6

Separate but Equal
Democratization? Participation, Politics, and Urban Segregation in Latin America

*Dennis Rodgers*

1 Introduction

Many commentators have noted the existence of a historical correlation between cities and democratization (Dyson 2001: 83; Mumford 1995: 21). Whether implicitly or explicitly, this image of the city as an inherently civic space is fundamentally linked to the notion that the spatial concentration intrinsic to urban contexts promotes ‘a democracy of proximity, of participation by all in the management of public affairs’ (Borja and Castells 1997: 246). As Amin and Thrift (2004: 231) succinctly summarize:

the city has very often been seen as a forcing ground for a politics of emancipation. Thus, the classical Graeco-Roman city is where the rule of democracy is supposed to have arisen, a democracy based upon the public deliberations of a supposedly ‘free’ citizenship... The medieval city, and later, the Renaissance city are held responsible for such seminal events as the rise of guild politics, the forging of institutions of civic republicanism and the principle of sanctuary based around the rise of independent city states. The Enlightenment city – through its institutions of learning, intellectual exchange, and secular science – is associated with the rise of universalism and a cosmopolitan ethos. And so on.

Seen from this perspective, it is perhaps not surprising that the most urbanized region of the global south, Latin America, is also a heartland
of vibrant and much applauded democratic innovation. Of particular note are the myriad local-level ‘radical democracy’ initiatives that have proliferated throughout the region’s cities during the past two decades (see Van Cott 2008: 8). These are widely considered to have led to a fundamental ‘reconfiguration of relationships and responsibilities’ (Cornwall 2004: 1) in urban Latin America, devolving political decision-making to ordinary citizens through a process of decentralized public deliberation rather than the delegation of authority to elected agents that is characteristic of more conventional forms of representative democracy. Over two hundred and fifty cities in the region have implemented participatory forms of democratic governance (see Cabannes 2004: 27), and more are doing so every day. At the same time, however, it is a significant paradox that Latin American urban centres are amongst the most segregated in the world, something that is widely considered to have a significant fragmenting effect on public space (Pirez 2002), which undermines democracy and, more specifically, undermines the communicative processes upon which participatory democratic initiatives are founded.

This chapter explores the logic of this apparent disjuncture, seeking to understand how it is that participatory democracy can flourish, seemingly counter-intuitively, in contemporary Latin America’s ‘fractured cities’ (Koonings and Kruijt 2007). It begins by considering the theory and practice of participatory democracy in a broad-brush manner, in order to highlight how such initiatives are not necessarily as inherently transformative as they are often thought to be, before then questioning the putative link that is often made between urban contexts and democratic practices. Drawing on Caldeira’s (2008) recent research on ‘neoliberal’ participatory planning policies in São Paulo, Brazil, the chapter then goes on to show how participatory democratic initiatives can, in fact, actively promote urban segregation, to the extent that a heuristic parallel can be made with South African apartheid’s notorious policy of ‘separate but equal development’. What this dramatic comparison starkly highlights is how, in order to be truly encompassing, participatory democratic practices need to be implemented within the context of a unifying and integrating governance framework that is ultimately determined by broader political economy considerations. These, however, are particularly unfavourable in a contemporary Latin America characterized by extremely high levels of inequality and exclusion. The final section attempts to mitigate this rather depressing analysis by exploring how emancipatory democratic practices might nevertheless emerge in unpromising circumstances, drawing on the