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Leonardo Avritzer: Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America

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INTRODUCTION



This is a book about democracy in Latin America and democratic theory. It tells a story about democratization in three Latin American countries—Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico—during the recent, “third wave” of democratization.¹ This story emphasizes the role of popular participation through human rights organizations, groups devoted to a more just distribution of local resources and groups in charge of electoral monitoring, during the process of democratization.

My analysis of Latin American democratization challenges an assumption that lies at the heart of conventional theories of democratization: that all processes of democratization must cope with anti-institutional mass mobilizations of a kind that led to the breakdown of democracy in Europe during the first wave of democratization, and that the only way to produce stable democracy in the face of those mobilizations is—as in Europe after World War II—to narrow the scope of democracy to the selection of elites through periodic elections. This theoretical approach is known as democratic elitism. By showing how democratic collective action in Latin America opened a space for popular participation and transformed traditional (hierarchical and clientelist) understandings of politics, I hope to demonstrate the limits of democratic elitism as a general theory of democracy. Instead of applying an elitist framework derived from the particulars of European experience to Latin America, I use Latin American experience to support a more generous and hopeful understanding of democratic possibilities.

The recent wave of Latin American democratization marked a significant departure from the region’s long-standing lack of civic activity. In

Argentina, for example, democratization was connected to the growth of a human rights movement that insisted on democratic politics and a moral commitment to life and physical integrity as the foundation of such politics. In the wake of the authoritarian regime's withdrawal from the political scene in 1983, human rights groups marched in the streets of Buenos Aires demanding full state accountability for the fates of missing individuals. By joining a human rights program to demand government accountability, these movements sought to restore the relation between morality and political competition in the new Argentine democracy.

Democratization in Brazil also implied a broad, long-term change from the traditional lack of popular activity in the public space and the Congress's lack of accountability to societal actors. In the first months of 1984, millions of people occupied the streets of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and dozens of other Brazilian cities to demand the completion of transition that had begun eleven years earlier. The Brazilian *diretas* movement occupied the streets to call for a reconnection between public opinion and a Congress accustomed to responding to pressures from an authoritarian regime and resistant to mechanisms of popular accountability. The movement sought a new democracy in which public opinion is connected to the political system and, thus, able to craft a new relation between state and society.

Democratization has just come to completion in Mexico. One novelty has already been incorporated into the country's political system: the monitoring of elections by members of the Alianza Cívica, which was created in response to citizen concerns about political fraud and the view that only a political movement could restore the moral background needed for a decent electoral process. More than 18,000 monitors scrutinized electoral districts in order to assure the cleanliness of the 1994 presidential election. Alianza Cívica changed the political landscape of the country by restoring a moral component to the process of electoral competition. In 1996, the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), the institution in charge of organizing the electoral process in Mexico, introduced the principle of citizen councilors as the organizers and supervisors of the electoral process. In the July 2000 elections, more than 450,000 individuals participated in the organization and monitoring of the presidential elections. Democratization in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico shows a new phenomenon in these polities: the emergence of democratic forms of collective action.

A central dimension of democratization in Latin America was the role of forms of collective action that took place at the public level. Human rights movements in Brazil and Argentina retrieved the moral component of politics just as authoritarianism was destroying the most basic bonds of solidarity. In both cases human rights activists utilized the potential for

social solidarity that survived at the private or religious levels in order to publicly reclaim the right to life and physical integrity. Neighborhood associations blossomed in Brazil and Mexico during the process of political liberalization. Urban social movements raised the banner of autonomy by challenging authoritarian regimes' attempts to interfere with the daily lives of urban dwellers by relocating them or restricting their access to social services. Through independent associations, petitions presented directly to public officials, and the occupation of public space, urban movements challenged one of the region's most deeply ingrained traditions—the idea that material improvements for ordinary citizens represent favors to be delivered by elite political mediators. Electoral monitoring, as well as the political campaigns launched by Alianza Cívica, tackled the issues of the right of individuals to have equal weight in the political process and of making the law on power-holders' control effective. Again, Alianza Cívica, human rights movements, and urban social movements retrieved the moral dimension of politics by introducing public forms of collective action in Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil.

