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# Anthropology Book Forum

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## Rites of Participation: Popular Encounters and Democratic Ritual in Brazil

Review by Joseph Jay Sosa

*The Limits to Citizen Power*

By Victor Albert

Pluto Press, 2016

Political anthropologists and ethnographers often address the limits to citizen power, in terms of the material and symbolic barriers ordinary people encounter in their attempts to have a say in the rule of the state. Victor Albert's recent book, *The Limits to Citizen Power: Participatory Entanglements and the State* (Pluto Press) invites readers to consider the question from an additional perspective. Albert examines not just the limits to power, but the limits of citizenship, one that may be immanent to citizenship itself as a social form. Albert's ethnography of three different participatory democratic institutions in the Brazilian municipality of Santo André shows both the extrinsic and intrinsic factors for why these institutions premised on citizen access often fail to translate into citizen power. While noting the opposed interests of organized citizens versus representatives of the state (although these social roles become flexible in practice), Albert instead concentrates on the ritualized form under which citizen-state interactions take place. The result questions many of the ideological assumptions of unmediated spontaneity in democracy theory's traditional treatment of participation.

Participatory democracy has become quite a hot topic in political science and political anthropology of South America. While many variations exist in implementation, the basic supposition of participant democracy is that it multiplies citizens' points of access to decision making and gives

citizens an institutionalized form to co-craft public policy and governance in collaboration with state officials. Participatory institutions exist on a number of scales and in a variety of formats--from local participatory budgeting (PB) where neighborhood residents decide which development projects take priority to national councils (on women, youth, health, etc.) where social movement representatives review federal policy in a given area. In the 2000s, the so-called "Pink Tide" of leftist governments won presidential elections in South America. Many of those administrations set up participatory institutions in a variety of formats. The institutionalization of participatory democracy principles has not only changed mechanisms of governance; they have also contributed to a certain experimentalist ethos on the left. Ethnographers hailing from sociology, anthropology and political science have been keen to study the democratic procedures and political cultures that have emerged from these new institutions. But participatory democracy also has its critics, even those committed to the emancipatory and empowerment goals it presents. Some argue that participatory bodies become co-opted by the administrators who organize them, becoming a captured voice of the people. Others suggest that participatory institutions are an end-run around legislative practices. Thus, the general question framing most ethnographic studies of participant democracy have centered around whether participant democracy can live up to its promise to bring ordinary people into the state, or whether the will-to-bureaucracy throughout liberal democracy and modern life more generally will ultimately undermine the participatory project?

Victor Albert's book fits well within this general question framing most scholarship on participatory democracy. *Limit to Citizen Power* interweaves the story of four different participatory "councils" in Santo André: the Housing Council (HC), Municipal Budget Council (MBC), Urban Development Council (UDC), and Welfare Management Council (WMC). These four councils have different purviews and manage citizen input in different ways. Albert's observations, however, demonstrate how all the councils are concerned in one way or another with questions that continue to

vex the inherent paradoxes of how democracy is exercised in daily practice. He begins his analysis in the first chapter by contextualizing some of the tensions in participatory democracy historically, showing the paradoxical forces around PD that made it what it was. Chapters two, three, and four turn to participatory institutions as ritualized spaces of encounter. In his schematized reading of speaking orders, modes of address, the organization of bodies and architecture, Albert shows how decision-making processes symbolically recapitulate the legitimating practices of representative democracy. Chapter five provides narratives from the participants themselves--both citizens and state representatives--on how they mediate conflicting ideas about the process. Titled "Backstage," chapter six offers a glimpse of various interactions outside of the participatory meetings themselves. In viewing these side conversations outside the primary ritualized sphere of action, Albert considers how other political forms, such as clientalism, also inform the participatory process.

The first chapter explores central paradoxes of participatory democracy in the context of broader historical factors in Brazil's democratization. Here the site of the councils, Santo André, becomes crucial to the narrative. Santo André, a 600,000 resident municipality in the greater São Paulo metropolitan area that occupies a special place in the Brazilian political imagination. The city was a site of a metal-workers' strikes in this region in 1978 that became a symbol of resistance to Brazil's military dictatorship and launched the career of strike leader Luis Inácio da Silva (Lula) on a trajectory that eventually included the Brazilian presidency. After the success of the strikes, Lula formed the Worker's Party (or PT) in 1982 (shortly after the dictatorship allowed a return to political parties). Envisioned as a "movement of movements" rather than solely a political party, the PT aggressively instituted participatory democracy institutions in municipalities after they won local election. Santo Andre had a progressive mayor, Celso Daniel, a martyr-like figure whose figure looms large in not only the history of participatory democracy but in the living memory of the politicians and citizens whom Albert interviews. Drawing on the Santo André municipal plans filed under the Daniel administration, Albert

reports on Daniel's ambivalent feelings towards the participatory institutions he helped create. Daniel, himself a member of the original generation of PT organizers and socialists, lamented that the citizens he wished to empower did not understand how participation worked. While PT activists like Daniel wanted to use participatory institutions to remake the structure of power, the citizens they brought into the process had more focused goals--using the process to make specific demands rather than broad governing changes. Albert, here, touches on a fascinating question: what is the disjuncture between the potential for structural change that the activist founders of participatory democracy envisioned, versus the often specific (and, to recall the title, limited) demands that citizens place on it? Placed within the history of Santo André, this question acquires an additional intimate layer of meaning as actors see themselves as continuing a line of democratic and populist tradition that extends to the fight for democracy in Brazil. This shared feeling in the importance and fragility of democracy appears in ethnographic accounts of citizenship throughout the Brazilianist literature, and Albert's interlocutors seem attentive to this as well.

