

## Reflections on local participatory democracy in Latin America

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This work presents reflections on the field of participatory democracy in Latin America, based on the analysis of the experiences of Cotacachi in Ecuador, and Torres in Venezuela, which are examples of great popular participation at the local level. The study proposes to interpret the experiences from a Latin American point of view, considering the singularities of each municipality analyzed. The aim is to identify which factors contribute to the emergence and consolidation of mechanisms of participation in the public policy decision-making process. In order to approximate the democratic theory of the context of Latin America, the study presents an analysis structured in two relevant concepts for the theory: agency and public space. These concepts were essential to identify which factors allowed the creation and consolidation of practices of participatory democracy at the local level. The analysis of the experiences resulted in a list of seven factors that were fundamental for their advancement and diffusion, factors that may represent important guidelines for the development of new democratic practices in countries of the region. Finally, the study presents some reflections on the challenges that must be overcome to expand the local power and popular participation in Latin America.

**Keywords:** participatory democracy; Latin America; democratic theory; local power; popular participation.

### Reflexões sobre democracia participativa na América Latina

Apresentamos neste trabalho as reflexões desenvolvidas no campo da democracia participativa na América Latina a partir da análise de duas experiências que permitiram uma maior participação popular no âmbito local. Nosso objetivo é fazer uma releitura dessas experiências a partir de uma perspectiva teórica latino-americana, que considere suas singularidades. Pretendemos, dessa forma, identificar quais fatores contribuíram para a emergência e consolidação dos mecanismos de participação nos processos de tomada de decisão sobre políticas públicas. Buscando revisar a teoria democrática, de forma a aproximá-la da realidade latino-americana, construímos uma análise estruturada em dois conceitos caros à teoria democrática: agência e espaço público. Baseados nesses conceitos, buscamos identificar os fatores que permitiram a criação e a consolidação de práticas de democracia participativa local. Analisando as experiências de Cotacachi, no Equador, e Torres, na Venezuela, elencamos sete fatores que consideramos fundamentais para o avanço e difusão das duas experiências, podendo estes representar importantes diretrizes para o desenvolvimento de novas práticas democratizantes nos países latino-americanos. Por fim, trazemos algumas reflexões sobre desafios relevantes que devem ser considerados para a ampliação do poder local e da participação popular em Nuestra América.

**Palavras-chave:** democracia participativa; América Latina; teoria democrática; poder local; participação popular.

### Reflexiones sobre democracia participativa en América Latina

Presentamos en este artículo las reflexiones desarrolladas en el campo de la democracia participativa en América Latina a partir del análisis de dos experiencias de participación popular en el ámbito local. Nuestro objetivo es hacer una relectura de esas experiencias a partir de una perspectiva teórica latinoamericana, que considere sus singularidades. Pretendemos, con eso, identificar qué factores contribuyeron a la emergencia y consolidación de los mecanismos de participación en los procesos de toma de decisión sobre políticas públicas. Buscando revisar la teoría democrática, para aproximarla a la realidad latinoamericana, construimos un análisis estructurado en dos conceptos caros a la teoría democrática: agencia y espacio público. Basados en los dos conceptos, buscamos identificar cuáles son los factores que permitirán la creación y consolidación de prácticas de democracia participativa local. Analizando las experiencias de Cotacachi, Ecuador, y Torres, Venezuela, identificamos siete elementos fundamentales que, a partir de nuestra perspectiva, son directrices para el desarrollo de nuevas prácticas democráticas en países latinoamericanos. Por ende, presentamos algunas reflexiones sobre los retos para la ampliación del poder local e de la participación popular en Nuestra América.

**Palabras clave:** democracia participativa; América Latina; teoría democrática; poder local; participación popular.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this article we present the conclusions and propositions made from a research work on the democratic context in Latin America, as well as the construction of alternative local experiments for the expansion of popular participation in the regional hegemonic political system. Two stimuli were basic to structure this work.

A first stimulus is linked to the perception that the democratic theory that today serves as the basis for the analysis of our political systems is fundamentally anchored in European or Northern American theorists. Thereafter, this theory ignores the specific context of Latin America, which has undergone the process of widespread diffusion of its political rights in a social, economic and cultural reality very different from the countries where the current democratic model originated (Nun, 2001; O'Donnell, 2004). This reality led us to try to build new theoretical bases in the democratic field originated from our context, giving relevance to the experiences of local democracy developed in this region.

Considering the diversity of participatory democratic experiences at the local level, a second stimulus arises, that one of verifying which elements have led to the emergence of effective participatory and innovative practices in the sense of democratic dynamics in the localities. Even though each reality will bring a series of specificities that prevent us from wanting to standardize these democratic phenomena, we start from the hypothesis that it is possible to identify similar factors that compose these different practices and that can be configured as key issues for the development of effective and long-lasting local participatory experiences.

By articulating these two concerns, the question that guides this article is: based on a Latin American perspective, what are the factors that contribute to the emergence and consolidation of democratic experiences of effective participation in decision-making processes about public policies? The response to this question aids the construction of a new analytical structure of democratic theory that takes into account the Latin American reality and the experiments of its people.