Despite this powerful presence of popular collective action at the public level, democratization in Latin America continues to be analyzed by the most well-established democratization theories (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Stepan, 1988; Linz and Stepan, 1996) as the restoration of political competition among elites. In place of the theory of transitions to democracy derived from the democratic elitist tradition, with its fundamental elite-masses distinction, I will propose in this work a conception that links the emergence of political democracy to the formation of a public space in which citizens can participate as equals and, by arguing about collective projects for society, guide formal political decision-making.² The public sphere lies between the market and the state and involves individual communications and deliberations through face-to-face interaction. The concept of the public allows democratic theory to overcome the elite-masses dichotomy by suggesting a new way of approaching democratization, namely through the analysis of practices prevailing at the public level. Thus, democratization ceases to be regarded simply as the institutionalization of political competition and becomes a societal practice in need of institutionalization. I will argue that democratization is the result of transformations at the public level and that full democratization is the capacity to transform new practices from a societal innovation into a public form of decision-making.

To defend this argument, I will need to establish a contrast between the central problem of the first and second waves of democratization—the contradiction between mobilization and institutionalization—and the problem for the consolidation of democracy during the third wave of democratization. When we consider formal politics in the recently

democratized Latin American countries, it shows sharp elements of political continuity with the previous authoritarian period. Social movements occupied the public space at a moment when there were serious restrictions on the free organization of political parties in Brazil and Argentina and on the forms of political competition in Mexico. To be sure, the completion of democratization in Brazil and Argentina and its recent completion in present-day Mexico has lifted most of these restrictions and brought the political opposition to positions of power. Yet the arrival of the Peronistas, the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), or the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the Partido de la Accion Nacional (PAN) to power positions did not imply the renewal of democratic political practices, or the incorporation of new practices into the political system, but an attempt to rebuild old practices that were at best semidemocratic and at worst the cause of the previous breakdown of democracy. Traditional actors brought clientelism, permanent changes in the rules for political competition, the subordination of moral issues to majoritarian considerations, and silence on former and current human rights violations back into the democratic political system.

I will argue, then, that the central challenge facing current Latin American democracies does not come from a contradiction between mobilization and institutionalization but from the dissociation between a more open, egalitarian public space and other, more traditional means of gaining control over and using the administrative state apparatus. There is now a tension between democracy as a form of societal organization that involves demands for accountability, respect for rights and democratic practices at the local level, and the expansion of political rights, and democracy as a form of organization of political competition among groups and state administration. I will call the former the political public space and the latter political society. The essential point is that the two levels may not coincide and that, in late democratization situations, tensions between an open, egalitarian public space and a more closed and hierarchical political society may endanger democracy itself.

My argument is developed in two parts. In the first part, I contrast the elitist and public-space theories of democracy and sketch some general reasons for being skeptical about the elite view and preferring the public-space theory. I argue that democratic elitism makes ad hoc assumptions about the democratic role of elites and the anti-democratic role of forms of collective action. I show that the attempt of the theory of transition to introduce the category of hard-liners as the anti-democratic members within ruling elites does not solve the issue of semi-democratic, oligarchic members of political society. It is their presence in post-democratization

scenarios that poses the problem of the limits of current democratization theory. Thus, the first part of the book has two theoretical arrival points: (1) the impossibility of furthering democratization in Latin America by drawing solely on political elites; and (2) the theoretical alternative represented by an analysis of democratization based on the emergence of what I call participatory publics. The conception of participatory publics involves four elements:

- The first element is the formation at the public level of mechanisms of face-to-face deliberation, free expression, and association. These mechanisms address specific elements in the dominant culture by making them problematic issues to be politically addressed.
- The second element is the idea that social movements and voluntary associations address contentious issues in the political culture by introducing at the public level alternative practices.
- The third element involves the transformation of informal public opinion into a forum for public deliberation and administrative decision-making.
- The fourth element is that they bind their deliberations with the attempt to search for institutional formats capable of addressing at the institutional level the issues made contentious at the public level.

The second part of the book develops the case for participatory publics by examining democratization and post-democratization periods in Latin America. I show that forms of renewal at the public level such as publicly demanding the respect for human rights or rejecting political intermediation in the claim for public goods or election monitoring did not reach the political system in Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico. The moral renewal introduced by human rights movements did not quite reach the political system in Argentina and in Brazil. The demand that a moral dimension be reestablished in politics collided with political society's quest for normalization. Issues such as settling accounts with the past and respecting human rights in the present retained the support of society, but they could not make their way into the political system. Movements for social and material welfare in Brazil and Mexico met a similar fate. The autonomy of neighborhood associations and the public presentation of demands were undermined by the reintroduction of clientelism, which became one of the principal ways of building political majorities. Again, renewal had societal support but became relatively insulated at the public level. Last but not least, political campaigns and monitoring had only temporary effects on political society. They enjoyed successes such as the removal of a president in Brazil and the reduction of electoral fraud in Mexico,

but they could not transform themselves into new patterns for political activity. Between political campaigns, they remained isolated at the societal level. The result was a compartmentalization of public and political dimensions. While renewal at the public level does not vanish, neither is it incorporated into political society. It is at this level that the theoretical analysis of the first part of the book (chapters 1, 2, and 3) meets the storytelling on democratization and democratic life in recent Latin America, in chapters 4, 5, and 6, generating a new understanding of the political dilemmas of third-wave democracies.

