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Working Paper no.72

SUBVERTING THE SPACES OF
INVITATION?
LOCAL POLITICS AND PARTICIPATORY
BUDGETING IN POST-CRISIS BUENOS
AIRES

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November 2005

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**Subverting the spaces of invitation?**
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## Introduction

The worst crisis in Argentina's recent history came to a head during the night of 19-20 December 2001, when the country was racked by a series of mass protests that have collectively come to be known as the '*Argentinazo*'. Following President Fernando de la Rúa's desperate and unsuccessful attempts to prevent capital flight and defend the value of the Argentinean peso, thousands descended into the streets, demanding his resignation and an immediate end to the austerity measures. This rapidly escalated into rioting and violent clashes with the police that left 28 dead and plunged the country into unprecedented turmoil. De la Rúa resigned, and there were three interim presidents in ten days before Eduardo Duhalde was appointed head of state by the Argentinean Senate on 1 January 2002, with a limited mandate to serve out the remainder of de la Rúa's term until December 2003.[2] The peso was deregulated and lost three quarters of its value, the country defaulted on its foreign debt of US$132 billion – the largest sovereign default in history – and businesses ground to a standstill, precipitating soaring unemployment and a massive increase in the proportion of the population living under the poverty line, from 38 percent in October 2001 to 54 percent in June 2002.[3]

Although the economic dimensions of the crisis are clearly important, it is critical not to underestimate its simultaneously political character. There is no doubt that the demonstrations were protests against ongoing processes of pauperisation and exclusion, but they clearly also reflected a more general disillusion with Argentinean politics and politicians, as was paradigmatically reflected in the ubiquitous slogan of the demonstrators, "*que se vayan todos*" ("out with the lot of them"). The *Argentinazo* highlighted "the limits to Argentina's democratic culture" and "the absence of political channels capable of providing for the more systematically and proactively deliberative articulation of interests".[4] It was a moment "when

[2] Elections were subsequently held in April 2003, and current President Néstor Kirchner was elected to a four-year term of office.
[3] A. Fizbein *et al.*, 'The Argentinean crisis and its impact on household welfare', *CEPAL Review*, 79 (2003), pp.143-158; L. Manzetti, *The Argentine Implosion*, North-South agenda working paper no. 59, Miami: North-South Center, 2002.
[4] L. Tedesco, 'Argentina's turmoil: The politics of informality and the roots of economic meltdown', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 15:3 (2002), p.469.

people bypassed politics as usual",[5] because they were characterised by a highly personalised "politics of informality" that "undermined the working of the state as a set of formalised institutional procedures" for representing political voice.[6]

Ana Dinerstein claims that in the wake of this "crisis of representation", Argentina became a "political laboratory", as an unprecedented groundswell of bottom-up mobilisation led to a range of "alternative" forms of political participation aiming to transform the nature of Argentinean political culture and society. These included *asambleas populares* (spontaneous neighbourhood assemblies), *clubes de trueque* (barter clubs), *empresas recuperadas* (worker-occupied enterprises), and *piqueteros* (organised groups of unemployed).[7] In the three years since December 2001, however, the first three have either disappeared or steadily declined, while most instances of the latter have become institutionalised as a new form of political clientelism. This suggests that none constituted a sustainable mode of alternative political participation. At one level this is easily explained: politics, at its most basic, is about resource distribution decisions, and none of the above practices controlled anything significant in the way of resources or access to resources. They furthermore all positioned themselves in opposition to an Argentinean state that they decried as 'weak' or 'irrelevant', but which in actual fact following the crisis rapidly embarked on a wide-ranging programme of social assistance in order to mitigate its effects and to shore up its dominant position within the institutional fabric of Argentinean society.[8]

The issue of the relationship with the state is an especially important one. As Atul Kohli and Vivienne Shue have pointed out, state-society linkages are a critical political interface, ontologically perhaps the most significant in the modern era.[9] Although such relations are highly variable – neither states nor societies are monolithic entities, and the boundaries between them are often blurred – they inevitably constitute a particular sociological space of co-habitation between a generally manifold 'society', and a 'state' that is a privileged social institution in terms of political scope and flows of power. The alternative forms of political participation described above that emerged in post-crisis Argentina arguably occurred in what Karen Brock *et al.* have termed "autonomous spaces", that is to say spaces that have opened not in interface with the state but rather against or in indifference to it.[10] This has critical ramifications for the political possibilities of such spaces. Although they might conceivably be imagined them as 'insurgent' forms of political participation that could eventually 'conquer' or 'replace' the state, both history and the continuing strength of the post-crisis

[5] M. López Levy, *We Are Millions: Neo-liberalism and New Forms of Political Action in Argentina*, London: Latin America Bureau, 2004, p.10.

[6] Tedesco (2002), p.478.

[7] Ana Dinerstein 'Que se vayan todos! Popular insurrection and the *asambleas barriales* in Argentina', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 22:2 (2003), p.187.

[8] This included for example the *Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados* (Plan for Unemployed Heads of Household) which distributed subsidies amounting to over US$500 million to 2 million households in 2002, and over US$600 million in 2003 (E. Galasso & M. Ravallion, 'Social protection in a crisis: Argentina's Plan Jefes y Jefas', *The World Bank Economic Review*, 18:3 (2004), p.367).

[9] Atul Kohli & Vivienne Shue, 'State power and social forces: On political contention and accommodation in the Third World', in J. Migdal, A. Kohli and V. Shue (eds), *State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

[10] Karen Brock *et al.*, 'Power, Knowledge and Political Spaces in the Framing of Poverty Policy', *IDS Working Paper*, 143, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2001, p.23.