To feed these reflections, two experiences considered successful in the aspect of the structural transformation of local democracy were selected, with national and international recognition, both of which were important references to support the participatory proposals implemented by the national governments of their respective countries. Cotacachi, in the Ecuador, and Torres, in Venezuela, present experiences that were born in a context of effervescence for new participatory practices, and stood out in comparison to other cases that would have had, in principle, the same potential for innovation and transformation.

This work was developed, first, through a bibliographical review on the idea of participation in the democratic theory; first in a general way, secondly focusing in Latin American authors. Then, we gathered a wide bibliography and documents over the experiences. Finally, there was field work, carried out in 2011, both in Ecuador and Venezuela, that gave the access to new documents and, mainly, the opportunity to interview different actors involved in the political process: farmers, indigenous people, researchers, mayors, journalists, historians, activists.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A more detailed description of the methodology can be found in Addor (2016).

In order to carry out this analysis, a research tool was elaborated, based on the bibliographic review on democratic theory in Latin America and structured in two concepts, which we consider to be complementary in the analysis of the democratic phenomena. The first concept is *public space*, treated by several authors, but that will be referenced here from the definition made by Dagnino, Olvera and Panfichi (2006:23-25) who state that:

The public spaces would be those deliberative instances that allow recognition and give voice to new actors and subjects; Which are not monopolized by any social or political actor or by the state itself, but are heterogeneous, i.e. reflect social and political plurality; Which, therefore, make the conflict visible, offering conditions to treat it in a way that recognizes the interests and opinions in their diversity; And in which there is a tendency towards the equality of resources of the participants in terms of information, knowledge and power. [our translation]

This concept, therefore, will allow us to analyze which elements related to the constitution of the popular participation spheres are relevant for their consolidation.

The second concept is *agency*, presented by O'Donnell (2000:537), who defines it as “presumption of sufficient autonomy and reasonableness of each adult to make decisions which consequences entail obligations of responsibility” (our translation). The author seeks to highlight, through this concept, the idea that citizenship is a product to be constructed from a complex process, which only occurs by the extension of civil, social and political rights. O'Donnell (2000:537) states that because we refer to ourselves in the central countries, we forget how recent, extraordinary and incomplete the environment of the achievement of rights is in Latin American countries.

This reference will guide us to reflect on how factors related to the citizenship and political culture of local residents have become fundamental for the creation and strengthening of the participatory local democracy proposal.

Based on this pair of concepts, the analysis of the historical, political, economic and cultural context of the two experiences was developed, which allowed us to list *seven* fundamental factors that had great importance in the emergence and consolidation of the two participatory experiences in the study. Although not stating that these factors are the necessary or sufficient conditions for the development of a experience with similar impact, we believe that identifying them may help reflect on ways to create new democratic practices at the local level.

This paper is concluded with some remarks over the strengthening and dissemination of other Latin American participatory experiences. These reflections go towards achieving advancements in theory and in practice, to the construction of a democracy truly inclusive and democratic, characterized by social, political, economic and cultural rights in Latin America.

## 2. THE PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE IN COTACACHI, EQUADOR

The experience of local participatory democracy in Cotacachi was only one of the government experiences resulting from the process of building the strongest contemporary social movement in Ecuador and at the time one of the strongest social movements in Latin America: the Ecuadorian indigenous movement (EIM). Since the 1960s, the EIM has been structuring itself through the creation

of national organizations that link social organizations and government<sup>2</sup>. From the impact of the *Levantamiento* of 1990, the EIM decides, in 1995, to enter the political-electoral dispute through the *Pachakutik* movement.

In addition to acting at the national level, indigenous people win electoral victories in municipalities and embrace the banner of participatory management, promoting new democratic practices, inspired in fact by principles of community management present in their daily lives.<sup>3</sup> Among them, the experience of the municipality of Cotacachi in the province of Imbabura stands out.

Cotacachi presented, until the 1970s, a great concentration of land and intense exploitation of the Indians.<sup>4</sup> From a series of changes in the course of the 20th century (Addor, 2016), the Cotacachean indigenous communities organize themselves to form the *Unión de Organizaciones Campesinas e Indígenas de Cotacachi* (Unorcac), which has become the great bastion of the indigenous struggle and one of the most solid second-degree organizations in the country. Ortiz (2004:79-80) divided the history of Cotacachi indigenous movement into three. The first, 1970-1981, period of “formación de la ciudadanía indígena”, struggle for civil rights. The second, 1980-1996, for the struggle for “derechos políticos y sociales”, prioritizing issues such as indigenous education, infrastructure, support of productive activities and social security. The third phase, 1996-2002, brings themes such as indigenous health, natural resources and political participation. It is on this third period that we will lean, analyzing the participatory democratic experience initiated after the election of Auki Tituaña for mayor.

## 2.1 ENTRY OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE INTO GOVERNMENT AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Elected in 1996, as a result of an articulation between Unorca/Fenocin and Pachakutik/Conaie, Auki Tituaña began a participatory process, based on the strengthening of grassroots social organizations; In the interchange between the three zones of the municipality; And in the consolidation of public spaces. A month after his inauguration, Auki convened a first *Asamblea de Unidad Cantonal de Cotacachi* (Aucc), seeking to set guidelines for the development of the *cantón*. This first meeting worked, in reality, as a catalyst for a process that consisted of three major phases: socioeconomic diagnosis of the communities; activity planning; implementation.

