensure homogeneity enough to do comparative analysis among cases: the initiatives must be aimed at budgetary items, they must focus on the local level (or at least at the district level), meetings must be frequently held and deliberation must be present. Finally, PB must include accountability measures.

The body of the book is divided in three parts. The first part reviews the different institutional frameworks, political cultures and legal settings that host the participatory initiative. In the second part, we find a detailed analysis of the “convergences and divergences” in PB institutions in Europe. Here, Sintomer and Ganuza assess the so-called “Porto Alegre effect”: they analyze to what extent European PB’s are similar to the Brazilian experience. In the third part, the authors go to the impacts, consequences and challenges of these European participatory experiences. Specifically, they pay attention to three areas: the transformation of public administration, the changes in terms of social justice, and the “democratization of democracy”.

It is noteworthy the richness in the description of PB’s through which the reader get immersed into the daily routine of participatory processes, for example, neighborhood assemblies in Bobigny (France). By extending the “analytical zoom”, the authors do account for the multi-causality inherent to participation. They highlight the crucial role played by *path-dependency to show* how the structure

of civic society and social organizations, the arena of political parties and other political platforms have a clear influence on the heterogeneity of PB procedures. The culture broth in which PB emerges has a lot to say about the different designs and its consequences. Sintomer and Ganuza identify six “big” models of PB, six ideal-types: the “Porto Alegre adapted for Europe”, “proximity participation”, “consultation on public finances”, the “public-private negotiating table”, “community funds at the local and city level”, and the “representation of organized interests”. As the authors show, the hybridization of models is the general trend in Europe, and it is quite striking that PB means very different things, participatory institutions with very different aims and capacities.

The recent deployment of these devices and the lack of quantitative data, make it difficult to carry out systematic comparisons of the impacts of participatory budgeting in Europe (Sintomer *et al.*, 2008). However, the book concludes that it is in the field of administration and public policy where greater outputs are observed. In contrast, the link between participation and social justice/redistribution seems to be weak. In a similar manner, the causal path from participation to the deepening of democratic culture is clearly weak if we compare it with the Brazilian experience. In this regard, there is a key difference among the PB in Western Europe and the Porto Alegre model: whereas the later had a two-way boost, where both social movements and local governments were involved (Santos, 2005), empirical evidence shows that most of European PB’s were powered from the top, without the support of grassroots

movements backing it up. Does this mean that the involvement of social actors in the design and implementation of PB reinforces its outcomes in terms of social justice, redistribution and democratic culture? The authors are not conclusive in this respect but, in any case, this is a strong hypothesis which deserves further research. The value of PB itself depends —quite a lot— on its social transformative goals and effects.

The potential of participatory devices to foster transparency and accountability in the public sector are the issues in which the literatures on participatory democracy and administrative modernization have found synergy. According to the evidence presented in Sintomer and Ganuza's book, in European ground, the main transformations dumped by PB are those related to public administration culture and organisation. However, impacts seem to be modest and partial, not radical qualitative transformations (p. 169). In this subject, Sintomer *et al.* find evidence of the quality improvement in public services through the incorporation of local knowledge. They also identify an increasing of effectiveness and efficiency in service delivery through networks with the Third Sector organizations. Another positive impact would be the streamlining of communication circuits between administrators and citizens, besides a greater accountability in financial issues. In addition, PB has fostered the promotion of coordination and join-up government among administrative departments. Thus, we can say that in areas related to public effectiveness, efficiency and accountability, PB seems to produce positive outcomes. In regard to the administrative culture, PB was a "breath of fresh air", with officials

reorganizing their organizational charts and task distributions; but it is also a crash among classic bureaucratic roles and the flexibility required by citizens' intervention. Despite all these relevant findings, in the book, we miss a more detailed empirical analysis of the impacts and consequences of PB in the dynamics of local administration. *Which are the chains of causality that lead to partial improvements or failures? But also, which are the obstacles and problems that participation poses to the current administrative culture and resources?* As an starting point, Sintomer *et al.* face these questions in regard to European PB's, and this is an important contribution to a literature which has recently fallen "from the heavens" to tackle with the real impacts and consequences of participatory politics. As Bherer (2011) has written in a recent literature review on participation and changes in public management, more comparative research —both qualitative and quantitative— is needed. And, in any case, the big question would be whether the participation of the "ordinary citizen" is transforming the administrative culture and in what sense it happens (Bherer 2011).

The international literature on participation has rarely considered simultaneously the scope of public administration modernization (Sintomer *et. al*, 2008); but, inevitably, discussions on democratic innovation and administrative change run in parallel (Brugué, 2009). Alongside with Sintomer's book, Fung (2004) gave us some clues about the changes in public administration produced by citizens' participation. In what he calls "accountable autonomy", Fung identified some patterns of change: for example, greater autonomy in operational

levels, more transparency and control by the public from below, increased innovation and dissemination of good practices, greater cross-fertilization and coordination between departments, and greater trust between actors facing common problems. On the other side, the challenges have been also remarked: participation can trigger distrust in the government, poor decisions, loss of control, or under-budget allocations for the effective implementation of the policy (Stansbury and Irving 2004). The advance of Sintomer and Ganuza's book has been precisely to go to beyond the previous piecemeal research to offer a more comprehensive view -despite their focus on PB. Actually, the comparative character of their study provides much more evidence on the achievements and obstacles at introducing participation in the administrative process.

The study of the problematic relation between the New Public Management and PB is also a strong point of the book. At a time when New Public Management (NPM) recipes are being implemented all around Europe, is participatory budgeting contradictory or complementary to them? Do they point to different paths of public sector modernization? For Sintomer and Ganuza, PB represents a "third way" in the modernization of public administration different from bureaucratism and mercantilisation (p. 162). In this sense, the role of citizens in the networks of administration is critical to understand the different models we are talking about. Can we talk about an active, empowered citizenship emerging from PB? Are citizens becoming active participants in some areas and public services, and passive consumers in others? The authors get evidence that PB has mainly encou-

raged "consumer" and "codecisor" roles rather than self-management and assessor ones. In Porto Alegre, self-management was decisive, especially in poor areas. There, citizens were involved in the whole process of public policing (from design to evaluation). In contrast, in most European experiences, citizens take part in decision-making with different intensities (*codecisor role*); or they are introduced as costumers using channels such as satisfaction surveys around the quality of goods and services (*consumer role*). But, beyond this fact, how do citizens and civil servants relate in each phase of public policing? Where does participation work best? We need more research to know how the logics of bureaucratism, mercantilisation (NPM) and participation are embedded in the daily functioning of public sector and the tensions among them. If we want to improve public services, courageous decisions must be taken in regard of different logics of deciding, working and producing public goods.

In summary, Sintomer and Ganuza's book should be read because it is an ambitious contribution to the research on participation since it widens the comparative approach, poorly developed to the date. Secondly, this is an important contribution for its focus on public sector modernization. And, third, it is a very comprehensive radiography of participatory methodologies and its dilemmas in the current Western Europe. The branch of hypothesis and evidence that the authors find is a tempting invitation to continue the investigation on the field. Given the policy of cuts in public spending and the current attempts to reform the public sector, we really need to advance what happens when citizens' preferences

and knowledge come into the process of public production. What will be the future of participatory politics in the context of fiscal discipline? Real consequences and impacts will have to say a lot in the debate. In this respect, Sintomer and Ganuza have opened-up new windows, and we really feel invited to lean out and see what it lies beyond.

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