Argentinean state caution against such an interpretation, and as such it can be contended that they effectively constitute 'dead end' forms of transformative politics.[11]

Implicitly for this very reason, Andrea Cornwall argues that there a crucial distinction has to be made in terms of the political possibilities accorded by "autonomous" spaces of participation on the one hand, and what she labels "invited" spaces, on the other. These are political spaces opened up by the state to non-state actors, which because they intrinsically involve *both* society and the state, potentially offer greater scope for reconfiguring power relations and extending democratic practices.[12] Not surprisingly, perhaps, there has emerged a rapidly growing literature on the issue, including in particular on the famous Porto Alegre 'participatory budgeting' (PB) initiative in Brazil, which by all accounts has been remarkably empowering and democratising.[13] At the same time, however, this literature is arguably frequently characterised by a range of normative assumptions, including in particular the notion that the simple existence of invited spaces will automatically lead to better decision-making, better outcomes, and the creation of better citizens. Cornwall points out that this is by no means always the case, and suggests that to truly understand the dynamics of invited spaces it is necessary:

> to situate them in institutional landscapes as one amongst a host of other domains of association into and out of which actors move, carrying with them relationships, knowledge, connections, resources, identities and identifications.[14]

Arguably the most important issue in this regard are the political configurations within which invited spaces are embedded. Indeed, these are frequently considered to be *the* key factor determining the success or failure of participatory initiatives, insofar as oppositional politics and the excessive politicisation of participatory processes are widely thought to lead to deficient and non-meaningful participation.[15] This papaer takes a closer look at political factors surrounding the introduction and implementation of PB in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires in 2002-03, during which it was remarkably effective despite a manifest process of politicisation.[16] Based on ethnographic research and interviews carried out over a six months period (April-September 2003) with a range of individuals and groups involved in the process, it explores the micro-level politics of PB in the central Buenos Aires neighbourhood

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[11] J. Holston, 'Spaces of insurgent citizenship', in J. Holston (ed), *Cities and Citizenship*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

[12] Andrea Cornwall, 'Introduction: New democratic spaces? The politics and dynamics of institutionalised participation', *IDS Bulletin*, 35:2 (2003), p.2. See also A. Fung & E. O. Wright (eds.), *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*, London: Verso, 2003; J. Gaventa, 'Towards participatory governance: Assessing the transformative possibilities', in S. Hickey and G. Mohan (eds), *Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation*, London: Zed Books, 2004; J. Harriss, *et al.* (eds), *Politicising Democracy: Local Politics and Democratisation in Developing Countries*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

[13] R. Abers, 'From Ideas to Practice: The Partido dos Trabalhadores and Participatory Governance in Brazil', *Latin American Perspectives*, 23:4 (1996), pp.35-53; R. Abers, 'From Clientelism to Cooperation: Local Government, Participatory Policy, and Civic Organizing in Porto Alegre, Brazil', *Politics and Society*, 26:4 (1998), pp.511-537; G. Baiocchi, 'Participation, Activism, and Politics: The Porto Alegre Experiment and Deliberative Democratic Theory', *Politics and Society*, 29:1 (2001), pp.43-72; T. Genro & U. de Souza, *Orçamento Participativo: A Experiência de Porto Alegre*, São Paulo: Fundação Perseu Abramo, 1997.

[14] Cornwall (2003), p.9.

[15] W. Cooke & U. Kothari (eds), *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, London: Zed Books, 2001.

[16] Further political factors subsequently led to the process' probably terminal decline from 2004 onwards. For details, see D. Rodgers, 'Unintentional Democratisation? The Argentinazo and the Politics of Participatory Budgeting in Buenos Aires, 2001-2004', *Crisis States Working Paper*, 61, London: Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics, 2005.

area of Abasto in order to understand this apparent paradox. It shows how PB overlay over existing social practices and relations, how different actors perceived and acted upon the process according to distinct and often contradictory agendas, and how the empowering nature of the PB process itself all combined to make it work in an autonomous and effective manner. This raises a number of interesting issues about the politics of participation in invited spaces, including the necessity to take into account local level socio-political dynamics, as well as the practically transformative nature of participatory processes.

**The macro-politics of PB in Buenos Aires**

The official 2003 PB information brochure explicitly suggests that its introduction in 2002 was a direct response by the Government of the City of Buenos Aires (GCBA) to the *Argentinazo*:

> We live in an epoch in which the institutions of democracy lack representation and legitimacy in unprecedented ways. The citizenry demands new answers, new channels of accountability and participation, new ways of doing politics. Bridging the gap that today separates the State from society is the key to maintaining a fully democratic life. In this context, the Government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires has opened a space for the direct participation of local neighbourhood inhabitants in public affairs. The Participatory Budget Plan has the objective of canalising the demands of society and granting citizens a central role in the democratic life of the City. Citizen participation is the best means possible to attain a more democratic control over the Government's administration of the City.[17]

Considering the underlying logic and aim of 'empowered deliberative democracy' initiatives such as PB, this arguably constituted a rather logical response to the crisis.[18] At the same time, however, PB was by no means an obvious initiative to implement in Buenos Aires. Although the idea was first suggested as early as 1994 by an independent trade union, the *Central de Trabajadores Argentinos* (CTA – Argentinean Workers' Central), which subsequently campaigned successfully to have "the participatory character of the budget" established in article 52 of the 1996 constitution of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, it enjoyed very little momentum.[19] Certainly, the same article of the constitution also stipulated that the City Legislature was to "establish the consultative procedures regarding the assignation of resource priorities", but it conspicuously failed to do so once the constitution was adopted, partly because of a lack of interest but also no small measure of suspicion towards PB on the part of the city's major politicians and political parties. By 2001 little more than some limited pilot projects in specific Buenos Aires localities had taken place, generally under the impulse of local GCBA bureaucrats.

To a large extent, the full-scale introduction of PB in Buenos Aires can be characterised as a case of 'unintentional democratisation', insofar as it was a contingent consequence of the alteration of the political balance of power in Buenos Aires by the *Argentinazo*.[20] The crisis tore apart the ruling *Frente Grande* (Broad Front) party and forced the mayor of the city,

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[17] GCBA, *Presupuesto Participativo: Una Realidad*, Buenos Aires: GCBA, 2003ª, p. 4, my translation.
[18] Fung & Wright (2003).
[19] GCBA, *Constitución de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones del País, 2003b, p.19, my translation
[20] Rodgers (2005).

