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**The limits of participatory  
democracy: Social movements  
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Ana Cecilia Dinerstein and  
Juan Pablo Ferrero

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# THE LIMITS OF PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF DISAGREEMENT IN SOUTH AMERICA

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**Bath Papers in International Development and Well-Being no. 16**

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# The limits of participatory democracy: Social movements and the displacement of disagreement in South America

Ana Cecilia Dinerstein and Juan Pablo Ferrero

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# The limits of participatory democracy: Social movements and the displacement of disagreement in South America

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## Abstract

Recent experiences of social movements in South America and the expansion of non-institutional forms of collective action have given rise to new conceptual frameworks such as participatory democracy, which aim to capture the impact of new forms of participation and collective action on democracy in the region. As a means of exploring the possibilities of deepening democracy, such frameworks have taken as their focal point the institutionalisation of 'alternative' forms and processes of participation. However, the focus on institutionalisation has usually bypassed the more radical dimensions of the discourses and practices of the movements—the 'disagreement' at their heart. By way of illustrative cases of two contemporary movements from Argentina (Piqueteros) and Brazil (Movement of Rural Landless Workers) we focus on two questions: What is the contribution of social movements to the process of democratisation? To what extent is such contribution being captured by new scholarly work on participatory and deliberative democracy? We analyse the political struggle within, against and beyond democratic 'borders' led by social movements in three historical moments. By distinguishing the dimensions of 'real policies' and 'imagined politics' we suggest that new conceptualisations such as 'participatory democracy' are unable to recognise the alternative democratic realities that emerge out of disagreement and play a regulatory role in transforming disagreement into dissent. Hope is then lost in translation. We suggest that Radical Democratic Theory can offer a better work of translation, as it is able to grasp the vital dimension of movements' collective action that resists integration into the hegemonic cannon, thus reflecting the movements' own reflection of their emancipatory collective action.

**Key words:** Democracy, disagreement, Rancière, social movements, South America, theory

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## 1 Introduction

The emergence and consolidation of new social movement organisations in South America in the past two decades have sparked fresh discussions about both the meaning and scope of such action, and its influence on democracy in the region. During the 1990s, neoliberal structural adjustments triggered a process of identity formation and organisational consolidation of new movements led by peasants, the indigenous, the unemployed and the landless, which began to articulate two goals: to ameliorate the misery of communities effected by unemployment, poverty and landlessness; and to engage in democratic and deliberative practices at community levels that embrace fresh values and ideas. Whilst the former development intended to tackle the social, economic and political effects of neoliberal reforms, the latter informs a shift from pure opposition to neoliberalism to the creation of new forms of social and political interaction.

These movements have inspired a process of rethinking democratic politics beyond the limits imposed by the state centred 'transition' debate of the mid-1980s (O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986), towards an analysis of what became known as participatory processes from below (Pearce 2010). By displacing the preoccupation with democratic transition in the region (Fung and Wright 2001), this examination has focused on the nature of participation, its relation to institutionalised participation practices (Neaera Abers and Keck 2009), and an assessment of the contribution of social movements to more radical social and political change (De Sousa Santos 2005, 2008).

In this article, we engage with this work. By using two case studies of social movements from South America we intend to move from the discussion of the tension between liberal and participatory democracy that has marked recent debates in the field (Shöönleitner 2006), to a discussion of the *tension between participatory and radical democracy*. We focus on two questions: What is the contribution of social movements to the process of democratisation? To what extent is such contribution being captured by new scholarly work on participatory and deliberative democracy?

