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BOOK REVIEW

The Effects of Participation*

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(DONAGHY, Maureen. *Civil Society and Participatory Governance: Municipal Councils and Social Housing Programs in Brazil*. New York: Routledge, 2013)

The debate on effectiveness is today at the centre of the participation agenda. What are the results of participatory institutions, and how and when do they produce change? These are questions asked by activists, academics and governments hungry for assessments for evaluating the outcome of the rich democratic experimentation that has recently taken place in Brazil, and for projecting their future ventures. In academia, this effort means huge theoretical and methodological challenges. After all, when we speak of the results of participation we can include a variety of effects – such as changes to people's quality of life, to the dynamics of the civil society-State relationship, to resource allocation, to the quality of democracy, to the decision and implementation of public policies etc. – which requires a reduction by specification of the domains of analysis, associated with a search for variables and indicators that allow the results of participation on the dimension(s) selected to be measured. Ingeniousness in the research design is also required to mitigate the problems arising from attributing relations of cause and effect, isolating the influence of other determinants in the context. As if that were not enough, expectations need to be calibrated and normative parameters appropriate to the analysis of participatory institutions need to be set, in a general context marked by strong politicisation of the debate on State-society interaction.

Civil Society and Participatory Governance. Municipal Councils and Social Housing Programs in Brazil (2013) by Maureen Donaghy brings an important contribution to this debate. The book discusses the effects of participation on the allocation of public goods and on the promotion of social wellbeing policies, with the normative presupposition that it is up to participatory institutions to increase the poor population's access to citizenship rights. Thus, the author investigates whether or not municipal housing councils are associated with a rise in the adoption of housing programmes and policies for the low-income population, and, if so, how and when.

One of the study's most innovative characteristics is the creative and innovative manner in which the author combines quantitative research with case studies in order to determine the causal mechanisms through which municipal councils influence housing policy in Brazil. Donaghy uses data from Munic/IBGE (Basic Municipal Information Research/Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) on 5,564 Brazilian municipalities, from 2005 and 2008, to test the hypothesis that the existence of municipal councils is the key to explaining the increase of housing policies in municipalities. The list of programmes devoted to the low-income population includes the construction of new housing units, awarding of plots of land, supply of construction materials, regularisation of land titles,

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urbanisation, and the acquisition of units and improvement of existing units.

Based on these initial pieces of information, the author selected five cases to study in depth: Curitiba (low associative pattern and no housing council), Recife (high associative pattern and no municipal council), Salvador (low associative pattern with municipal council) and São Paulo (high associative pattern with municipal council). In order to assess the role of the civil society-State dynamics in the effects of municipal councils, the author contrasted the cases of Santo André (long presence of left-wing governments) with those of São Paulo and Salvador (instability of parties in power). Her analysis distinguishes the assessment of the processes – defining the variables that influence the dynamics and political processes in the councils – from the analysis of the influence of the participatory process on the results of public policies. This is interesting if we accept that a participatory process can be successful regarding the inclusion of new actors and a new agenda without it necessarily affecting the results of public policies and vice-versa.

The results of this mixed-method approach allow the author to question commonly accepted hypothesis such as the importance of associative density or of the party in power for effective participatory institutions. Similarly, the conclusion that councils matter to the adoption of housing programmes for the poor goes against a good part of the assessments produced in academia that share in and reiterate a certain disseminated pessimism, partly marked by excessive expectations and/or by a restricted focus in case studies. Even so, although the author concludes that councils do matter to the adoption of programmes for the poor, she does not go further in the analysis of the extent to which these programmes have resulted in the housing deficit decreasing or the living conditions of the poor actually improving. This would be difficult, considering the data available.

The results of the research are presented in eight chapters, the first one being the Introduction. In Chapter 2, the author debates the place of housing policy and its relationship with the question of democracy and development, comparing the Brazilian case with those of other developing countries. Her assessment is that Brazil's housing policy reflects a worldwide trend, a rise in the number of programmes aimed at low-income populations. The Brazilian specificity lies in the decentralised system and in the role that civil society assumes in the process of policy production, which, along with other characteristics, make the current Brazilian arrangement a model for other developing countries (p.44).