Aníbal Ibarra, to seek new configurations of support both within and outside of his party. Among those he turned to was Ariel Schifrin, the leader of an important but previously marginalised faction within the *Frente Grande* party known as the *Grupo Espacio Abierto* (Open Space Group). Schifrin agreed to support Ibarra, but made overseeing the introduction of PB in the city a conditions for his support. Although Ibarra had previously clearly signalled that he was not interested in implementing PB,[21] but nevertheless acquiesced, and Schifrin became head of the city administration's *Secretaría de Descentralización y Participación Ciudadana* (Secretariat for Decentralisation and Citizen Participation) in February 2002. He was clearly less interested in PB as a form of empowering democratisation than in the potential he saw its implementation as giving him to build up *Frente Grande* – and wherever possibly more specifically *Grupo Espacio Abierto* – political networks in Buenos Aires. Historically, the city had been dominated at the local level by Argentina's Radical party, the *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR), and Schifrin moved rapidly to insert loyalists throughout the city's sixteen decentralised administration and participation centres (the *Centros de Gestión y Participación*, or CGPs), with the brief to establish a strong counter-presence by means of the PB process that was now being instituted through the CGPs. As one of these loyalists based in the CGP no. 2 Norte (North) told me during an interview on 11 August 2003:

> The Open Space Group now has a better territorial development than before, precisely because Ariel is the Secretary of Decentralization and he's worked the CGPs well, and of course the PB is a good tool to extend the presence of the party and impose ourselves at the local level, especially vis-à-vis the Radicals.

At the same time, despite this manifest politicisation of PB, by all accounts it was a process that worked very well during the first two years of its application. As Jorge Navarro has succinctly summarised, the PB process in Buenos Aires began with a limited one month *Plan de Prioridades Barriales* (Neighbourhood Priorities Plan) pilot project that was carried out in June 2002, involved 4,500 individuals in 16 neighbourhoods who participated in 250 meetings and identified 338 budgetary priorities that were then incorporated into a special annex of the city's 2002 budget that was approved by the City Legislature. By May 2004, 165 of these priorities had been executed (49 percent), 101 were in the process of being executed (30 percent), and 22 were being disputed (7 percent). A full scale *Plan de Presupuesto Participativo 2003* (2003 PB Plan) followed this pilot project between July and September 2002, where 9,450 individuals in 43 neighbourhoods participated in 450 meetings and voted 189 priorities that were integrated into the city's 2003 budget. By May 2004, 65 of these priorities had been executed (34 percent), 45 were in the process of being executed (24 percent), and 10 were being disputed (5 percent). The *Plan de Presupuesto Participativo 2004* (2004 PB Plan) was carried out between March and September 2003 in 51 neighbourhoods. 14,000 individuals participated in the identification and voting of 1,000 priorities, 600 of which were incorporated into the city's 2004 budget (those that were not incorporated were rejected as unfeasible or inappropriate).[22]

To a certain extent, these impressive achievements were due to intelligent institutional design. PB in Buenos Aires involved the devolution of authority for the determination of municipal action from the city government to local neighbourhood inhabitants. These debated and established their local needs over a period of several months, first generally in neighbourhood

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[21] See, for example, D. Rodríguez, 'En la vía electoral', *Página 12* (13 April 2003), p.7, a: http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-3946-2002-04-13.html.

[22] Jorge Navarro, 'Presupuesto Participativo en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires', in R. Romero (ed.), *Democracia Participativa: Una Utopía en Marcha*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones Cooperativas, 2005, pp.108-109.

assemblies, and then more specifically in local thematic commissions, respectively concerning socio-economic development, public works and environment, education, health, culture, and security. Once proposals were decided on by each commission, a final neighbourhood assembly was then held where participants voted on which thematic clusters they felt contained the most urgent proposals, ranking the top four. The proposals emanating from neighbourhood assemblies were then sent to relevant city government departments, and discussed about two months later in a city-wide plenary bringing together neighbourhood inhabitants and city government bureaucrats. Those found to be technically feasible were then ranked in relation to each other according to a formula that took into account population differences, the number of voters in neighbourhood assemblies, and the relative wealth and poverty of neighbourhoods, in order to put all neighbourhoods on an equal footing. An "action matrix" for the whole city was then drawn up of all the ranked proposals and integrated into the municipal budget, providing the order in which city public resources were to be expended until depleted. In many ways, PB in Buenos Aires was therefore arguably more an exercise in participatory planning than PB *per se*, but this meant that it avoided many of the problems linked to a lack of public funds that have plagued other PB processes (and that would moreover have been particularly critical in post-crisis Argentina).

While it is important to take into account the institutional design of the Buenos Aires PB initiative, it cannot be said to have constituted a counterweight to the process' politicisation, however. Not only was it continuously being tinkered with by the PB Provisional Council – a council of elected neighbourhood delegates and NGO representatives that theoretically supervised the whole process but in practice deferred to the Secretariat for Decentralisation and Citizen Participation – but its provisions were often ignored or imperfectly executed by both local and central GCBA PB Technical Coordination teams. To this extent, the reasons underlying the unlikely success of PB in Buenos Aires during the first two years of its implementation are likely to be found elsewhere. One reason is undoubtedly the fact that a significant proportion of the members of the – central but also several local – PB Technical Coordination teams shared something of a technocratic public service outlook and sought to promote PB for the process' sake rather than any party political agenda. As such, they constituted something of an anti-political 'Trojan horse' within the politicised PB process (indeed, many of the cases of bypassing of the formal rules that I was able to observe occurred not with the intention of subverting the PB process but rather to facilitate it in the face of its politicisation). Another reason is that the political balance of power in post-crisis Buenos Aires remained extremely volatile until the September 2003 elections, and political intriguing meant that Schifrin had to make compromises that limited the speed and scope of the politicisation of the PB process. He allied himself with another *Frente Grande* faction, the *Movimiento de Justicia Social* (MODEJUSO – Social Justice Movement) which meant that he had to share a certain quota of power with it, for example, and he was also forced to appoint a number of Radical party members to certain CGPs in view of that party's local strength (although he promptly manoeuvred to neutralise them).

In many ways, though, possibly the most important bulwark against the politicisation of the PB process was the nature of local politics in Buenos Aires. As Steven Levitsky has pointed out, political parties in Argentina can be conceived as an "informal mass parties", based on:

a dense collection of personal networks – operating out of unions, clubs, non-governmental organisations, and often activists' homes – that are often unconnected to (and autonomous from) the party bureaucracy.[23]

These constitute the territorial base of traditional political parties, but are highly independent and only loosely federated, except at a symbolic level, for example through the memory of historical figures such as Evita Perón in the case of the Peronist party,[24] or Hipólito Irigoyen for the Radicals. This made the enterprise of systematically creating *Frente Grande* party political networks through PB no straightforward matter, as it inevitably involved engaging with and co-opting a variety of existing local level social forms in Buenos Aires, all of which had their own agendas and interests that did not necessarily coincide with those of the *Frente Grande*. Moreover, even when local grassroots associations or local *punteros* and *punteras* (socio-political brokers) were well-disposed to the *Frente Grande*, PB often had effects on the way they responded to demands to mobilise and subvert PB. The next section attempts to ethnographically depict some of these processes specifically in relation the neighbourhood area of Abasto.

