

## BOOK REVIEW

## Controles Democráticos No-Electorales y Regímenes de Rendición de Cuentas en el Sur Global: México, Colombia, Brasil, China y Sudáfrica

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In the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 04, 1989, which epitomized the end of the Cold War, many countries experienced new forms of democratization with the involvement of non-State actors in politics. It had taken two decades for the democratic transition to spread around the world. Blossoming civil society organizations would need another decade to “democratize democracy” (GIDDENS, 1998) in these countries. In the meantime, almost every country from Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Europe and Asia had undertaken major systemic reforms towards democracy. This makes the comparison of public accountability regimes of the utmost relevance, as exemplified in this new volume edited by Ernesto Isunza and Adrian Gurza for Peter Lang’s series ‘Political Sociology for the 21st Century Challenges’.

The first question that comes to mind even before opening this book and exploring the collection of case studies from Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, China and South Africa is: Why compare public accountability across such different countries? The authors argue that these countries share a common experience of post-authoritarian transition, which would make them part of the same democratization wave.

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Yet there are huge differences regarding both the initial political context and the outcome of the transition. Mexico and Colombia are both cases where formal democratic rules already applied but were hindered by dominant party regimes, with the former being a single party and the latter a two-party system. Brazil is a case of a military government withdrawing to give way to a multi-party system with the 1985 elections and the 1988 constitutional reform. South Africa is a case of institutionalized racism turning into a multi-ethnic democracy through the 1994 elections. China remains a case of non-democratic regime based on a long-standing single-party system, in spite of the ideological conversion to State capitalism turning this country into a major actor of globalization. The very notion of 'Global South' used here as a common ground is troublesome, since it seems to conflate economic characteristics with political features of the selected countries, regardless of their obvious disparities in terms of history, culture, demography, etc.

Therefore, contrary to what the editors argue, the choice of these countries to compare public accountability regimes does not fit in a most-similar systems research design. Instead, when treated as most-different systems, these five cases exhibit a high potential for theory building and testing of what are the causes of public accountability enforcement, and which are the sufficient conditions for non-State actors to play an active role in politics, beyond electoral processes. Once this methodological contradiction has been clarified, we can value the empirical findings of each chapter and the theoretical contribution of the overall book to the study of democracy.

Public accountability has been traditionally conceptualized as a twofold problem of answerability and responsibility (SCHEDLER, 1999). While answerability refers to citizens' faculty to demand State actors to justify their decisions for the greater common good, responsibility refers to the obligation of State actors to attend and occasionally anticipate these demands. In other words, public accountability is simultaneously a matter of rights and duties, of power and capacity, hence calling for "balance agencies" (O'DONNELL, 1999), that is to say, agencies responsible for controlling the government, and controlling standard operative procedures. It involves both State and non-State actors at many different levels of the democratic process.

What makes the discussion about public accountability tedious is the fact that it has convened three epistemological approaches which do not actually dialogue with one another. The administrative approach has traditionally made emphasis on infra-State mechanisms of public accountability, following the tradition inherited from British political science concerned with the Westminster mode of governance (BOVENS, GOODIN and SCHILLEMANS, 2014). The political science approach has developed a different approach with a focus on State-society relationships through the formal organizations and mechanisms studied by political institutionalism from the Northern American Academy (SCHEDLER, DIAMOND and PLATTNER, 1999). A more sociological approach has brought in a better knowledge of non-electoral mechanisms of public accountability, coined “social accountability” (PERUZZOTTI and SMULOVITZ, 2006), after notable political scientists inspired by the critical theory and the European sociology of collective action (re-)discovered the role of civil society in democratization (COHEN and ARATO, 1992).

In that context, the greatest contribution of the research conducted by Isunza Vera and Gurza (2018) is to provide in-depth analyses of how non-electoral mechanisms are utilized by social actors to diversify their control over the State. These mechanisms, coined ‘democratic controls’, are particular modalities of public accountability, which can be bottom-up, horizontal or inclusive, as they refer not only to social movements and networks but also to councils, citizen assemblies, revocatory mandates, etc. They act as causal forces in the democratic interplays between the society and the State, mediated or not by civil society organizations and balance agencies. Non-mediated interplays refer to vertical accountability, which essentially consists of the electoral process. Mediated interplays are far more complex, since they involve quite heterogenous categories besides the citizenship and the State.

The book theorizes three ideal types of such mechanisms. The first one, called ‘institutional non-electoral democratic controls’, is made of the State-society interplays mediated by both civil society organizations and balance agencies. In that case, balance agencies act as intermediary on behalf of civil society organizations to control the government or the legislative power. The second one, called ‘mixed institutional non-electoral democratic controls’, refers to citizens’ participation,

with or without balance agencies. Participation in balance agencies can be permanent (as in councils or committees) or occasional (like in the case of roundtables coordinated by the government). Citizens can also call out to State actors without the mediation of balance agencies and outside the electoral process through popular initiatives, whether to denounce illegal practices by civil servants and politics (for instance, corruption under its multiple meanings), to propose the adoption of new bills, the organization of a referendum, and so on and so forth. The third type of mechanism refers to 'extra-institutional non-electoral democratic control' as a vertical non-electoral control (also known as 'social accountability'). Examples of such mechanisms abound, which are also the last recourse for citizens under authoritarian regimes, including social protest, civil disobedience, campaigns by advocacy networks, etc.

