

PREFACE

We did not set out to write a book on *bootstrapping* democracy. We set out, rather, to explore a well-known example of participatory democracy—Participatory Budgeting (PB)—and to really put it to the test. More than anything else that test was about looking at cases of PB in places where it was less likely—given what the literature predicted—to be successful. PB is the idea, started in the late 1980s in Brazil, that citizens can and should play a direct role in shaping the budgets of the towns and cities in which they live. If the idea is simple enough, the devil is in the details of actually getting the process to work. What we found were a range of outcomes, and this book tries to put some order to those outcomes and use the findings to say something concrete about the possibilities and challenges of building local institutions of participatory democracy. Of all of our findings, the most striking, but in retrospect one that should have been anything but surprising, was the degree to which local actors proved to be extremely inventive, indeed ingenious, in designing local variants of PB. In those cases in which we found that some form of genuine participatory budgeting was built, local activists and state actors (administrators, politicians, and technocrats) proved to be extremely adept at taking a widely diffused national “blueprint” and adapting it to local realities. In trying to describe this phenomenon, as is all too often the case, a colloquialism provided the most evocative description. *Bootstrapping* is an English expression that refers to the leveraging of a few initial resources into something larger and more significant. In computer science, it means using a small program to load (“to boot”) an operating system.¹ In business, it refers to creative entrepreneurship using a small amount of start-up funds. In development theory it has been used by Charles Sabel (2004) as a metaphor that suggests a process of building institutions that are capable of constant adjustment, “where each move suggests the next” and that benefit from social learning (7). Sabel’s interest is in institutions that are growth favoring, and he argues that such bootstrapped institutions “are as much the outcome as the starting points of development” (7).

We borrow the spirit of these various usages, and in particular the notion of bootstrapping as a dynamic form of social learning. PB, it turns out, is not a model or a blueprint, but rather an assemblage of various participatory practices and ideas developed by social movements and a previous generation of local government experimenters, and it has been adapted as an *instituted process* to local conditions. As we have encountered it, *bootstrapping democracy* takes on an expanded meaning that assumes a double-edged agency: on the one hand, following conventional usage it refers to problem-solving and is specifically an *instrumental* response to the challenge of coordinating the functions of local state with the inputs of local civil society; on the other hand, and departing from conventional usage, it is an *ethico-political* project of empowering citizens.

With its specifically Anglo American etymology, bootstrapping unfortunately may not travel well. Our first reaction when we thought of the term was that it has no obvious translation in Portuguese, the language of the bootstrappers in this book. To them we sincerely apologize. We considered more familiar Latinates such as “inventing,” “designing,” and “creating,” but we decided that in the English language these more readily bring to mind detached observers in laboratories, ivory towers, offices, or workshops, rather than the contested field of local politics in Brazilian *municípios*. The Brazilian expression “dar um jeito” (to find a way) rightly brings to mind improvisation, but it is pejorative and also implies informality. We wanted something that evoked the inventiveness but also the messiness, conflicts, strategic calculations, and principled pragmatism that building democratic institutions necessarily calls for. In our usage, we intend not only to emphasize the novel means and designs that were developed to make PB work, but also the new alliances, and in particular the delicate blurring of the boundaries between state and civil society that genuine participation entails. Indeed, what we discovered was that the most central preoccupation of architects of PB was precisely finding the right balance between “bringing civil society in” and preserving the autonomous logic and energy of civic engagement.

The question of contexts conducive to bottom-up democratic deepening is an extremely important one, of relevance well beyond the countries of the Latin American “pink tide.” It is for this reason that we wanted a title that emphasized *agency* in the face of obstacles. There is something defeatist, in our view, in the social scientific diagnosis that asserts that there are necessary preconditions for democratic empowerment and that these preconditions invariably end up being those read back from the developmental trajectory of

Western democracies. In fact, one could just as well make the argument that most democratic innovations of the past two decades have taken place in the context of “less developed democracies.” And while the stories in this book are not an argument for a participatory blueprint or imposed change from the outside (quite the contrary), they invite us to have a broader imagination of the possible, including one that might travel from south to north. Meaningful social change is, after all, in the words of the social theorist and former Brazilian minister Roberto Unger, change that is “context-smashing.”²

This project began with reasons and a design, but its execution, including the interpretation of the findings has been a process of discovery, one in which so many contributed in large and small ways that it is impossible to give full credit where it is due. Institutionally, we received support from Brown University, the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, the Watson Institute of International Studies, the Brazilian National Council on Scientific Research (CNPQ), as well as generous funding from the World Bank. All of the research was made possible by our partner NGOs in Brazil: CIDADE in Porto Alegre; POLIS in São Paulo; and ETAPAs in Recife. The individual municipal administrations gracefully made themselves available, as did our respondents, who sometimes spent many hours being interviewed. The Brazil research team—Ana Neri dos Santos, Clarice Barreto Linhares, Cristiane Vianna Amaral, Daniela Oliveira Tolfo, Georgia Christ Sarris, Isabela Valença Vaz, Roberto Rocha Coelho Pires, Tatiana de Amorim Maranhão—carried out their tasks with consummate professionalism and dogged determination.

We owe many intellectual debts. Our principal debt is to Shubham Chaudhuri who helped develop this project and collaborated with us in its early stages before being pulled away by professional responsibilities. His idea of matched-pair municipalities has by now spawned a small cottage industry in Brazil, and we wish we had been able to count on his abilities for the later stages of the project. We also especially thank Peter Evans, who engaged us at every step of the project, and Kate Wahl, our editor at Stanford, for her support and insightful commentary. We also received extremely useful feedback on the entire manuscript from Phil Oxhorn. Michael Walton, Ruth Alsop, and André Herzog gave us feedback on the early stages of the research, and we are especially indebted to Michael Walton for his commitment to this project. Along the way we also received insightful comments and suggestions from a number of our colleagues: Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Richard Snyder, Sonia Alvarez, Jeff Rubin, Millie Thayer, Agustín Lao Montes, Vijayendra Rao, Adrian Gurza

Lavalle, Brian Wampler, Einaar Braten, Judith Tendler, Christian Stokke, Olle Tornq ust, Jonathan Fox, Leonardo Avritzer, Erik Olin Wright, Archon Fung, Frances Moore Lappe, Sergio Baierle, Regina Pozzobon, Marcus Melo, Roberto Pires, Peter Spink, Andr  Herzog, Peter Houtzager, Michael Kennedy, and John Markoff. We were extremely fortunate to have some wonderful graduate students at Brown to work with and are especially thankful to Diana Graizbord, Esther Her andez-Medina, and Jennifer Costanza. The writing stage of the project would not have been possible without a postdoctoral fellowship from CNPQ for Marcelo and the support of the Watson Institute in giving him an intellectual home for the year.

An early version of the argument developed in Chapter 5 appeared in *Social Forces* (2008). Some of the findings reported in Chapter 4 appeared in an article in an edited book by Stokke, Tornq ust, and Webster (2009).