## Participatory Budgeting in Abasto

The *área barrial* (neighbourhood area) of Abasto is a sub-unit of the CGP no. 2 Sur (South) district, which is located just East of the geographical centre of Buenos Aires (see map 1). It straddles the Avenida Rivadavia, which historically divides the more prosperous North from the impoverished South of the city, and is an extremely heterogeneous neighbourhood, that can nevertheless be generally classified as socio-economically 'lower middle class'. According to the 2001 GCBA census, the CGP no.2 Sur has a population of 190,000, equivalent to about 6 percent of the population of Buenos Aires.[25]

In formal administrative terms, Abasto is the CGP no. 2 Sur's *área barrial* no. 1 of three (see map 2), with the other two being respectively labelled Once and Balvanera (Sur). Most PB participants that I interviewed from this CGP district claimed that the names attributed to the *areas barriales* did not correspond properly with the non-administrative socio-geographical identities of the area, that is to say the historical *barrios* (neighbourhoods) of Balvanera and Almagro.[26] Abasto was made up of bits of both Balvanera and Almagro, Once did not actually include either the eponymous train station or plaza that bear that name (they were in Abasto), and Balvanera (Sur) was simply a socio-geographical non-entity. I use the label "Abasto" to describe the location of my fieldwork for simplicity's sake, since most of my investigations on the PB process in the CGP no. 2 Sur concerned the *area barrial* no. 1 (Abasto), where I attended several meetings, interviewed a range of participants and GCBA

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[23] Steven Levitsky, 'An "organised disorganisation" Informal organisation and the persistence of local party structures in Argentine Peronism' *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 33:1 (2001), p.30.

[24] See J. Auyero, *Poor People's Politics: Peronist Networks and the Legacy of Evita*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.

[25] See http://www.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/hacienda/sis_estadistico/poblacion01.pdf (consulted 1 October 2005).

[26] According to the census mentioned in footnote 5, the historical neighbourhoods of Almagro and Balvanera have populations of approximately 140,000 and 150,000. The discrepancy with the population of the CGP 2 Sur of 190,000 gives an indication of the degree of boundary mismatch between the CGPs and the historical neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires.

officials, and also carried out a curb-side survey. I also however spent time in and around the CGP's administrative offices, which were located in the *área barrial* no. 2 (Once).[27]

**Maps 1 and 2: Buenos Aires CGPs and the CGP no. 2 Sur**
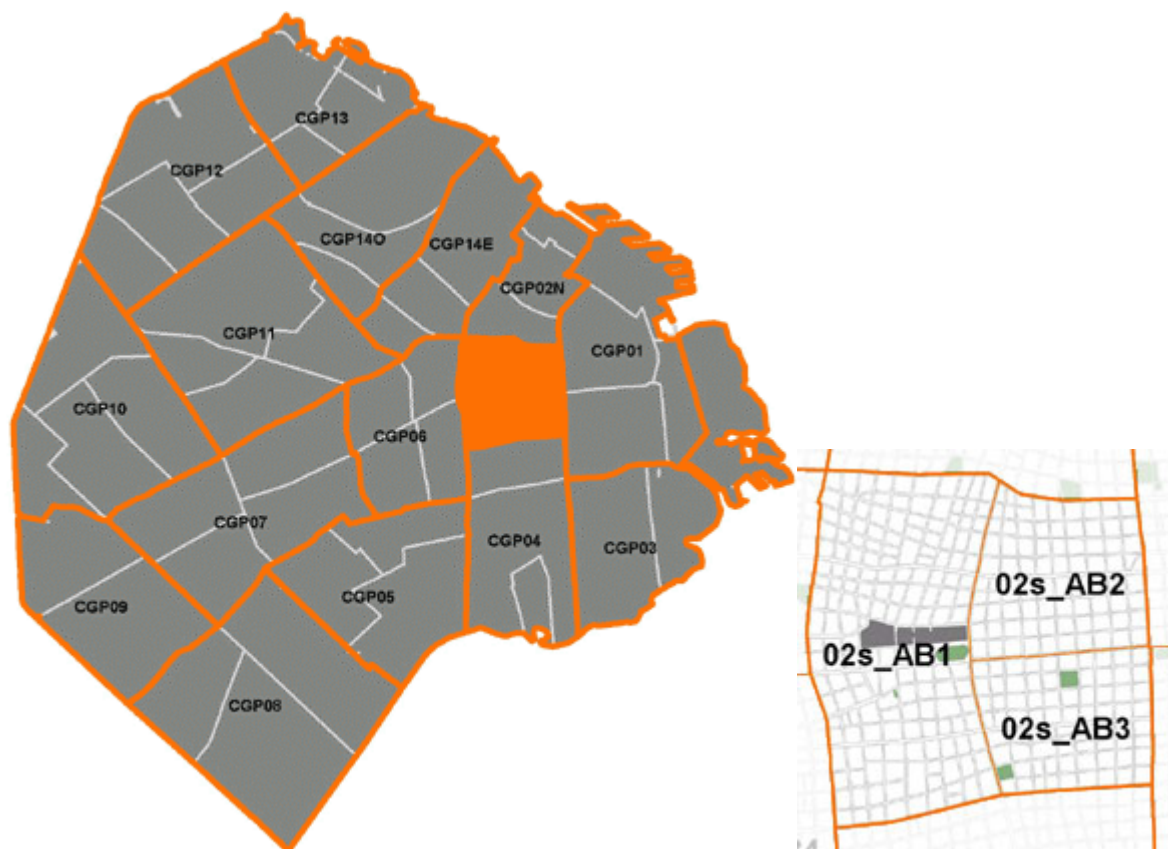


Source: GCBA, *http://www.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/hacienda/pp/areas.php?menu_id=11567*.