Chapters two, three, and four focus on structural features of the participatory meetings themselves, showing how interactions construct not only the meaning but the efficacy and legitimacy of the participatory governance sessions. Albert borrows here on sociological insights on the institution, anthropological frameworks on ritual, as well as semiotic anthropology approaches to the interactions. Distinguishing his analysis from previous ethnographies that have treated elections and induction ceremonies as aspects of the participatory governance process secondary in comparison to demand making and negotiation, Albert shows how the physicality of the space creates a cosmology of the governance session itself. In the description, Albert recounts ceremonial aspects of Brazilian meeting structures that will be familiar to any one who has sat through a government or even scholarly presentation. In a close ritual analysis of the action of "composing the table," Albert offers an incisive reading of the political significance of seeming arcane formalities. Composing the table consists of

inviting roundtable participants up to the table one by one, announcing their position and credentials. Albert's close reading of the honorifics applied (reminding the reader that the 'his excellence' title adjoining the names of even minor politicians symbolically recalls the imperial Portuguese tradition) shows how composing the table is truly performative act that instantiates state authority in a room so that constrains citizens' efficacy in exercising their power. Other factors--from the architecture, to the scheduling, to the staging of bodies--collude to frame the interaction as one where the state frames the relationship it will have with its citizens.

The clinical eye applied to the meeting spaces contributes to the ethnographic approaches to participatory democratic institutions--as they tend to follow the experiences of a set of a cohort of participants. Focusing on ritualization, Albert hits upon the scripted sociality of participatory meetings that might not have been obvious had this simply been an account of competing interests. While initial ethnographic analyses tended to be overly laudatory of the process, subsequent analyses have focused on the ruses of citizen access, how such access is limited by bureaucracy, the competition of interests, etc. These corrections to the initial wave of uncritical praise have been a welcome addition to the record, but they have been fairly uncreative in the way they have treated power.

Scholars have mostly analyzed the flaws of participatory democratic institutions in terms of the possibility for subterfuge or cooptation. Such analyses show that no process is invulnerable to the manipulation of interested actors. Albert demonstrates plenty of this kind of external pressure on participatory institutions. The focus on the ritual of participation shows an additional set of limitations, this time not due to external pressures but to the immanent contradictions of symbolizing democratic power itself. This is the true limit of citizen power, that it cannot manifest itself in the abstract or in utopic unmediated fashion but rather it needs a form, a ritual to fashion it. Will the cultural aspects of power itself undermine the prospect of radical democracy? That is, ultimately as Albert documents, not just the limits to citizen's power but the limits of power.

In these middle chapters, the focus on the structure of the encounters makes Albert's ethnographic reportage appear removed from the people themselves, which is both a strength and weakness of his reading here. While Albert captures the unspoken rules that structure the encounter, his method misses what Brazilians call *jeitinho*—the clever and roguish ways in which rules can be negotiated. Surely, there are performative misfires in the ritual: people who speak out of turn, who roll their eyes at the pronouncements of the politicians attending, or in other ways resist the roles that the state carves out for them. Had Albert become more embedded with a particular group, he might have been pulled into the particular views of a subset of actors, privy to another set of motivations, interpretations that would have obscured the formal analysis of the social field that he schematizes. While he gets offhand comments from the crowd, describing chaotic meetings as farcical (*palhaçada*) and 'nonsense' or a mess (*bagunça*), what is missing is a sustained voice from within that crowd. A greater attention to the ideological, interpersonal disputes between supporters of Edu and Ronaldo in elections for citizen representative in chapter two, for instance, might have missed the fact that the election itself reinforces the legitimacy of the process regardless of who wins. Yet Albert's constant insistence on the procedural view risks an overly clinical gaze, where precisely what is missing from this ethnography of citizen politics are the citizens themselves.

The strength of Albert's study emerges over the course of the book to show how participatory democracy is layered into, shapes and is shaped by existing patterns and structures of institutionalized power. One of the central questions of the book: how to balance the participatory ethos of social democracy and the inefficiency of that model for the administration of developed life. This is not an abstract or suppositional question. The foundation of Brazilian grassroots activism (*grupos de base*) was centered on procuring resources from the state, such as water and resource collection. Albert suggests that these infrastructure services, which propelled dispossessed people into politics and eventually participatory regimes, are precisely the kinds of projects that do not work well by

committee. Has Brazil's participatory turn generated its own conditions of ungovernability, and if so, are oppositional politics actually necessary within the participatory model? In exploring these questions, the author hits on one of the most important contradictions of a (post?) liberal society. If liberalism offers citizens the promise of not having to care about politics (Berlant 2011), then does the demand to participate violate a norm of modern global life? Might not caring also be part of the efficacy of administration? Albert's analysis is, perhaps appropriately, ambivalent about these very provocative questions that he raises. After all, democratic public assemblies can have their determinations thwarted by an inefficient bureaucracy, by interfering elites, judicial prohibitions and complexities and so on. Yet, if citizens are not actively influencing the decisions and conduct of the public administration rather than merely being offered a formal opportunity to do so, then an ideally liberal bureaucracy and an ideally efficient administration cannot salvage their democratic promise.

### Bibliography

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**Joseph Jay Sosa** is assistant professor of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at Bowdoin College. He is a cultural anthropologist whose research focuses on sexuality, statecraft, and public culture in São Paulo, Brazil. His current book project, *Participatory Desires*, examines how demands for LGBT political recognition in media, protests, and government institutions have served as a catalyst for broader shifts in Brazil's ideological spectrum.



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