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Review

Direct Democracy in Brazil

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The Brazilian Workers' Party (PT) has been in government for two years now. This book does not deal with that disastrous experience, but does show why the Lula leadership of the PT has been so keen to expel left parliamentarians and attack left influence in the party: until recently much of the party was involved in the practical application of ideas which showed that another way of organising society was possible.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/paa1.jpg>]

For fifteen years or so, beginning in the late eighties in the southern city of Porto Alegre, there was a radical experiment in direct democracy which involved thousands of citizens in improving the conditions under which they lived. This experiment was called the Participatory Budget (PB).

The book begins with an interview with grassroots PB activists and brings together articles by the broadcaster and writer Iain Bruce, Raul Pont (ex-mayor of Porto Alegre), Joao Machado and other leading Brazilian leftists. In effect, it shows why Porto Alegre was the natural choice to host the World Social Forum and why it became a beacon for the anti-globalisation movement.

Together, the contributors give us one of the best pictures available of how the PB operated. Every year, over a period of months, people met in their neighbourhoods to decide the priorities for the allocation of resources in next year's municipal budget. In a series of mass meetings (involving upwards of 30,000 people every year by the early 2000s) these decisions were refined upon and co-ordinated. This process was later extended to the whole of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, involving one-third of a million people in 2002.

Was the PB a democratic figleaf, a way of securing the consent of the masses for their inadequate level of public services, a way to limit rather than expand horizons? Potentially, and in the case of some cities, administered by less radical forces, actually.

But this is what Jose, an activist, says: "More than just public works, [the PB] manages to discuss the big issues... The PB should be implemented across Brazil. I think this is a model that the WORLD needs." At its best, the PB was Paulo Freire's revolutionary educational process in action.

But aren't the possibilities of making substantial changes to people's lives very limited at municipal level in a "Third World" country? In fact, the southern part of Brazil is the most developed part of the country, with a relatively high local tax base.

Admittedly, municipalities still only get 14 per cent of total national tax revenue. But in the first ten years of the PT administration in Porto Alegre local taxes went up by 196 per cent and became more progressive, targeting holders of real estate, for example.

Aided by popular scrutiny of the budget, the PT clamped down severely on corruption, releasing more money for other projects. The net result was the development of the best bus service in Brazil, 99.5 per cent of people enjoying access to fresh water, the most liberal laws on squatting in the country - and much more.

Iain is right to emphasise the central importance of Democracia Socialista (DS), the Brazilian section of the Fourth International, to the PB. In the late 70s, the FI, as he says, had discussed and elaborated a sophisticated approach to

the role of democratic demands in the battle for power and during the construction of a socialist society which (I would argue) makes it unique among revolutionary currents.

The importance of these ideas for today's social movements and hence for revolutionaries has never been greater. People don't trust revolutionaries who play fast and loose with democratic structures. Nor will we ever make a revolution without winning the majority to our ideas through open argument and discussion. There are no short cuts.

In an underdeveloped country like Brazil, DS argued, the pursuit of democratic demands has an inescapably revolutionary dynamic, the logic of which leads to a rupture with the existing system.

But, leaving aside for a moment the problem of what happens when a left party achieves national power under conditions of a low level of struggle (as the PT did in 2003) could we have been more cautious about how this democratic discourse could be hijacked by social-democrats and by openly capitalist forces? As Assis Brazil points out in the book: "the reason the World Bank is in favour of the PB is that it likes the transparency that it provides".

The defeat of Raul Pont, the PTs candidate for mayor of Porto Alegre in the municipal elections of autumn 2004, after a campaign which was very close to the party's line nationally, constituted a symbolic endpoint to this whole experience. The Brazilian left will have to start again, but not from scratch.

Of course, the Lula government has not implemented the PB across Brazil, contrary to Jose's hopes. Except in Fortaleza, surviving PT local administrations are shifting sharply to the right. But this should not be allowed to obscure the achievement that the Participatory Budget represents, however short-lived it was.

The Porto Alegre Alternative: direct democracy in action

Iain Bruce, editor

IIRE/Pluto Press, Notebook for Study and Research No 35/36 (162 pp, â,-19.20, Â£12.99, \$23.50)

Brazilian socialists André Passos Cordeiro, Ubiratan de Souza, Pepe Vargas, Raul Pont and João Machado describe in The Porto Alegre Alternative how Porto Alegre's participatory budget was born, how it works, how it developed in interaction with popular movements and spread with local Workers' Party (PT) victories, and how it has staked out new ground in promising a radically democratic alternative in the interests of the poor to top-down political and economic decision-making.

Iain Bruce is a British journalist and filmmaker who has made documentaries for Channel 4 and the BBC. His latest documentary touches on Porto Alegre and its connection with the wider global justice movement.

"Iain Bruce's impressive collection is the first book-length study available in English of Porto Alegre's participatory political project. Refreshingly unwilling to romanticise its subject matter, it takes a robustly multifaceted approach. A must for those seriously interested in global democracy from the grassroots up." - The Guardian

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