In many ways perhaps the most basic issue about any invited space is that those being invited into the space need to know about the space. It rapidly became clear during my investigations that knowledge about the PB process in Buenos Aires was extremely limited, even if this observation does need to be tempered with the fact that my research was carried out during the second year of the process. An impromptu and unsystematic curb-side survey that I conducted in the Plaza Once (formally Plaza Miserere) on 24 June 2003, during which I stopped and asked 103 men (54) and women (49) whether they had heard about the PB process, elicited a positive tally of just 10.7 percent (11 positive replies). When I further asked how many had actually participated, just 1.9 percent of respondents answered that they had (2 positive replies). To contextualise these admittedly unsystematic figures, it is illuminating to compare them with data from the GCBA Statistics and Census department's survey of knowledge about CGPs in Buenos Aires. Based on an annual household survey, it found that in 2003 only 36.4 percent of the population within the CGP no. 2 Sur district knew about the

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[27] I also gained insight into the PB process indirectly through similar research activities in the CGP no. 2 Norte, as well as less systematic attendance of meetings and interviews in other CGPs, and interviews with a wide range of GCBA officials, academics, and NGO activists involved in the PB process.

existence of their CGP, and that just 18.6 percent had actually had any direct dealings with it.[28]

Such dismal figures are perhaps not surprising when one considers that every PB official that I spoke to during the course of my research complained that they were trying to institute PB on a shoestring budget, and that there was very little advertising of the process, and certainly no systematic information campaigns. As one member of the PB Central Technical Coordination team remarked in an interview on 19 August 2003:

> Personally, I think that one of the greatest problems we've had has been with the minimal diffusion of information about the whole process… This is something that can be seen in every neighbourhood, you find that the level of knowledge about PB that the average inhabitant has is really quite minimal. We're constantly trying to get more information out there, but there hasn't been a proper campaign or anything… One of the things I really feel, and this is my personal opinion of course, is that for one reason or another we haven't properly exploited certain channels that because they're in the government's hands would be very easy to make use of in order to effectively communicate on a very large scale, for example by including something on PB in the information bulletins that all the kids in state schools receive at the beginning of the year to give to their parents… or also by advertising on the GCBA's radio station, or the new television station that it now has as well… The radio in particular is particularly galling, as we've had almost no airtime at all on it, and what little that we've had has been because I know a lot of people there and I've pass on certain things to them informally… Logically you'd want this kind of informing of the population to be formalised."

Considering the wider post-crisis context, the lack of funding for the PB process is not surprising. There is little doubt, though, that politics also played a role in this situation. Ibarra showed little interest in the PB process and clearly only sanctioned its implementation in order to gain Schifrin's political support. He however seemed to understand very well the dangers involved in Schifrin using PB to his own advantage, and several PB officials that I interviewed speculated that the low budget assigned to the PB process was a way for Ibarra to keep Schifrin in check.

At the same time, in many ways politicisation was arguably one of the most effective means for mobilising people to participate in the PB. Jorge Navarro, coordinator of the PB process in Buenos Aires, and a close ally of Ariel Schifrin, admitted frankly in an on-the-record interview on 7 August 2003 that local *Frente Grande* political networks had been used to mobilise participation in the PB process in the CGPs nos. 2 Norte, 2 Sur, 10, 12, 14 Oeste (West), and to a certain extent in the CGP no. 5 (on the basis of my own investigations I would have also added the CGP no. 11 to this list, although only to the same limited extent as in the CGP no. 5). He maintained however that PB inevitably had to be promoted through pre-existing networks due to the scarcity of funds, and that since the most easily mobilised and well-disposed ones were clearly going to be *Frente Grande* party political networks – particularly considering that PB was a government initiative – this was a necessity. Considering the general lack of resources that characterised the implementation of PB, as well as the suspicion of opposition Radical and Peronist politicians towards it, it has to be said that his justification makes a good deal of sense. Indeed, this is something that Arnab Acharya,

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[28] See http://www.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/hacienda/sis_estadistico/nuevoinforme/N139.pdf (consulted 1 October 2005).

Adrián Gurza Lavalle, and Peter Houtzager have similarly observed about the use of *Partido dos Trabhaldores* (PT – Brazilian Workers' Party) networks in the implementation of PB and deliberative policy councils in São Paulo in Brazil.[29]

In a related manner, and as noted above, the nature of politics at the local level in Argentina arguably made it almost inevitable that many of the channels for promoting PB and mobilising participation would overlap with party political networks. The local community organisations and associations that constituted the primary target of any PB information and mobilisation campaign were effectively the same ones Argentinean political parties draw their political strength from, that is to say organisations that are not necessarily primarily political in nature, but associated with other spheres of life – such as sports clubs or neighbourhood associations, for example – and that become politicised or are used politically. At the same time, however, the decentralised structure of party political networks in Argentina, and in particular the top-down chain that links macro-level politicians to more localised *referentes* who are themselves in turn connected to micro-level *punteros* and *punteras* who 'control' a local association and can turn people out to vote, means that there is also considerable scope for political demands from above to be subverted,[30] as the following exchange I had with a participant at the Abasto final PB neighbourhood assembly on 13 June 2003 illustrates well.

This assembly was to decide on the proposals to be put forward for integration into the 2004 municipal budget. It was held on a Friday evening in a large school hall, and over 350 people attended – a high number compared to other meetings I observed during my research. I recorded in my field diary at the time that there were:

> slightly more women than men – c.60/40 split (?); predominance of older participants – c.50 percent over 55 years old, c.30 percent under 30 years old, the rest 30-55 years old. There is a family atmosphere, with tango music playing in the background; much general conviviality and jovial exchanges between individuals who obviously know each other. Some groups – at least a dozen – that standing apart from each other; some are family groups, others seem to have no obvious link to each other, except for a group of Bolivian (?) migrants being very pointedly ignored by everybody else.

Both the debating and the voting proceeded in an orderly although often passionate fashion. The assembly voted to prioritise health, public works, education, and socio-economic development projects, which respectively included initiatives such as increasing the range of services provided by the local health centre, putting in more street lamps, setting up a neighbourhood apprenticeship scheme for unemployed youths, and building a library. As people began to leave after the results were announced, I approached a man in his late forties, whom I had noticed following the proceedings extremely intensely after initially seeming rather nonchalant about them, and asked him:

> "Excuse me, *Señor*, I was wondering whether I could ask you some questions about your participation in this assembly and the participatory budgeting process? It would only take a few minutes…"

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[29] Arnab Acharya, *et al.*, 'Civil Society Representation in the Participatory Budget and Deliberative Councils of São Paulo, Brazil', *IDS Bulletin*, 35:2 (2004), pp.40-48.

