Berkeley Seminar on Envisioning Real Utopias
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1. The "pragmatic orientation of the mode of empowered participatory governance". To what extent does this narrowing of participation to pragmatic issues, problem-solving have the effect of excluding Big Issues from politics altogether?

- I argue in my longer work on these issues that it is actually desirable – if ironically so – to narrow the scope of political debate within participatory institutions and have them take as their orientation towards tasks a very pragmatic problem solving orientation, rather than having the site of participation being a site of struggles over fundamental issues of power and inequality. This is different from traditional leftist stances. Kate asks, then, whether this restriction has a depoliticizing effect – limits the potential for local problems solving being a site for deepening democracy.

- One issue here is that the Big Issues are often already well formulated in the larger political arena and has hardened people into opposing positions, whereas if a more pragmatic stance is taken then it may be possible for people to actually deliberate about issues and form new perspectives because it was more open. At the same time it wasn't clear how the content of the pragmatic issues was to be determined.

- One of the benefits of limiting issues to pragmatic problem solving is that it privileges experiential knowledge rather than expert knowledge and thus encourages participation of ordinary people. The pragmatic focus is part of the lifeworlds of the participants. But I think that you have to target the way large scale issues are talked about too. You cannot just say all we can talk about are pragmatic concerns; there also has to be a way of engaging these big issues, and we have to find ways for experiential knowledge to bear on these bigger problems.

- To play devils advocate: the big risks are, first, co-optation which keeps the larger system safe, and second, producing cynicism because people engage because they believe participation will change people's lives but then discover that participation only deals with small "practical" issues. That may be a risk.

- How does the pragmatic focus figure in affecting larger scale change? Is it through some kind of gradual process of accumulation of pragmatic changes or is it through the effects of this on the political culture, on the cultural context of change?

- Response: probably more the latter. The sites of empowered participation serve a variety of purposes, but the pivot is the ways these affect people's understanding of the capacities of ordinary people and the possibility of change. These are better served by practical work than hot rhetoric about human capacity and possibility. In the deliberate for a like in Porto Alegre people deal with very practical matters that affect their lives – sewers, day care centers, etc. Through participation people become schooled in the practices of deliberation, trade-offs, negotiation. They

come to understand the problem of trade-offs, and understand the time horizon problem and can orient their political energies that way. How do you really learn this and trust the process? You learn it through practical activity. This is a central part of school of democracy ideas, and this depends upon EPG demonstrating to people that their participation matters. This of course is very messy – rough and tumble with a deliberative glue to it, not a pure form, of course. The hope is that you can change the political culture through pragmatic public participation more than by fighting over the fundamental political questions of property rights, power, privileges, inequality, social economy, etc. These require action at the center through the state. This requires political movements acting at the center. Can EPG increase the space for those movements?

- A defense of the pragmatic orientation: People should have a meaningful role in decisions that affect their lives. These are important issues. To say that they are dealt with in a "pragmatic" way does not mean that they are of minor importance.

- It is also the case that the pragmatic focus can make it possible for people who are ideologically polarized to still deliberate around common needs and problems, and these can affect the polarization, at least among popular forces. This is not true for all problems, but for many. And we want to set in motion the endogenous process of citizen formation and democracy expansion by identifying these zones of possible problem-solving.

2. Is there research on the actual affects of this participatory process on people? Does it engender more democratic citizens?

- Gianpaolo Baiocchi's book on Porto Alegre explores this. Several indicators of effects: many people move from assemblies into more competitive party politics. Also the PB has stimulated a thickening of civil society and a proliferation of secondary associations.

3. Is there a tension between the school of democracy at the local level and the issue of political formation for the nation – the larger issues. To deal with the larger issues requires a very different orientation: mystification of win-win talk of pragmatic level. To deal with the large issues requires a different kind of strategy and orientation than the kind of political practices involved in pragmatic problem solving.

- This is also part of the countervailing power component of the model: countervailing power requires confrontation and disruption, threats. At its core is the idea that in order to get elites to participate in good faith their exit options have to be closed off through disruptive power in order to sustain the space for collaborative problem solving. Consider environmentalism: the low road has to be closed off by disruptive potential (and legal sanctions through courts).