The product of this work was the necessary subsidy for the II Aucc, held in 1997, when the main document of the process was concluded: the *Plan Participativo de Desarrollo Cantonal*. The *Plan* became the charter that guided the subsequent assemblies and the activities of planning and implementation of the participatory process. Due to the demand for continuity of the work, the Aucc became an organization that articulates participatory democracy in the municipality, forming a technical team responsible for monitoring the process. In order to monitor the scheduled activities, there was the

<sup>2</sup> Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (Conaie), Federación Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas, Indígenas y Negras (Fenocin), Consejo de Pueblos y Organizaciones Indígenas Evangélicas de Ecuador (Feine).

<sup>3</sup> The three principles of indigenous communities that were taken into their political practice: “AMA LLULLA, not to be a liar; it forces us to plan, because we have to have plans to later see what we accomplished and what was not fulfilled. AMA QUILLA, do not steal; it was the Participatory Budget, where the actions and costs were defined. With everybody knowing the budget, you could accompany the costs, there was transparency. And AMA SHUA, do not be lazy; represented the contribution with voluntary work, citizen participation” (Vega, 2011, our translation).

<sup>4</sup> The municipality of Cotacachi, Imbabura State, is 100 km north of Quito, with about 40 thousand inhabitants.

creation of the *Comité de Desarrollo y Gestión* (CDG), an executive body of the Aucc, and the *Comités Temáticos*, groups formed by civil society and government focused on specific areas: health, education and culture, environment, handicrafts, agriculture, tourism.

The re-election of Auki in 2000 allowed the insertion of a new participatory mechanism: the *Presupuesto Participativo* (PP), brought from the exchange with other experiences, particularly the Brazilian case of Porto Alegre. It is worth mentioning that the experience got international, winning the prizes: better experience of governance and citizen participation, UN, in 2000; Cities for Peace, Unesco, 2000-2001; Child Friendly Cities, UNDP, 2003; Good Practice in Citizen Participation, International Observatory of Participatory Democracy, 2006 (Addor, 2016).

## 2.2 ANALYSIS OF COTACACHI EXPERIENCE

We can make a brief analysis of the main issues that revolve around the development of Cotacachi's participatory experience. Methodologically, it was an interesting experience attempting to aggregate different cultures, languages, practices, within the same public space.

Even though all this movement was strongly promoted by the national EIM, Cotacachi was not characterized as an experience that integrated and strengthened this articulation with the wider indigenous movement, being, in general, kept apart from other experiences of local indigenous management. In spite of this, it participated in great national mobilizations and raised several flags broader than the local ones, such as “*no a la minería*”, the decentralization of health, the end of illiteracy.

In Cotacachi, we highlight the concern with the political education of local actors, which took place in the public spheres of deliberation. The process inherited an already existing political culture, mainly by the performance of Unorcac and other historical movements of struggle, as that of the artisans, but the stock of political education created by the new experience had a remarkable impact. On the other hand, it is not possible to reduce the relevance of the local government in the process, which contributed to the mobilization of the population, financially and methodologically enabled participation spaces and attracted national and international resources.

Despite the representativeness and legitimacy of the participatory experience, the authority over the allocation of resources was in the hands of the traditional democratic structure: *alcalde* and *Concejo Cantonal*. The spaces of participatory democracy were not institutionalized and had no legal power of decision.

## 2.3 ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND WEAKENING OF PARTICIPATION

The experience of Cotacachi resulted in a series of changes in the municipality.

Firstly, the change in the relationship between indigenous peoples and the rest of the population, with increased inter-ethnic respect and self-esteem among indigenous communities. Secondly, the transformation of the State-Society relationship, promoting a new understanding of the political rights of citizens, highlighting the role of women, in a traditionally sexist context. The third transformation was the integration between the three zones of the municipality, forming a sense of identity and

pride with Cotacachi, which was corroborated by the national and international recognition of its participatory process.

In spite of having lived longer than most indigenous local government experiences, Cotacachi began to weaken itself in the middle of Auki's third term. This occurred as the result of a number of factors both at the local level (break in the social fabric of the participatory process, personalism of Tituaña, technicization of social organizations such as Aucc and Unorcac) and at the national level (*Alianza País*<sup>5</sup> represented internal rupture in the EIM, greater presence of the State in the localities). Today, the participatory spaces are weakened, both for the reasons presented earlier, and for the current government's stance of not strengthening the previous articulation.

### 3. BOLIVARIAN REVOLUTION IN TORRES

Torres, and its capital, Carora, had, throughout the 20th century, many popular movements that made the municipality and its capital identified with the political struggle.<sup>6</sup> Among the movements of greater relevance, we can highlight: a humanist strand within the church;<sup>7</sup> The performance of "Chio" Zubillaga who fought against inequality and in support of the training of workers; The cooperative movement; And the political and cultural movements of the peasants in the region. Finally, we cannot ignore the influence of the parties during the second half of the 20th century, such as the *Partido Comunista de Venezuela* (PCV), the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS), the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (MIR), o *La Causa R* (LCR) and the *Frente Amplio de Izquierda* (Fadi).