[30] This is particularly true in Buenos Aires, which is less dominated by a single party than many of Argentina's provinces, where political clientelism is almost feudal in nature (see G. O'Donnell, *Counterpoints: Selected Essays on Authoritarianism and Democratization*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).

"Sure, why not? Are you a reporter or something?"

"No, no, I'm an anthropologist from the London School of Economics. I've come from England to study how participatory budgeting works in Buenos Aires, to learn from your experiences."

"Are you? Well, isn't that something, an Englishman coming to learn from us Argentineans! What do you want to know?"

"Let's begin with how you learnt about participatory budgeting and why you came today?"

"Well, actually I didn't really know much until tonight, I came because the woman over there told me to come", he said, pointing to somebody across the room. "She's done a lot of things for me and my family in the past, so when she asked me whether I could come, as she does from time to time, I of course said yes, and so here I am."

"Why did she want you to come? Did she tell you how to vote?"

"Why, yes, she did, she told me to vote for this and that proposal, not to vote for this one, and she also told me to vote for this candidate for plenary delegate rather than that one."

"And did you vote as she asked you to?"

"Well, for the delegate, yes, but not for the proposals. Normally I would have, but normally when she asks me to come to meetings like this, I just come, vote, and then leave as quickly as possible, because they can get really boring, you know. But you can't do that with this meeting, you have to sign up at the beginning or else you can't vote at the end, so I had to sit here through all three hours of tonight's meeting. But you know what? I heard a lot of really interesting things, I sat here and I listened to all the proposals, and thought to myself 'there's some good ideas here', and so when it was time to vote, I didn't vote like she told me to, but for the proposals that I thought would be best for my neighbourhood."

It would probably be inaccurate to suggest that such behaviour patterns on the part of those mobilised by *punteras* and *punteros* is common, but what this exchange does show is that even in a invited space subverted by politics there can still be scope for independent participation that arguably reverses the flow of subversion. To a large extent, the credit for this subverting of the subversion – so to speak – can be attributed to the powerfully transformative process PB can often be for the individuals who participate in it. Certainly, this was something that also emerged – albeit in a different manner – from my subsequent interview on 24 June 2003 with Ana Balladares,[31] the *puntera* who had asked the person I had the exchange with to come to the PB assembly. When I questioned her on the matter, Ana readily told me that she had been mobilising her networks in Abasto to ensure a high level of participation in the PB process since its inception, at the behest of a *referente* who was the dominant local *Frente Grande* politician, and who was connected in turn with various more macro-level politicians, including Ariel Schifrin. In order to explain what she called her "militancy", she began by telling me about her background.

She started by emphasising that she had been "a Peronist militant almost all my life, from the age of 16", although she was "only able to join the party at the age of 18 in 1972". She talked passionately about Evita Perón and the inspiration that her work in favour of "the most

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[31] Most names of informants have been changed or omitted to protect their privacy.

humble and vulnerable class" constituted for her, and stated that "even though I never got to know her because I was born three years after her death, I fell in love with that woman". She also talked about Padre Carlos Mujica, a catholic priest well-known for his social work in the slums of Buenos Aires who was assassinated in 1974 by the right-wing 'Triple A' group, and explained how this radicalised her and led to her becoming a *Montonera* armed guerrilla under the military dictatorship that seized power in 1976. She was eventually caught and imprisoned for several months, and when she was released escaped to Brazil, where she stayed until the restoration of democracy in 1983. On her return, Ana threw herself into mobilising support for the Peronist party in Abasto, although doing so:

> with a low profile, dealing with the social aspect of things, helping people in need… for example people who are on the verge of being expelled from their houses, I'd connect them with lawyers or friends who would be able to stop or extend the whole expulsion process, to buy some time to look for alternative social housing or something."

She then recounted the immense joy that she had felt when the Peronist party candidate Carlos Menem won the presidency in 1989, and how proud she had been to have "contributed to this victory with my local territorial work". She however then went on to describe her progressive disillusion with Menem and his "neo-liberalism and corruption", till she felt that "he did not represent Peronism any more", which in 1998 led her to "break definitively with Peronism and close down my *unidad básica* (local unit)" in Abasto, although "I kept my people". Shortly after this "low point in my life as a militant", she found a new focus, however. As she described:

> Near my house there was a *Frente Grande* locale, and one day I walked in with a friend who wanted to ask them a question but who didn't dare go alone by herself, so I went with her, and what drew my attention there was that there were photos of Evita, of Padre Mujica… on the walls… I said to myself 'what are my *compañeros* doing here, in this place, this is very bizarre', and I began talking with one of the militants, who told me that they too had come from Peronism and that they too didn't think Menem represented Peronism any more, so they'd founded their own party to resist him… I then and there decided to become a *Frente Grande* militant, and from then on worked my people for them.

Ana's militant activities soon came to include "mobilising my people" to ensure their participation in the PB process, which was something that her *referente* was particularly anxious about this, not only for political reasons but also because he had been one of the early GCBA bureaucracy converts to PB, involved in the limited pilot projects that were conducted in Buenos Aires during the late 1990s. Yet while Ana to a large extent seemed to conform to her *referente*'s wishes, it became apparent that she also had her own agenda. "For a long time", she told me,

> I'd been fighting to get a crèche set up in the neighbourhood… There's was only one crèche in the whole of Almagro, in Avenida Ramos Mejía. It was a municipal one, and had a waiting list of 150 kids, so another crèche was obviously something that was needed. The government wouldn't do anything, though, even when I found some unused land in the neighbourhood where it could be built… When the PB process began in 2002, though, I thought to myself 'this may be an opportunity', and so I looked at how I could make it work… I joined the socio-

economic development commission, and worked to persuade everybody else that we should propose the crèche as our priority project and build it on this land… We talked and talked between ourselves about it, and it ended up being a really great commission, because they all agreed with me, and the crèche became our commission's priority project… I was sure we'd win, but then I heard that the education commission was proposing that a library be built on the land I'd found instead of the crèche, and so I began to fear that the crèche might not be voted as the overall neighbourhood priority… To make sure that wed win, I brought all my people to the final PB assembly and told everybody to vote for the socio-economic development commission, and that way we won!