- So there is a tension between confrontation and deliberation, disruptive threats and consensus formation. As a Marxist I see struggles involving victories and defeats of opposing interests with winners and losers, not consensus. Marx believed that the whole idea of consensus-formation was ludicrous in a class divided society – there was no space for consensus problem solving; all you could do was force concessions from elites: you forced concessions rather than reached consensus. So these pragmatic problem-solving democratic experimentalist

processes had little place. I take a more complex view here – that the system is more contradictory with more spaces for forging among a subset of actors problem-solving arenas of participatory governance. We need to find those zones and build institutions because this is a way of enhancing social empowerment. The transformative potential we will discuss next week – seeing these as strategies and not just institutional designs.

4. How do you deal with the fact that people come to the deliberative table with such status differences, such differences in cultural capital and inequalities in standing within the discussion so some are listened to more than others.

- I think that these claims of the effects of inequalities are often overstated. Intellectuals often make these claims – that if you lack education and cultural capital you do not feel entitled to speak. I think this is overstated. Ordinary people do speak in these for a if they believe that there is a point to it. If people get over the cynicism barrier then a pretty wide spectrum of people feel it is legitimate speak.

- The data on Porto Alegre indicate that the deliberations were not dominated by people with high education. Mostly it was people around the middle of the education distribution.

- Also on the practical and local issues the expertise of citizens may be very high relative to "experts" and so their contributions can matter more. But when the deliberation moves beyond these narrowly practical matters can experiential knowledge still play a role?

- Santos argues that in Porto Alegre there was a transformation of technical experts from techno-bureaucrats to techno-democrats. What they learned is how to translate the technical issues into a form that ordinary people could understand them. This was not in the spirit that experiential knowledge was more valid or important, but that technical knowledge needed to be made accessible so that ordinary people could link their experiential knowledge with technical understanding. So the issue is whether technical experts can facilitate this.

- You can look at Amy Lang's discussion of experts in her comment son this: the BC citizen's assembly involved a serious educational component so that the citizens would be properly informed to make the decisions. A very interesting organization that is devoted to this is the science for the People organization in Kerala – KSSP (http://www.kssp.org.in/). They are committed to the idea that what is needed is not so much a privileging of local knowledge and experiential knowledge, but rather to enhance the capacity of ordinary people to deal with technical knowledge and technical experts.

5. But what happens when the elites have something real at stake? Suppose you had a random citizens assembly on health care. When elites have real stakes, what happens?

- There is no question if we are serious about a transformation of capitalism towards a socially empowered egalitarianism that this will provoke resistance among the rich: they are threatened by this and will defend their interests. Yet many wealthy people may act against their own interests – they often do after all,

> Engels is an example. Interests do not determine unique political stances –
> education does push people towards more universalistic positions often. But you
> will get resistance and it will be strongest where the stakes are highest, and this
> resistance will be effective.

6. I have real questions about whether this model could possibly work at a national level.
At a city this kind of planning is possible. Even at a city level it takes lots and lots of
energy. How could this work at a national level?

- The EPG model is really meant for those issues that can be brought down to the
immediate contexts of people's lives. The implication is not that national level
planning could be organized this way, or that national planning would somehow
be an aggregation of these bottom level participatory plans. The point here is that
cities already do these kinds of plans – they allocate resources for these kinds of
purposes – and that the priorities and agendas for this can be generated by direct
participation. When this happens the priorities change a lot. But national planning,
to the extent that it happens and we want it to be under robust democratic control,
would have to be organized in a very different manner. The scope conditions are
very different for different levels of a system.

7. How do these local designs affect larger scale transformation?

- These EPG designs are both an institutional design and a strategy. It is a reaction
against the over-focus on national transformation of the traditional left. Perhaps
this is enhanced by globalization which may make local transformations even
more central. Many people have incorrectly concluded that the increased
difficulty of national transformations in the face of globalization makes
transformative strategies less viable in general. I think this is not true and
certainly that local transformations are still important and can play a central role.
This does not mean that everything is local and this is the only site for struggle
and institutional transformation.

- Is part of the logic a "demonstration effect"? Yes – this is important. There are
hundreds of PB experiments in the world, including in Spain.

- (Jorge) No no. In Barcelona this is just advisory. The PB is not binding and this
has generated a lot of frustration.

- That is interesting. In Porto Alegre it really is an empowered popular participatory
budget even if the elected city council still holds formal authority to pass the
budget. I guess in the Spanish case the PB is just an expressive input. Still, the
frustrations with pure advisory role could generate pressure for more change.