#### 3.1 THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE POPULAR POWER IN TORRES

Torres, like all of Venezuela, was flooded with great hope by the victory of Hugo Chavez in 1998. The *Revolución Bolivariana* managed to group the different fronts of struggle in the city, leading to the victory in the second post-Chávez local election in 2004, the Candidate Julio Chávez, of the *Patria para Todos* (PPT).

The entry of Julio Chávez represented a series of changes. First, an open dialogue with the population, facilitated by the opening of the building to the people and by the choice of officials originally from the local popular movements, who adopt a practice of governing *en las calles*. The government promotes various social and economic policies with a focus on the poor and, particularly, in the rural communities.

The main pillar of the change was the *Constituyente Municipal*, inspired by the *Asamblea Constituyente Nacional*, which represented a space for collective debate on the development guidelines of the municipality. The four months of debate had as a product the *Ordenanza de Constitución del Municipio Bolivariano G/D Pedro León Torres*, where the new principles of the municipality were established, highlighting the role of the people as its own manager (AMC, 2005). The document

<sup>5</sup> *Alianza País* is the electoral movement created around Rafael Correa's leadership.

<sup>6</sup> The municipality of Torres, Lara State, is 400 km west of Caracas, with about 200 thousand inhabitants.

<sup>7</sup> For the historian Luis Cortés and collaborators (2008:36) the movement, called "Iglesia social en Carora", was one of the origins of Liberation Theology.

also structured popular participation, which would have as a fundamental pillar the community organizations called *juntas comunales*, predecessors of the *consejos comunales*. Another important step was the implementation of the *Presupuesto Participativo* (PP), influenced by other experiences, such as Porto Alegre. Beginning in 2005, the priorities for the use of investment resources were defined collectively, following the decisions taken at the assemblies, which were ratified by the municipal council. One aspect that underlies Torres' democratic renewal is the revision of the idea of representation. In the participatory democratic structure, although there are representatives, these are called *voceros*. The *voceros* have a direct bond and responsibility with the citizens they represent, being held accountable for all and every adopted decision, and susceptible to be replaced at any moment. The figure of the *junta comunal* represented in the *Ordenanza* the organizational basis of the community, and began to be formed in 2005. With the *Ley de Consejos Comunales*, of 2006, the *juntas* were adapted to become *consejos* (councils). The demand for more territorial issues led to the articulation of a few *consejos*. Thus, when the *Ley Orgánica de las Comunas* was approved, Torres was already advanced in the formation of *comunas* and today is one of the regions that contributes most to the national debate of the *comunas*. Torres is currently one of the most advanced municipalities in the consolidation of the new democratic structure.

### 3.2 ANALYSIS OF TORRES EXPERIENCE

The concern with preparing the population for its inclusion in the new democratic structure was always present in Torres. The spaces of popular participation and the strengthening of community organizations were fundamental for the political culture.

There was not a long period of conflict between the process of transformation and the traditional democratic structure, factor which granted the process a fluidity that persists until today. Promoting Laws of participation at the national level were important for the legitimacy of Torres experience for they provided support to it, formalizing functions and responsibilities of participatory budgeting, community councils and communes.

In the methodological question, the Torrense city hall succeeded in consolidating a system of participation that was structured and effective. However, in spite of these influences and the alignment with the *Revolución Bolivariana*, it can be said that Torres had an autonomous walk, based on the fighting forces and the local leaderships. One can also note a certain influence of Torres in the national development of the participatory proposals, having been one of the most advanced in its structure of participation.

### 3.3 ADVANCES AND CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRACY IN TORRES

Torres' experience had the merit, not so simple, of giving continuity and greater depth to the participatory process with the change of the mayor. Edgar Carrasco, a former Julio employee, although with a more technical and less political profile, managed to combine his technical skills with an appropriate political stance.

Torres is one of the municipalities where the structuring of the "new geometry of power" is more advanced, however it is still necessary to take care of some aspects. First, there must be a continuous

dialogue with the laws promulgated by the national government. As already happened with the *consejos comunales* and the *comunas*, Torres must always be aligned with the legislation.

After an unbalanced start, a more equitable participation between urban and rural groups can be perceived. In addition, the local elite, who initially ignored and criticized the process, nowadays also participates and builds their collective spaces, one of the aims being the access to financial resources. The current challenge lies in the consolidation of the *comunas*, which are still in the process of formal recognition and consolidation of their strategies to discuss economic structures, forms of cooperation, larger works.

An unquestionable achievement of the experience was the political education of the Torrense population, which in addition to developing the local practice, was always closely linked to the struggle at the national level. At the same time, alternative means of communication, such as community newspapers and radios, were multiplied, pointing to the need of exchanging information through new means that escaped the traditional space.

Nonetheless, there are still a number of difficulties the experience needs to address. One is communication, which has the main means still dominated by the local elite. Moreover, problems of dialogue are diagnosed in an apparent difficulty of the State itself in adapting to what it is proposing.

When weighing advances and difficulties, in Torres we can find an interesting experimentation in the consolidation of a new democratic structure, of effective spaces of participation, of a new relation between State and Society that can bring many lessons to other experiences.