Another strong aspect of this book is its focus on institutional change, which is arguably the best means to secure public accountability. Each case study sheds light on the complementarity of public accountability mechanisms under the concept of regimes. These mechanisms mobilize four different logics, namely 'synergy' between agents, 'equilibrium' between diverging intentions, 'blame avoidance' among State actors, and 'coercion' in principal-agent relationships. Although each mechanism works independently from the others, they are all framed in a country's socio-political system, hence interacting with one another. Therefore the performance of one mechanism relies on the existence of the others, which raises the question of how democratic controls can be effective in non-democratic regimes. The answer to that question, of course, is to be found in the study of Chinese personal networks as a substitute to the lack of actual citizens control over the State. But even in democratic countries, effective public accountability is often hindered by a government's authoritarian practices, by civil service corporativism, or in absence of true checks and balance between the executive and the legislative due to party hegemony, as in South Africa and Mexico.

In any event, the different chapters of this book provide empirical evidence of how the complementary mobilization of these mechanisms improves democratic controls through responsibility and answerability, whether in bureaucratic procedures or in the relationships between the executive, the legislative and the judicial power, or even in the mediation of competing interests

among non-State actors. In the four democratic countries of the study, participation has played a key role in increasing the effectiveness of public accountability because it was fit in the post-transition political system. The Brazilian experience provides a striking example of how public accountability can benefit from this process. In that case, non-State actors participation evolved from an extra-institutional logic before the democratic transition, to a mixed institutional logic leading to the 1988 constitutional reform, then to an institutional logic with the multiplication of policy councils and sectorial conferences. However, in neither case study does the government's will seem sufficient to guarantee the effectiveness of non-electoral democratic controls. Even in Colombia, where the 1991 constitutional reform gave way to regular participation channels as a ground for peace talks, social protests and other forms of extra-institutional democratic control were necessary to overtake the formalism of these channels until the adoption of the Law on Citizens Participation in 2012.

That being said, the authors do not overlook the limits of these democratic innovations, which are to be found in the professionalization of political activism, the lack of control over the controllers and the resilience of top-down relationships featured by traditional forms of governance. In South Africa the democratization process initially carried out by the African National Congress (ANC) was hindered by the incapacity of other parties to challenge its hegemony, so that the efficiency of public accountability relies first and foremost on neo-corporativism (i.e.: top-down relationships between the government, labor unions and the ANC). In Brazil the Workers Party played a key role in developing participatory mechanisms at a local level while becoming a major political force in many municipalities, and the then-governing party for more than a decade (from 2002 to 2014). Yet these democratic innovations have suffered serious drawbacks with the politicization of the judicial process in the fight against corruption, which led to the return of a far right-wing government and reactionary policies, worrisome for many civil society organizations. In Mexico, the main improvements in public accountability were due to the transparency and anti-corruption policies and incomplete modernization of the public service, in a context of integration to the North-American Free Trade Agreement. Then again, the participation of non-State actors in the political process has been bordering on the extra-institutional logic of social mobilization since the

mid-1990s. Hence it remains marginal, except for the consultation spaces opened by the Federal government, while protracted violence caused by drugs traffic hijacks civil society organizations and local governments from many states. In China the meaning of social participation is to be interpreted in the long-standing tradition of mass control by the Communist Party, since the Mao era. Therefore citizens' participation does not actually provide democratic control mechanisms, but rather social control mechanisms, strictly speaking, that is to say mechanisms to control the society. Moreover, the government still exerts a strict control over 'democratic' institutions whenever they threaten its domination, even at the cost of human rights violations.

In concluding this interesting collection of case studies one question remains: Will these reforms have long-standing effects? In spite of the reluctance of the authors to admit a structural change is at work in Mexico to tackle systemic corruption, the adoption of transparency policies seems to be a major policy paradigm shift that will affect the whole political and administrative system inherited from the heyday of the Institutional Revolutionary Party. Likewise, in Colombian the post-1991 democratic innovations have endured both the polarization of the political interplays and the political shifts in power. Brazil is an indeterminate case. As for today, the recent politicization of the judicial system has revealed the precariousness of the autonomy gained by balance agencies since 1988. But the conservative President Jair Bolsonaro and his Minister of Justice, Judge Sergio Moro, have not yet proven being able to enforce society's control over civil servants and politics, nor to mitigate corruption as they promised during the 2018 electoral campaign.

Eventually, the Chinese case reveals the true limits of assimilating the enhancement of private networks to a 'democratic' process, unless confounding fundamental human rights with public accountability mechanisms. There are too many intervening variables to be taken into consideration, which can affect the public accountability, to draw any consistent conclusion about this case of allegedly top-down democratization. Ironically, the authors' theory of public accountability regimes contradicts the premises according to which China is a relevant case of non-electoral democratic control, in absence of free elections (which is the bottom line for public accountability whatsoever) and because of the

hierarchical and centralist governance mode that remains the pillar of State capitalism. Similar limitations might be observed in Qatar and Russia, to mention but two infamous examples of such capitalism in contemporary world.

Revised by Fraser Robinson

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