In Chapter 3, Donaghy statistically tests her central hypothesis: the existence of a link between the presence of the councils and the adoption of social housing programmes. The data found confirm the initial hypothesis, according to which the existence of councils leads to the allocation of more resources for programmes aimed at low-income populations. In the two years (2005 and 2008), the number of programmes was significantly greater in municipalities with councils that in those without. These data lead the author to conclude that "This provides evidence to confirm the primary hypothesis that participatory governance institutions lead to programmes benefiting the poor" (p.56) and that "These results provide evidence to sceptics that councils exist more than as institutions on paper" (p.62). In the same chapter, she tests the independent effect of other variables on policy results, among them civil society density and the party in power. The findings lead the author to question the literature on participation: "interestingly, two variables that political scientists would expect to have a significant effect on social policy – the presence of a leftist administration and the density of civil society – do not have a consistent effect on the adoption of housing programmes" (p. 59).

Based on these preliminary results, Donaghy goes further in the analysis of the relationship between civil society density, participation and public policies with the following question: "is the effectiveness of participatory governance institutions in bringing about

programme adoption contingent on a strong civil society?" (p. 63). The variable used to measure the strength of civil society is based on associative density, measured by the number of non-profit organisations per capita in each municipality. The conclusion is that a strong civil society makes no difference to the results of municipal housing councils as far as the adoption of programmes is concerned. The problem is that the variable used by Donaghy does not seem adequate as a measurement of the strength of civil society, precisely because it leaves out important actors such as social movements and because it groups together organisations with very different profiles in terms of their political orientation, involvement with the housing issue (or lack thereof), and their relationship tradition with the State. Aware of these limitations, Donaghy seeks to validate the measurement used by resorting to the case studies.

What variables influence the decision-making process in the councils and what are their results? This question orients the analyses in chapters 5, 6 and 7, in which she seeks to identify how and to what extent the context matters. Once again in dialogue with the literature, the author assesses the role of institutional design and of the dynamics of the civil society-State relationship on the functioning of the councils and on their results. The case studies corroborate what the literature of the field suggests: the party in power influences the policymaking process inside the municipal councils. When the mayor belongs to the PT (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* –Worker's Party), civil society finds a more favourable environment in which to exercise its influence. However, the statistical analysis concludes that the presence of the PT in government does not increase the probability of social programmes being adopted when councils do exist: "what is true for the policy process does not appear to apply to the outcomes across cases" (p. 76). It was institutional designs that proved more prone to being generalised as to their effects. On this point, Donaghy finds divergences between the findings from the results of the qualitative and the quantitative research:

> Though the case studies provide strong evidence to suggest that the party in power influences the civil society-State dynamics in the policy process within municipal housing council, quantitative results do not confirm the importance of the PT in power for programme outcomes in the larger universe of cases (...). Therefore, though the party in power may matter in some cases, in the aggregate the party is a weak predictor of the effect of participatory governance institutions on programme outcomes (pp. 113-116).

In an attempt to find answers, the author returns to the case studies and speculates on the reasons for the insignificant link between the PT and the results of policies in the cases. However, just as interesting as this debate are the methodological considerations at the heart of these conflicting findings.

> The results of this analysis also bring to light questions regarding mixed-method research. Using multiple methods should serve to strengthen the reliability of findings. When case studies tell one story and statistics another, however, researchers have to use both sets of data to tease out the causal mechanisms at work and plausible explanations for conflicting findings. The real world of politics and policy making is messy, and neither the interpretation of cases nor statistical analysis can truly identify all variables at work. I believe, though, that relying on multiple methods in this study reduces the probability of asserting false conclusions, even if it takes some work to wade through the evidence regarding the process and the outcomes of these new institutions (p. 116).

In short, Maureen Donaghy offers her readers a complex and innovative analysis on the processes and effectiveness of participatory institutions. It is a most welcome contribution. The results of her research remain open to interpretation and the book is evidence of the work we have before us if we wish to go further in the research on the effects of participation.