#### 4. PATHWAYS TO BROADENING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA

In each Latin American country, the process of democracy consolidation was developed according to its historical specificities and sociocultural characteristics. Safeguarding the differences that exist between the different nations, we can affirm that there is a common path among most countries of the region. The colonial period, the struggle for independence, the formation of the republics, the dictatorial periods, the processes of redemocratization are, in general, events that bring the histories together. An analysis that covers the different realities may allow a wider perception of how the history of democratic consolidation in each country has been unfolded.

Even though the general democratic theory provides subsidies for the understanding of our reality, it is necessary to review this theory on the basis of the systematization of history and practices developed in Latin American countries, to gradually consolidate a theoretical framework more appropriate to the characteristics of the processes developed here. This paper tries to articulate the theoretical propositions and the analysis of the experiences studied intending to contribute to the debate on the current democratic construction in Latin America.

The construction of democratic renewal processes is underway in several Latin American countries, facing: on the one hand, the traditional political culture of the region, which promotes hierarchy, keeps society distant from the political arena, strengthens clientelistic practice; on the other hand, a representative democratic structure that is conservative and subordinated to capital, which hampers broad participation.



Evelina Dagnino (2004:11) highlighted what would be the two hard *nuclei* that needed to be explored in a “more radical and effective way” to support the proposal of a transformative democratic project. First, highlights the need for resistance to the neoliberal reinterpretations of the notion of rights, which collide with the historically conquered universalist and egalitarian proposal. Second, emphasizes the importance of building and consolidating public spaces, striving for its quality as a sphere of social interaction and decision-making, valuing its public side: “The existence of effectively public spaces is only guaranteed by the effective plurality and diversity of its participants, by the equivalence of their resources of information, knowledge and power” (Dagnino, 2004:11, our translation).

The comparison of the participatory democracy experiences of Torres and Cotacachi with the presentation of the political projects in dispute, made by Dagnino, Olvera and Panfichi (2006), shows a great similarity between the ongoing actions and the characteristics of the *participatory democratic project*, in opposition to the *neoliberal* and *authoritarian projects*. In both experiments, one can see the existence of an important political project that directs the process and is shared by the society and the local government.

Based on this perception, and using the ideas of political structure of participation and political culture, we analyzed seven factors that were identified as extremely relevant to the emergence and consolidation of these two experiences of local popular power.

#### 4.1 ENABLING THE AGENCY: RIGHTS IN UNISON

In a reality in which universal access to civil rights was far away, political rights have infiltrated the Latin American society, promoting an alleged citizenship but still with fragile bases. To this day, full enjoyment of political rights is curtailed by scarce access to civil and social rights, by the incomplete guarantee of individual and collective freedoms. In order to consolidate democratic proposals that produce an effective transformation in reality, we need to focus not only on the political inclusion of the people, but also on the fulfillment of their demands and with the guarantee of access to the civil and social rights that they are entitled to (O’Donnell, 2000). While the division of rights is useful for its understanding and analysis, in practice it is necessary to put together these rights in a single project, in a single guideline of action.

We come to an extremely important theme already highlighted by O’Donnell (2000:562), who identified it as perhaps the most important of his reflection: “to what extent and under what conditions the poor and discriminated use the political freedoms of a democratic regime as a platform of protection and empowerment to successfully fight for the expansion of their civil and social rights” (our translation).

The consolidation of new democratic participatory structures will not be guaranteed by rules or laws that create new institutions, but by the existence of citizens who have the capacity to give them life, who possess the political culture necessary to change the political environment. Systematizing the learning obtained with the cases studied, three factors stand out as support pillars for this *agency habilitation* guideline in participatory democratic experiences. The factors described below intertwine and sometimes become difficult to separate. The division proposed here serves as a form of systematization to contribute to the scientific exercise of analysis and understanding of reality.

#### 4.1.1 ENCOURAGE THE POPULATION TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In both processes analyzed, in Ecuador and Venezuela, the reference fact that initiates the transformations is the election of a new mayor who begins the construction of a different management model. Nevertheless, the understanding of the historical-political context in both cases clearly showed the importance of the existence of previous movements of struggle, of mobilization, of questioning. The victories achieved in the electoral contests are a reflection of the political force that was articulated for that transformative project.

Therefore, the struggle for rights was already present and was strengthened with the conquest of the city. The merit, in both cases, was transforming these contexts of struggle into an effective, broad and diverse social base that legitimized and pushed forward the proposals for democratic innovation. Dagnino, Olvera and Panfichi (2006:42) pointed out that many democratic experiences in Latin America: “often derive from political projects (or some of their contents) that originate in civil society and reach State power, or are incorporated into the actions of different state-owned apparatuses, starting to guide them” (our translation).

The understanding of the importance of the political basis of struggle in society seems to have been present among the leaders in the two experiences. In both, there is a great concern with the formation of the population in two senses. First, an objective training, based on the themes of project design and execution, that allows the grassroots social organizations to be inserted in the proposed participatory process. In both cases, the important work of technicians related to the process is identified supporting this formulation of popular organizations. Second, the preoccupation with political formation, with the formation of leaderships, also appears as a fundamental strategy in both cases. It was understood that only through the political culture of the population would democratic projects at work continue. In large part, this formation took place in the participatory process itself, where the importance of long-standing political leaders is large.