- The basic idea here is a kind of modular view of transformation: changing pieces
in local parts can cumulatively amount of system-change, which is not just a
demonstration effect idea.

8. Positionality issues: how does the positionality of people affect these democratization
processes? I think the chapter does not recognize this sufficiently – it needs to be
recognized as a real problem.

- I am a rather old fashioned enlightenment intellectual who believes in reason. And I think that often the obstacles of identity and positionality are overstated, especially when we are examining contexts of disadvantaged people working together.

- The identities formed under conditions are oppression are not necessarily identities which we should regard as exemplary, as identities that have some kind of privileged standing. In any event, when people get together from different positionalities they have a responsibility to try to go beyond their position/identity towards something more universal sense of justice, connection, moral stance. Democratic deliberation and dialogue needs people to both bring their perspectives anchored in their positionality and engage in connected communication in which they move outside of their positions.

- Does this mean that we have to have a shared set of values? Not necessarily – you need some kind of transcendent understanding of your life, but this is not necessarily the same as a fully shared set of *values*?

- Lots of these situations involve a great deal of confusion on the part of actors – not so much different values as different beliefs.

8. The three pillars of democratic institutions: direct, associative and representative. How are they connected and is there a division of labor among them? Does deepening in one affect the others?

- Representative democracy is the arena in which large scale battles over the rules of the game occur and these Big Issues actually get fought over. How democratic this is depends upon how deeply democratic the representative mechanisms are.

- Can you have egalitarian principles in one pillar and not in others? Can one disguise the undemocratic character of another – EPG in local level like Porto Alegre but less democracy in national level.

- There is no reason for all of these institutions to fit together nicely, to be equally sites of democratization. Democratic deepening will generally be a very uneven process. So in Brazil there was a more radical democracy at the local than the national level. I don't know any formula which says which of these dimensions of democracy is the most central to democratization in general.

- In Porto Alegre case the project began as a model of direct democracy, but it involved into a process that involved a lot of associational democracy as well, as secondary associations were formed and neighborhood associations formed through which people's interests were crystallized, and these associations became more involved in the participatory budget. This also enhanced the functioning of the process because of the problem of endless meetings and meetings with too many people. This was really a case of self-organization in which the associations began sending people to the assemblies so they became more like assemblies of associations. So that was one way of cross-fertilizing two of the pillars. The local base assemblies also became sites of ordinary party politics and recruitment, sop the participatory assemblies also interfaced with electoral politics, although the

PB wanted to avoid them becoming too politicized or manipulated by parties for party objectives.

- There may also be some functional correspondences between different arenas of political issues and these three forms of democratic deepening. Perhaps associational democracy is most relevant for administrative democratization as in regulatory agencies, for example.

9. Randomocracy idea. This a recent idea and quite interesting as a way of dealing with some deficits in democratic processes – by going back to an "Athenian model".

- Who provides the information? Who structures it, who controls it. This could seriously shape the extent to which this really does democratize anything.

- If citizens are really gullible then this could just be another site of manipulation. But if the participants on the assembly are active and engaged, then they could evaluate and make judgments.

- One model is adversarial information provision – like in a criminal jury with a prosecution and a defense. But this has the problem of truth coming out of opposing distortions.

- Key issue is a meaningful pluralism of materials and expertise presenting different information from different perspectives. This is how the Citizens Assembly in BC worked. And the citizens picked the system – the STV system – that was not the one the experts preferred or predicted. This was the option that had aspects of proportional representation but also weakened parties

- It would be good to have a mechanism in which random delegates also had the power to determine some aspects of the information that would be made available.

- The Washington State rcitizens initiative assembly is another very interesting example of how this kind of random assembly could work – this time to solve the "rational ignorance" problem of voting for citzens in elections. The random assembly would deliberate intensively on a referendum proposal with lots of information from diverse experts and then their consensus – or distribution of preferences – would be made public. This would provide a clear signal to voters how they would vote if they were fully informed, so this is a way of simulating a fully informed electorate, and then giving this information to the electorate.

- Does this do the same as the signals from interest associations that people trust? Well, perhaps if people really trusted those associations and if most voters had that kind of connection to associations.

10. Democratizing the media would still be hugely important, even if with these other processes. Unless citizens are really well informed these processes won't go very far.

- Difficult design question: how to design a democratic media system

- Also the problem that many people will not be all that engaged even with a democratic media – not everyone will be interested in political matters. So there might still be a role for random assemblies.