We start with a review of the literature on democracy and social movements in the South American context. Then, we offer a narrative of the movements' processes of emergence, contestation, consolidation and institutionalisation, and suggest the existence of both two differentiable yet interlocked dimensions of the social movement field, that we call 'real policies' and 'imagined politics'. Whilst the former informs dissent within participatory processes, the latter refers to the 'disagreement' (Rancière 1999) that inhabits alternative territorial democratic practices with an expansive political meaning. Unlike dissent, which belongs to the 'democratic consensus' framework, disagreement speaks about the creation of alternative realities that do not fit (at least not completely) within the liberal democratic cannon. Our argument is that recent theorisations which emphasise the deliberative and participatory dimension of democracy towards the institutionalisation of dissent, have work along the lines of the political institutionalisation of the movements that occurred under populist governments at the beginning of 2000 in both Argentina and Brazil, thus, grasping the movements' contribution to democratisation only partially. Consequently, the dimension of what we call 'imagined politics', which is informed by disagreement, is 'lost in translation.' We then discuss briefly how

a better work of translation could be achieved, i.e. by engaging with the tradition of radical democracy.

## 2 Democracy in South America: From transition to participation

### 2.1 The transition debate

Authoritarian regimes in the 1960s and 1970 either banned or severely limited political activity in South American countries. The reestablishment of democratic electoral processes resulted from the mobilisation of human rights activists, supporters of alternative sometimes clandestine political parties, trade unions members, religious organisations. During the 1980s, scholars interpreted the transition process as a problem of 'governability.' Although they acknowledged the significance of the economy in political transformation, the study of political regime change was separated from an examination of the underlying economic processes. The autonomy with which the political sphere was treated in such analyses provided the basis for establishing a research trajectory in which the development of both political parties and a consensual political culture were predominant (Floria 1988, p. 199). Transition scholars came to define democracy as the 'explicit set of structures and procedures established a priori, concerning the peaceful resolution of recurrent and ongoing conflicts' (Morlino 1986, p. 316). Thus, 'consolidation' was defined as the routinisation of these structures and procedures by civil society.

Since O'Donnell's seminal work (O'Donnell 1982) on the authoritarian nature of the Argentinean state (1966-1973), comparative assessments of adequate institutional designs capable of assuring stability in order to achieve regime consolidation prevailed. The relative extent of democratic consolidation began to be seen as when 'democratic actors no longer have as one of their central concerns the avoidance of...authoritarian regression and consequently do not subordinate their decisions (and omission) to such a concern (O'Donnell 1992, pp. 48 and 49).' While these discussions highlighted the importance of the development of a dense institutional fabric as the basis of preventing a return to authoritarianism, they often neglected the influence of less formal organisations, such as popular, associative and neighbourhood-based, and social movement organisations in the democratisation process. As a result of the emphasis on political parties as key actors of the political process – as machines able to articulate most of the opposition demands (Mainwaring 1988) – social conflicts and demands for changes in those 'consolidated democracies' were bypassed in favour of analyses of institutional mechanisms guaranteeing stability. However, the expectation of ending the economic instability associated with dictatorial regimes vanished. During the 1980s, the external debt crisis (created during the dictatorial rules) conditioned democratisation processes. The new administrations were trapped between two antagonistic forces: the explosion of mobilisation demanding recognition of postponed and brutally repressed demands during the dictatorship (i.e. the respect for human rights), and pressures from the US government, banks and the IMF to service the external debt.

### 2.2 Transition and Social Movements

During the 1990s a wave of protests swept the streets of main cities of South America. In many mobilisations led to the early departure of many heads of government (Ollier 2003, p. 171). Some interpreted citizens' mobilisations as the result of both institutional failure to channel citizens' demands and malfunctioning of the political system (e.g. corruption). Intellectual

pessimism regarding the virtues of democratic consolidation led to a search for theories and typologies that could explain democratic underperformances (O'Donnell 1994) such as the 'underdevelopment of political parties' (Mainwaring 1999), which was linked to the overall systemic deficiencies and institutional flaws. During transition to democracy the strong participation of social movements in South America raised questions about their role in the 'resignification of democratic practices' (Foweraker 1995, p. xlv). Many movements began to recognise that democracy was not just a matter of a 'work of institutional engineering' but an undetermined process of re writing the social grammar by breaking with established traditions, on the other hand (Santos and Avritzer 2007, p. xiii). The two disciplines that address democracy and social movements separately had difficulties in accounting for this new developments: 'neither political sciences paradigms of regime types nor theories of social movements that focus merely on the grievances, organization, and leadership of defiant groups adequately account for the condition inducing common folk to resist and protest exploitation, degradation, and poverty' (Eckstein 1989, p. 1).