Ana's response to the PB process might be considered more classically subversive than the actions of the person that she mobilised to come to the 2003 PB final assembly in Abasto, insofar as it subverted the spirit of the PB process. However, as Rubén Basignana, one of the CGP no. 2 Sur 2003 PB Provisional Council delegates, underscored during an interview conducted on 17 June 2003:

it's human nature that people will try and push their own pet interests and project… Even though I haven't travelled much, I don't know of any society where that doesn't happen, and it's certainly happened a lot here during the past few years… But the important thing is that I don't think that it's happened due to bad will or for selfish reasons. For example, somebody in my neighbourhood pushed very hard for a project to build a crèche in the neighbourhood, to the extent that she brought people to the assembly to vote for her project and make sure that it was chosen. But the crèche isn't being built for her, it's for the neighbourhood, you see? It's like a school; it's a necessity, especially in our neighbourhood where there are so many social problems… So it's a good thing that we've now got this crèche, even if it was obtained through the negative political practices of the past…

Rubén in fact argued that ultimately such subversive practices didn't really matter because the PB process contained within it the seeds for a wholesale transformation of Argentinean politics and society:

In the end, it doesn't really matter how the process works right now, because it's only the beginning. You have to see it as a tool, a fantastic tool that is completely different to the means for obtaining resources that we've known in the past, like clientelism, corruption, *asistencialismo* (social dependency), demagoguery, and all those terrible, terrible things… It's a new means for us to make decisions, by participating… Of course it's still being constructed, but I can already see that in ten years' time we're going to have a fabulous tool that will allow a new form of politics here in Argentina that will also act as an impediment to the bad habits of the past returning… That's what I believe, that there are beautiful times ahead for Argentina, that after our journey through the worse darkness you can imagine during 1976[-1983] and also the events of 19-20 December [2001], we're finally becoming a normal country again, as our president puts it. Wouldn't that be something to be normal? We've been abnormal for much too long…

While Rubén's vision of the future evolution of Argentinean political culture might seem somewhat optimistic, there is one aspect of the PB process that definitely did seem to be having a significant and immediate impact, namely the fact that it formally opened up of institutional channels for direct communication with GCBA officials and bureaucrats, both through local assemblies and thematic commissions, but most substantially through the city-wide plenary that was held after all the proposals had been received and examined by city officials. Indeed, many local neighbourhood inhabitants that I talked to seemed to have engaged in the PB process less as a form of bypassing politicians than as a means of accessing and positively influencing the government bureaucrats who dealt concretely with their problems. During a collective interview conducted on 22 June 2003 with six members of the self-styled *Comisión de Vecinos de la plazoleta Moreno y Boedo* (Moreno and Boedo streets neighbours' association), all of whom had participated in the 2002 city-wide plenary, they repeatedly praised "how incredible an experience it was to be able to speak directly with the right people", because "you normally have to wait forever to see anybody, and then they tell you, 'no, I've got nothing to do with that' or something to that effect". As one member of the group argued:

> It's a question of responsibility, what the PB does is make the civil servants responsible, because it gives us a forum where we can formulate precise demands and present them directly to them. They can't hide behind the politicians any more, because there's a direct connection between us and them now.

**Conclusion**

On the basis of the evidence presented in this paper, it can be argued that the politicisation of invited spaces of participation does not necessarily work solely in negative ways, as much of the theoretical literature suggests.[32] Certainly, PB in Buenos Aires would likely not have been implemented in the first place had it not been for its potential politicisation, insofar as its introduction was a directly related to the fact that the City of Buenos Aires' Secretary of Decentralisation and Citizen Participation, Ariel Schifrin, saw it as a means of mobilising political support networks in the city. This underlines the basic notion that the opening up of invited spaces of participation is a fundamentally political act, although in the case of PB in Buenos Aires it was arguably a contingent and somewhat 'unintentional' instance of democratisation, something that goes against the grain of studies that have associated the introduction of participatory initiatives with programmatic politics.[33] At the same time, however, while the 'macro' level political configurations surrounding the opening of invited spaces of participation are important – albeit variably so – the ethnographic vignettes presented above of the PB process in Abasto suggest that what might be termed the 'micro' level politics are also critical to consider. Indeed, in many ways it can be argued that whether political factors positively or negatively affect participatory initiatives will in fact largely depend on the specific local political and social dynamics within which the distinct social actors involved and the participatory process itself are embedded.

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[32] See S. Hickey & G. Mohan, 'Relocating participation within a radical politics of development', *Development and Change*, 36:2 (2005), pp.241-242.

[33] Acharya, *et al.* (2004); G. Baiocchi, *Radicals in Power: The Workers' Party and Experiments with Urban Democracy in Brazil*, London: Zed Books, 2003; D. Chavez & B. Goldfrank, *The Left in the City: Participatory Local Governments in Latin America*, London: Latin America Bureau, 2004; P. Heller, 'Moving the State: The Politics of Democratic Decentralization in Kerala, South Africa and Porto Alegre', *Politics and Society*, 29:1 (2001), pp.131-163.

This was manifest in relation to the way in which the politicisation of PB in Buenos Aires had led to better levels of mobilisation in some areas of the city such the CGP no. 2 Sur, as noted above, but not in others, including the CGP no. 2 Norte (North), for example. As one former participant in this latte CGP explained to me in an email sent on 7 December 2004:

> There was so much deceitfulness and so many disappointments due to all the politicking, all the projects we wanted to set up and have included in the budget became secondary to certain people's political agendas… It became so ugly, projects were being promoted by people simply in order to gain political support, and so of course people began to withdraw from the process… Even me, who's believed so much in it, I don't want to have anything more to do with PB any more, I feel as if I've wasted too much of my valuable time for nothing... What's the use of having such a wonderful tool if you can't use it properly?