#### 4.1.2 TRANSFORM REALITY

The expansion of participation, by itself, can be considered an achievement. However, for the people who are being inserted in the political negotiation environment, especially those traditionally excluded and with precarious conditions of life, there is the expectation that this process can represent concrete benefits for their family, for their daily life. In both experiments, public policies have been implemented that have effectively changed the quality of life of the population, in relation to sanitation, electrification, housing conditions, access to education, access to roads, access to public health, among others.

In short, democratic deepening must have effective short-term results in improving people's quality of life. Emir Sader (2002:672) pointed out that the implementation of the proposals made by people to the participatory spaces was one of the factors that strengthened the experiences of the participatory budget in Brazil: “Research shows that the realization of their decisions was the most important reason which has led people to attend participatory budget meetings” (our translation). Without it, it becomes more difficult to legitimize it with society and, consequently, its continuity is jeopardized. Therefore, the capacity to effectively solve problems brought by the population to public spaces seems to be a fundamental element for the legitimacy and continuity of the participatory project.

### 4.1.3 FEED UTOPIA

An important aspect in consolidating the democratizing experiences analyzed was their linkage to a broader political project, to a project of transformation of society. The creation of local public spaces for the inclusion of the population in decision making about public resources is a vital aspect of these experiences. However, there is in this construction a seasoning that enhances these processes, which is the reference to major projects of transformation of society.

In Ecuador, there is a curious and rich interaction between two currents of social and political projects. On the one hand, the *Levantamiento* of 1990 and the creation of the Pachakutik in 1995 are milestones that underpin the proposal of struggle from the ethnic perspective with close ties between the local experience of Cotacachi and the struggle of the EIM. On the other hand, the perspective of class struggle is also present, inherited from the influences of the left parties, defending the emancipation of the workers. It is not uncommon to see posters and drawings of Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, hung on walls of houses and headquarters of organizations. As the former Cotacachi's city councilor, Patricia Espinoza (2011), said, "these struggles made people understand that it is not a punctual struggle, but rather a struggle for a system. We had to make people realize that the fight was beyond, we had to change the system" (our translation).

In Venezuela, the participatory process in Torres has a clear base in Hugo Chavez's proposal of transformation, being strongly linked to the *Revolución Bolivariana*. Local leaders take pride in being a benchmark of popular power under construction in the country. They express with joy the fact that the *Revolución* has never lost any election in the municipality. The members of the *consejos comunales* know that they are part of a project of reformulation of the state in a large scale.

This perception corroborates the emphasis given by Dagnino, Olvera, and Panfichi (2006:41) on the importance of a wide perspective. In particular, they highlight the class approach as a constituent element of political projects, which gives "a shared horizon of interests, experiences and culture", thus helping the creation of a potential basis for the emergence of specific projects.

The extension of the political rights gained from the experience was therefore not limited to the democratic functioning of local government, nor to the resolution of the problems of each city, but to the perspective of transforming all the country or even the world. Utopia was nurtured. If, on the one hand, the mobilization of the population around the participatory process was strengthened by effective material returns in the short term, on the other hand, it was nurtured by the linkage with a project of transformation of society.

### 4.2 PUBLIC SPACES: DIVERSITY AND ARTICULATION BETWEEN STATE AND SOCIETY

The crisis of the current model of representative liberal democracy denotes the need for new spaces that allow people to interfere in the construction of public policies that promote reflection and debate about living conditions, as well as, possible referrals. The formation of public spaces should be eclectic and widespread. On the one hand, there must be an articulated construction of autonomous, independent spaces, managed by civil society, and, on the other hand, of institutionalized, parliamentary spaces, with deliberative power over governmental policies. Only through this articulation will it become possible

to forge a linking of decision-making flows that will originate in the grassroots of communities, in daily life, in popular culture, in the art of resolving life (Ribeiro, 2005).

The two cases studied presented relevant experiences in the formation of new public spaces, whether linked to community organization or to the spheres of interaction between government and society, where the priorities and projects to be developed were decided. In the consolidation of a new political structure that represented the institutional basis of participatory democratic processes in Cotacachi and Torres, four factors stood out.

#### 4.2.1 ORGANIZE THE BASES

The experiences studied had important examples of large public spaces with a municipal scope, which have become important tools in the construction of participatory democracy. In Cotacachi, a *Asamblea Cantonal* and the *Presupuesto Participativo*; In Torres, the process of the *Asamblea Constituyente*, temporary, followed by the installation of the *Presupuesto Participativo*. However, in both experiences, there is a strong incentive to organize local society through small community organizations, which are in fact the basis of the participatory process. The focus of participation was not the individual, but the organized groups that represented a territory, a sector, a group of society. It was this institutionality that characterized the major decision-making spheres, where voices were guaranteed to individual, but the right to interfere in decisions (voting) was reserved for popular organizations.

These public societal spaces allowed the strengthening of the social network in the communities and neighborhoods and allowed access to resources for the projects built with the support of city hall technicians, who will contribute to the solution of the diagnosed problems. The representation in the participatory budget spaces was given by each community, based on these organizations. In Venezuela, the law of the *consejos comunales*, which allowed direct financing to these organizations was also fundamental for its consolidation. In Cotacachi, this mobilization structuring took place in two directions: by territory, with the strengthening of indigenous community organizations, the *Federación de Barrios*, and *juntas parroquiales*; and by sector, such as women's groups, youth groups, artisans.