Social mobilisations inspired a 'new theoretical awareness' that acknowledged both the limitations of previous approaches on social movements and the transformation brought about by these 'new' social movements (Escobar and Alvarez 1992, pp. 2-3) leading to an enquiry of to what extent these were new 'political' actors (Jelin 1985).

To read the movements 'in key of democracy' (Calderón 1986, p. 12) meant to focus on the various ways in which social movements' action contributed to the expansion of citizenship and new forms of social participation, but also to the dispute over the meaning of democracy (Santos and Avritzer 2007, pp.xlv).

### **2.3 Shifting the focus: from transition to participatory deliberative democracy**

The emergence of 'new democratic subjectivities' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) post transition embodied by peasants, rural workers, the unemployed and indigenous people movements forced a change in analytical focus away from institutional analysis to civil society mobilisation. Ideas such as empowerment, participation from below, and deliberative democracy emerged to both characterise the new phenomenon and offer a critique of liberal democracy.

Building on Habermas' contribution to the debate on democracy, the notion of the 'public sphere' was extended beyond traditional focus on political institutions to new 'places', including novel forms of collective action from those excluded from deliberative bodies (e.g. the 'disempowered'). Power relations underpinning deliberation came to the surface in the form of questions regarding the 'ability of speakers to participate on equal terms' (Karpowitz, Raphael, and Hammond 2009).

In South America, the notion of the 'public sphere' linked reemerging democracies and the formation of spaces for citizens' participation as equals (Avritzer 2002, p. 5). Conceptually located between the market and the state, the public sphere involved individual communication and deliberation through face-to-face interaction. For Avritzer (2002), the public sphere allowed democratic theory to overcome the elite-mass dichotomy by suggesting a new way of approaching democratisation, namely through the analysis of practices prevailing at the level of

public communication. Local experiences inspired an examination of the interrelationship between existing alternative deliberative spaces and the public policy decision-making process (Wolford 2010; Abers and Keck 2009).

Participatory and deliberative democracy fashioned a wave of studies aimed at revealing empirical phenomena largely neglected by the transition school. These studies explored innovation and processes of learning from below, challenging the normative assumptions inherent in classical comparative political analysis. Ethnography, participant observations, and in-depth interviews make up the methodological repertoire now commonly used by scholars in order to provide more accurate accounts of what is called developing democratic models and ongoing democratic practices.

Fung's and Wright's work (Fung and Wright 2001) illustrate this attempt to formalise 'discussion-based democracy' into a model of institutions they call Empowered Deliberative Democracy (EDD). Their starting point is precisely these experiments of 'deepening democracy', which in common have: (i) a 'practical orientation' – i.e. they are not organically linked to either political parties or social movements, so tend to focus on practical problems; (ii) bottom-up participation which favours new participatory channels and increases accountability (Fung and Wright 2001, p. 18); and (iii) finding solutions to 'real-world' problems through deliberation which provides participants with good reasons to get involved in collective action (Fung and Wright 2001, p. 19). These experiments colonise state power and transform formal governance institutions, i.e. the mechanisms of state power, into permanently mobilised deliberative-democratic grassroots forms (Fung and Wright 2001, pp. 21-23).