The central conception derived from the two parts is the understanding that third-wave democracies face a new consolidation problem caused by the non-overlapping between the public and the political dimensions. To cope with this problem, present even in well-established democracies, a new issue has to be faced: how to transform informal practices at the public level into forms of deliberative democracy. Because the gap between the public space and political representation is wider still in post-authoritarian countries, I argue that the central problem facing contemporary democratization theory is the transformation of democratic practices that have emerged at the public level into institutionalized relations between social actors and political society.

Based on my analysis of conflict between the public and the political, I will propose in chapter 6 an alternative form of conceiving democratic institutionalization. Based on an empirical study of Brazil, I show the scale of the changes that have taken place in face-to-face interaction and deliberation. I show how within the realm of voluntary associations, new neighborhood associations express the emergence of a new conception of autonomy for claiming material goods and establish a new moral parameter to the practice of politics. Members of voluntary associations support democratic values more than do Brazilians at large. When asked, they proclaim their preference for more direct and participatory forms of decision-making. They utilize generalizable criteria to justify their actions even when their demands are material: when asked to rank their reasons for participating in politics, they place organizational or collective aims higher than the attempt to improve their own material condition.

The empirical data on voluntary associations allow us to deepen the alternative conception of democratization advanced in this book. Departing from the stalemate between social actors and political society, I show that political society has been unable to incorporate innovations arising from the societal level, especially the reconnection of politics and morality and the disconnection of material and deliberative inequality. From this diagnosis I propose a different political problem, namely, how to bring the forms of renovation institutionalized at the public level to the political system as a whole. The main analytical and normative assertion

of this work is that Latin American democratization can be broadened if public arenas that have given rise to political renewal are transformed into forms of public deliberation.

In chapter 6 of the book I take two cases, the example of so-called participatory budgeting in Brazil and the institutionalization of citizen participation in the IFE in Mexico to show the success of the attempts to integrate political innovations introduced by social movements into the process of political deliberation. In Brazil, the participatory budgeting process allowed social movements' critique of the non-public and disempowering dimension of the claim for material goods to be transformed into a public form of decision-making on the distribution of the same goods. It allowed the incorporation of patterns of publicity and equality that emerged at the societal level into the decision-making process. The result is one arena in which collective action at the public level and democratic decision-making become compatible by the introduction of a deliberative, non-administrative device. A similar case took place in Mexico with the fully *ciudadanización* (citizens' control) of the IFE. *Ciudadanización* allowed the critique of electoral fraud and informal electoral monitoring practices to be transformed into an institutional form of electoral organization with citizen participation. The result is, again, a public arena in which public action became compatible with a democratic process of decision-making. I link participatory budgeting and the IFE to the previous discussion of democratization, showing that fora capable of assimilating public forms of discussion and deliberation, contrary to the assumptions of the democratic elitist tradition, reinforce rather than weaken democratization processes.

The conclusion of this work builds on the overlapping of the theoretical concerns of the first part and the analytical conclusions of the second. It shows that the Latin American recent experience of democratization departs from the experiences that led to the consolidation of democracy in Europe after World War II. In that case consolidation was directly linked with the ability to present an alternative to the contradiction between mobilization and institutionalization. The Latin American cases point in an opposite direction: the most sensible way to further democratize state-society relations is to transfer democratic potentials that emerge at the societal level to the political arena through participatory designs. Without this second step through which informal publics become deliberative, problem-solving publics, democratization in Latin America will not be able to bridge the gap between democratic societal practices and a hybrid political society that resists its full democratization. Thus, deliberative publics become the central arena for completing democratization due to the way they manage to connect renovations within the public

culture to institutional designs capable of transforming non-public and hybrid practices into democratic forms of decision-making.

The book's conclusion on the Latin American process of democratization enlightens the current discussion of democratic theory. It shows that beyond the problem of institutionalization faced by European democracies, new democracies face a different issue: How can they produce a new stock of democratic practices capable of providing specific answers to the region's cultural tradition? Unlike the second-wave democracies, the Latin American democratizations point in the direction of the rehabilitation of those traditions within democratic theory that stress the importance of participation at the public level.