Thus, it was through the strengthening of various grassroots social organizations that participatory democratic projects succeeded in mobilizing a significant number of people. Municipal deliberative spaces of greater magnitude, for methodological issues did not allow participation wider than a few hundred people. However, the debates held there were already based on discussions and decisions taken in each neighborhood, in each community, and were therefore the result of the participation of thousands of other people in political society through popular meetings.

#### 4.2.2 REAPPLY METHODS ACCORDING TO THE PLACE

The participatory experiences in the two cities surveyed presented interesting innovations in the proposal of a democratic structure and in its relationship with the traditional representative democratic system. However, the contributions of other experiences of participatory democracy were relevant. As an example, the case of the participatory budget of Porto Alegre was a source of inspiration for both cases. Additionally, other exchanges within each country or with neighboring nations were also important.

Cotacachi had a Cuban inspiration, which explains its success in health policies and education/literacy. In the construction of the participatory structure, there was influence of the Cuban logic of community organization, but also exchanges with other participative management experiences in Ecuador and southern Colombia. The Torres municipality was initially inspired by the National Constituent Assembly, held by the Hugo Chávez government, and the Brazilian experience of participatory budgeting, but improving the system according to local reality, adopting different criteria of division and dedication of resources.

In this way, it is important to emphasize that the knowledge or models brought from other experiences in neither case were simply implanted in the place. A collective construction concern was identified that allowed the imported tools to be processed and perfected to the local context and demands, respecting and valuing the culture of the place and its values, which was fundamental for the inclusion of the different groups in the participatory process.

#### 4.2.3 ENSURE STATE COMMITMENT

The formation of public spaces is a fundamental step towards the consolidation of new structures of participatory democracy. However, the simple creation of these spheres is not enough. In most cases, these spaces do not have a legal existence that would include them in the structure of the country's formal democratic system. Consequently, there is no law that guarantees that the referrals and decisions coming from those participatory institutions will be considered by the government for the definition of its policies. This is the case, for instance, of the experience of participatory budgeting in Brazil, as pointed out by Dagnino, Olvera and Panfichi (2006:68): "The other great Brazilian contribution to participation, the Participatory Budget, lacks explicit constitutional anchoring, which demonstrates that democratic innovation does not necessarily require legal spaces specifically designed to materialize in participatory practices" (our translation).

In this scenario, what guarantees the effectiveness of deliberative public spaces is the commitment of the local government to the participatory process, which is the only factor that guarantees compliance with collective decisions and respect for the participative instances. It is important to note that, in both cases, the ruler faced resistance from within the formal democratic structure, by the municipal officials (or more often, the municipal council), who perceived their policy-making and budget functions as threatened. The main tool for dissolving these barriers was the popular legitimacy that was used by the mayor to pressure the city council to respect the decisions of the newly created bodies.

Alternatively, the reliance on the ruler's political will is also clear in times of conflict. In Cotacachi, when divergences between the strongest institutions of the participatory process begin to emerge, the city hall diminishes the diffusion of the decisions of the popular spaces. When interagency tuning begins to fall, there is no longer a unanimous perception that local government is respecting the decisions of the population. This conflict helps portray how much the commitment of local government to the effectiveness of the participatory system is an essential factor.

#### 4.2.4 FORMALIZE POLITICAL COMMITMENT

The transformative processes in the two municipalities studied managed to widen the spaces of participation and mobilize many people for the construction of an alternative democratic proposal. An

element that was present in both experiences and which played an important role in the construction of an identity, of an articulated political project, around which the whole movement revolved, was the collective construction of a document that would serve as the basis for the struggle. It is relevant that these documents were elaborated at the beginning of the experiences jointly between society and the State and represented a reference for both in the transforming path that developed there.

In Cotacachi, the *Plan Participativo de Desarrollo Cantonal* was the great landmark of building the participatory experience. Similarly, in Torres, the Municipal Constituent Assembly concentrated on building a document that would guide the incipient transformation project. Espinoza (2011) highlighted this articulation: “We saw that civil society alone can not advance, it needs the State. We can have very good intentions from civil society, but the State has the tools [...] The union of these two spaces allowed us to do a much stronger and more consolidated work” (our translation).

The structuring of public spaces and of the democratizing proposal were based on an aggregating document that brought together the different actors around the political project. This had been collectively elaborated in a deliberative sphere that integrated people and government and that was registered as a commitment of the entire population. The articulation of civil society and the state around a formalized political project has perhaps been one of the main factors of solidity of the experiences.

With the highlight of the relevant factors in the two experiences studied, we do not intend to formulate models or stages of building participatory democracy experiences. One can not state categorically that each one of these factors is necessary, that is, that without any of them it would be impossible to consolidate participatory, transformative democratic projects. Similarly, it is not possible to conclude that they together are sufficient conditions for a transformation to occur. This analysis intends only to indicate coincident factors that had outstanding relevance in the two cases studied and that can contribute to other practices of popular power construction.