As Sam Hickey and Giles Mohan have pointed out, the success of participatory initiatives often depends on their being linked to a broader political project and not opposing existing power relations, and the PB process in Abasto was clearly less conflictual than in the CGP no. 2 Norte at least partly because it did not challenge local political configurations. This was linked to the fact that Abasto had electoral affinities with the governing *Frente Grande* party, while the CGP no. 2 Norte was a more upper middle class and upper class area that tended to vote predominantly against the *Frente Grande*.[34]

At the same time, however, it can also be contended that there existed in Abasto a very particular constellation of competing actors, interests, and practices that articulated together in such a way as to hold each other in check, thereby permitting the emergence of an effective and representative PB process, against the odds. Once again political factors are important to understanding this, both at the level of specific individual trajectories – as Ana Balladares' case demonstrates well – but also in terms of the "organised disorganisation" of local level politics in Argentina.[35] The decentralised mass of local associations and personal relationships that constitute the basis of party politics in Argentina inherently provided a counterpoint to any attempt to wrestle control of the PB process by political parties, because of the multiple possibilities for independent behaviour that this "system" afforded different actors within it, whether simple neighbourhood inhabitants, *punteras*, or *referentes*. There were consequently almost inevitably 'spaces of autonomy' within the politicised invited space of participation of the Buenos Aires PB, which allowed for a localised 'subverting of the subversion' of politicisation, so to speak. To a certain extent, this can also be said to have occurred at a city-wide level. As a member of the central PB Technical Coordination team explained in an interview on 19 August 2003:

> On the one hand you have the 'bad old ways' of politicking while on the other hand, you have a new project of participatory democracy that is supported by a broad spectrum of people, groups, and organisations across the 51 neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires… This makes it actually very difficult for the PB process to be hijacked completely, because it's something that would have to happen in 51 different points of the city, and to capture 51 areas is difficult for any political party. None of them have a presence in every neighbourhood, let alone a uniform one, and nor do any of them have enough competent cadres to coherently attempt to capture the PB process properly. There are too many pre-

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[34] Hickey & Mohan (2005), p.250.
[35] Levitsky (2001).

existing groups, organisations, and institutions in all of these areas that already display high levels of participation and militancy, for all sorts of reasons – including some really old and important ones – and who all have their own relationship with both the state and the PB process. Even if they only manage to ensure that the PB process continues without becoming too politicised in their own neighbourhood, this still means that political parties will lose, because there are too many of these small groups and organisations …

From this perspective, it can be argued that the real question about the dynamics of a politicised invited space of participation such as the Buenos Aires PB process concerns less the 'what' or 'how' of things, but rather the 'why'. In particular, as a CGP no. 2 Sur employee asked in an interview conducted on 12 June 2003:

Why are there all these different groups and individuals, some political, others not, some groups with a history of community activism, others groups with leaders? And why is it that they all want to participate, to be protagonists? That's the interesting issue to analyse – why do people, at some moment, get interested to become protagonists of something?

This is in many ways the fundamental question underlying the study of politics, and there are obviously different dimensions to its answer. One clearly lies in structural factors such as the 'crisis of representation' that the *Argentinazo* reflected, as well as the collapse of the Argentinean economy, insofar as desperate situations pull individuals out of the social torpor that (supposedly) characterises the modern era.[36] Less contingent structural facets of Argentinean society can also be invoked, including its civil society's long history of institutional vibrancy – as testified by the transformations of its dominant manifestations over the past century, from the early twentieth century workers' movement,[37] to the *sociedad de fomentos* (neighbourhood societies) of the 1930s,[38] to the human rights movement in the 1970s and 1980s,[39] to the *Argentinazo* in the early 2000s, among others – as well as the existence of political traditions that for many take on the form of veritable ways of life.[40]

Another answer is however related to factors that are more endogenous to the participatory process. As many of the interview extracts presented in this paper reflect, during the course of my fieldwork I repeatedly observed and listened to many Buenos Aires PB participants become enthused by, and converted to, the process and the empowerment it provided them, whatever the way they had came to be involved in the first place. Obviously, this was neither universal nor constant, and it was furthermore widely recognised that the process provided only a limited and imperfect form of empowerment, but often even those disillusioned by the politicisation of the PB process – such as the participant from the CGP no. 2 Norte mentioned above, for example – nevertheless saw it as a 'wonderful tool'. Indeed, I must also include myself among the ranks of the converted, as I too came to be highly inspired by my real-life

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[36] See J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, volume 2: Lifeworld and System – A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1987.

[37] J. Godio, *El Movimiento Obrero Argentino: Socialismo, Anarquismo y Sindicalismo (1870-1910)*, Buenos Aires: Legasa, 1987.

[38] L. de Privitellio, *Vecinos y Ciudadanos: Política y Sociedad en la Buenos Aires de Entreguerras*, Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2003.

[39] E. Jelin, 'La política de la memoria: El movimiento de Derechos Humanos y la construcción democrática en Argentina', in C. Acuña *et al.*, *Juicio, Castigos y Memorias: Derechos Humanos y Justicia en la Política Argentina*, Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1995.

[40] Auyero (2001).

interaction with a process that I had previously only considered theoretically and even rather cynically, in view of the way in which 'participation' and 'empowerment' have largely become vacuous 'buzzwords' within mainstream development discourse.[41] However diluted these labels undoubtedly are, and however imperfectly they are put into practice, it is evident that the social processes that they refer to can be powerfully transformative for those involved in them. As such, they can be conceived as radically political in nature, insofar as they are fundamentally about the transformation of configurations of power and governance, and it is perhaps this political factor, more than any other, than we should not forget are we seek to sustainably harness the potential of spaces of change such as PB.

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[41] See A. Cornwall & K. Brock, 'What do buzzwords do for development policy? A critical look at "participation", "empowerment" and "poverty reduction"', *Third World Quarterly*, 26:7 (2005), pp.1043-1060.

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The aim of the Crisis States Programme (CSP) at DESTIN's Development Research Centre is to provide new understanding of the causes of crisis and breakdown in the developing world and the processes of avoiding or overcoming them. We want to know why some political systems and communities, in what can be called the "fragile states" found in many of the poor and middle income countries, have broken down even to the point of violent conflict while others have not. Our work asks whether processes of globalisation have precipitated or helped to avoid crisis and social breakdown.

## Crisis States Programme collaborators

### In India:
Asia Development Research Institute (Patna, Bihar)
North Eastern Institute for Development Studies (Shillong)
Developing Countries Research Centre (University of Delhi)

### In South Africa:
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Sociology of Work Workshop (SWOP)
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### In Colombia:
IEPRI, Universidad Nacional de Colombia
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## Research Objectives

- We will assess how constellations of power at local, national and global levels drive processes of institutional change, collapse and reconstruction and in doing so will challenge simplistic paradigms about the beneficial effects of economic and political liberalisation.

- We will examine the effects of international interventions promoting democratic reform, human rights and market competition on the 'conflict management capacity' and production and distributional systems of existing polities.

- We will analyse how communities have responded to crisis, and the incentives and moral frameworks that have led either toward violent or non-violent outcomes.

- We will examine what kinds of formal and informal institutional arrangements poor communities have constructed to deal with economic survival and local order.

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