On the one hand, it can be argued that this is a state-centred model for deepening democracy as scholars claim that current experiments of 'deepening democracy' are bottom-up forms of participation which open channels and increases accountability, and led to a progressive 'mobilisation of state capacity' (Abers and Keck 2009, p. 292). Abers and Keck (2009, p. 292) suggest that the emergence of new deliberative bodies triggered a progressive 'mobilisation of the state capacity' toward new arenas, which are different from the private sector, and enhance collaboration between agents inside and outside the state. New decision-making spaces are privileged sites for an exploration of processes of democratic consolidation. They make visible the relationship between the state and civil society organisations, so that forms of participatory governance such as partnership and institutional innovation can be assessed more rigorously. The EDD would not be 'just another voluntaristic form of organisation insofar as it is fundamentally a state-centred process, with the state remaining the principal medium for the enactment of the consensually agree-upon "common good"' (Rodgers 2010, p. 2).

On the other hand, the EDD can be seen as involving 'a radical re-configuration of relationships and responsibilities between the state and society and thus constitutes a potentially fundamental transformation of this all-important connection.' (Cornwall 2004, p.1) Recent research into non-governmental public organisations and action in urban spaces by Pearce et al (2010) also explored how participatory experiences are effectively contributing to new approaches to tackling poverty, exclusion and conflict. These studies show that innovation in new forms of decision-making do contest traditional boundaries between participation and representation by avoiding normative inclinations. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007, p. 307.)

takes the discussion further by stating that ‘participatory budgeting and planning constitute today a form of counter-hegemonic globalisation’ as citizens’ direct participation in the decision-making process undermines the principles behind hegemonic liberal-representative democracy. New forms of co-governance result from new deliberative practices, in which civil society is ...a regular and well-organised way of exerting public control over the state by means of institutionalised forms of cooperation and conflict’ (De Sousa Santos 2007, p. 308). For Avritzer (2007, p. 381-382), participatory budgeting in Brazil challenges deep-rooted assumptions about the process of mobilisation and new forms of collective action and democratic consolidation: new forms of collective action enhance wider democratic participation and produced new institutional outputs to channel them through.

## 2.4 Participatory democracy and the problem of disagreement

Radical democracy offers a less well-explored theoretical premise from which to interrogate social mobilisation and democracy. Radical democracy scholars embrace the tradition of political emancipation by problematising the idea of ‘consensus’ and elaborating on the contested relationship between the universal and the particular. In the liberal discourse on democracy collective aggregation is possible due to a common ground of agreement on form and substance. Dissent is something that happens between competitors, and it is ‘prone to institutionalisation’. But the liberal aggregative paradigm was challenged by the deliberative paradigm based on communicative action. To Habermas, ‘the task of universal pragmatics is to identify and reconstruct universal conditions of possible understanding ... the task of mutual interpretation is to achieve a new definition of the situation which all participants can share’ (Habermas 1984, 3).

But Fraser (1990, pp. 60 and 61) rightly highlights how, by suggesting the formation of a universal (and official) public sphere, Habermas idealises it, thus understating the coexistence of different *publics*. He insulates the deliberative discursive arena from the effects of societal inequalities. What remains problematic in Habermas’ conception of democracy is that the particular type of deliberation ruled by the laws of ‘undistorted communication’ would, in turn, procure the effect of reconciliation of values. To Fraser, this would indicate the *end of politics*, which she understands as the fundamental antagonism behind the creation of social order. The emergence of parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses allows Fraser to explore the formation of *subaltern counter publics* instead. Insofar as these materialise in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they expand the discursive space by making assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation, now to be publicly argued out (Fraser 1990, pp. 66 and 67).

Democracy, according to Laclau (2001, p. 4), is both the effort to organise the political space around the universality of the community and the respect for differences: ‘the unilateralisation of either of these tendencies leads to a perversion of democracy as a political regime’. The tension between universality and particularity, is explored further by Rancière (2006, p. 51), when he suggests that the ‘democratic scandal consists simply in revealing this: there will never be, under the name of politics, a single principle of community that legitimate the action of those who govern on the basis of law inherent in the coming together of human communities’. The vocalisation of difference entailed in disagreement cannot be subordinated or included within abstract universality:

a political movement is always a movement that displaces the given boundaries, and extracts the specifically democratic, i.e. universalist component of a particular conflict of interests in such and such a point of society (Rancière 2006, : p. 84).