## 5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS ON DEMOCRATIC CONSTRUCTION IN CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICA

The global political environment has undergone profound changes over the last two decades. In Latin America, a new scenario apparently begun to design itself from the late 1990s. The defeat of the socialist international project paved the way for a strong neo-liberal wave in the region, establishing the Washington Consensus guidelines. The profound and uncontested success in the implementation of the neoliberal project was the key to its failure as a political project in many countries, especially since the negative impacts on the lives of the Latin American peoples were immense, catalyzing various movements of revolt and dissatisfaction.

A series of democratic experiences challenging the neoliberal model are beginning to be developed. However, in a scenario where most Latin American governments do not seem willing to promote significant changes in their traditional democratic structure, the articulation of local government with the participatory democratic project seems to be a way for the implementation of transformative processes articulating State and society.

At this point, it is worth bringing back the question that stimulated the research and reflection developed here: based on a Latin American perspective, what are the factors that contribute to the emergence and consolidation of democratic experiences of effective participation of the people

in decision-making processes about public policies? From this question and from the previously highlighted elements, we try to summarize the conclusions in a paragraph.

*The construction of a participatory democratic process with effective public participation in decision-making about public policies must be based on the promotion of a local political movement that allows the inhabitants to recover their utopias, structuring themselves from the political formation historically existent in the popular groups and the creation of spaces for the capacitation of new actors, without dissociating themselves from a concern with the real improvement of living conditions for the inhabitants of that territory in the process. The participatory democratic project must be based on the formalization of a social commitment, involving civil society and the State, that brings together different groups around the process of transformation, promoting the creation of diverse public spaces, whose methodologies must respect the cultures and the differences of such place and whose legitimacy will rely in its structural dependence on the grassroots social organizations, which must therefore be stimulated and strengthened by the transformative process, since they will guarantee the link between democracy and people, territory and daily life.*

In this sense, we bring five relevant points in the stride of democratic struggles, which are directly or indirectly linked to the factors highlighted in the previous section.

First of all, the defense of resuming the discussion on democracy. It is necessary to incorporate definitively the critical reflection around the limits of the current representative liberal democratic system of power, by its markedly elitist nature, and strengthen the struggle for a new democratic system, which de-privatizes power. Politics must be regained as a *means* of transforming reality and not as an *end* itself. Bravery is needed in order to reinvent democracy by occupying the existing democratic spaces, but also by constructing new structures to renew the model. It is necessary to question politicians, political parties, chambers, congresses, senates, councils, in a daily analysis of our political systems' functioning, aiming at a greater popular interference in decision-making spaces.

Secondly, the greatest approximation between the political system and society passes through a territorialization of democracy. The political sphere today develops away from the daily life of the majority of the population, disregarding the main day-to-day issues. Political dynamics increasingly becomes a self-referential process. Politicians seek vows, positions, power with the greater goal of gaining more power, more jobs equal more votes. It's power for power itself. The democratic advance must be directly linked to the improvement of living conditions for the population and this means that the local reality needs to enter the democratic system. A reconfiguration of the current democratic system must inexorably pass through a territorialization of democracy. "The current utopia will be territorialized, refusing the smoothing of territories" (Ribeiro, 2006).

As a third note, the need to transform the State stands out. One can not ignore the importance of struggle within the State. Increasingly, the search for transformation must understand the State as a strategic space within which one must try to insert the participatory democratic project. As Dagnino, Olvera and Panfichi (2006) defended, the participatory democratic project needs to be built starting from articulating sectors of State and civil society that are linked to this project. The demonization of the state, as well as its vision as a monolithic entity, will only limit the actions of the movements that seek to democratize it. The great challenge is to be able to disseminate more and more within the public sphere the participatory democratic proposal and to make a greater part of the State committed to it.

Fourth, to review the interaction between democracy and capitalism. The conflicts between democracy and capitalism are about to burst. The major problem was that the commodification brought by capitalism was not limited to the economic field, but expanded in totality to the cultural, social, and political fields. While neoliberalism and global monopoly capitalism preach practices that have as a backdrop to extend the dominance of the mercantile sphere over the different spaces of social relation, the democratic struggle must follow exactly the opposite direction, that is, it must seek a widening of the public sphere. Every democratic struggle is an anti-neoliberal struggle.

Finally, in the context of intense political dispute, it is necessary to establish a Latin American movement around a participatory democratic political project, a proposal to consolidate popular power in the region. In a world context where practical rationality and immediate gain are the universal values to be defended, the recovery of utopia becomes the great challenge for any contestatory movement. We need a supranational movement of exchange and support to the processes of construction of the popular power. Without it, experiences of participatory democracy will remain vulnerable to political instability in their countries, and can be dismantled with the weakening of a social movement or change of a national government.

There are many and profound democratic challenges in Latin America. The valuation of incipient and local experiences, even if imperfect and incomplete, must be a fundamental principle for the transformation of this reality. Perhaps in these practices are some of the organs of the “new mole”, presented by Emir Sader (2010), which may burst abruptly, bringing a scattered and diffuse revolution that will transform the democratic systems. But to that end, it is fundamental to consolidate a regional articulation to support this transformation, allowing a revival of utopia in every corner of Latin America.



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