It is, then, *disagreement*, rather than consensus, that informs the radical antagonism intrinsic in the interplay of identities and alterities implicated in democratic relationships. Similarly, Castoriadis (1991, p.164) suggests that ‘the moment of democracy’s birth, and that of politics, is *not* the reign of law or of right, nor that of “the rights of man”, nor even the equality of citizens as such, but rather the emergence of the questioning of the law in and through the actual activity of the community’ .

Participation in the public sphere is not simply a matter of being able to state propositional contents that are neutral with respect to form of expression, but a rejection of those contents. Forms of expressions are essentially intertwined with acts of identification which are the result of the dialectic of subversion and over-determination (Mouffe 1992) – i.e. being able to speak ‘in one’s own voice’ instead of ‘in a voice common to all’. Rancière then proposes that the term ‘politics’ should be used to name: ‘Whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts of lack of them are defined by a presupposition that (...) has no place in that configuration –that of the part of those who have no part’ (Rancière 1999, p. 29).

Democracy is then better understood as *democratisation*, i.e. ‘a dissensual praxis’ (Critchley 2008, pp. 114 and 115; Rancière 2011, p.2): *democratisation* regards political association as ‘constructed within specific discourses and always precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of those subject positions’ (Mouffe 1992, p. 10). During the process of democratisation existing relations of power are displaced and this displacement allows the emergence of new democratic subjectivities, democratic practices and subaltern counter publics that resist hegemonic integration and therefore both challenge and strengthen democracy. In short, democratisation allows a definition of democracy as the everlasting process of breaking ‘the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying’ (Rancière 1999, p.29) through the creation of spaces for disagreement.

### **3 Social Movements in Argentina and Brazil**

In this section, we briefly present a three-stage narrative of two social movements: the Piquetero Movement (of Unemployed Workers) in Argentina and the Movement of Rural Landless Workers, MST) in Brazil.

We hope to illustrate three arguments: first, that the mobilisation that emerged in and against the neoliberal reforms called into question the meaning and practice of democracy that sustained the policy-making process. Secondly, that the movements’ work at territorial and community level has renewed political thinking and practices based on disagreement with mainstream politics and the engagement with the new. Thirdly, that the normalisation of the movements’ politics into the logic of the state during the first decade of the 2000s excluded such innovation, thus displacing disagreement into the realm of dissent.

### 3.1 The emergence of disagreement: The Piquetero Movement and the Movement of Rural Landless Workers

One of the most noteworthy forms of expression of disagreement with the neoliberal structuring in Argentina has been the mobilisation of unemployed workers during the second half of the 1990s. Under Menem (1989-1999), democracy was assumed to be consolidated. To produce a quick and deep 'economic' transformation and to achieve economic stability became the government's priority. Roughly, after a period of confusion produced by the manipulation of the financial markets by powerful elites which produced several hyperinflation episodes that forced President Alfonsín to leave power before the end of his term, Minter Cavallos's Convertibility plan pegged the peso to the dollar and tamed hyperinflation, and formally set course for economic stability in April 1991.

A leading factor to the rise of non-institutionalised forms of protest during this period was the rise in unemployment rates, from 6 per cent in 1991 to 18.5 per cent in 1995, as a result of the privatisation of state-owned companies, public sector reforms and company restructuring. Unemployed workers and their communities in geographical areas of the country that were affected by the reforms was paramount during the second half of the 1990s. The 'roadblock' consolidated as a new form of protest and demand, where protestors put forward a diversity of demands (from employment programs to job creation and investment, to participation in the management of social and employment programmes). The process of contestation of neoliberal reforms led to the formation of a new collective identity (Piqueteros) and of a jigsaw of unemployed workers organisations (UWOs). UWOs disagreed with neoliberal stability, as democracy was being consolidated thanks to social exclusion. Democratic 'consolidation' was being achieved at expenses of the exclusion of the disagreement of those who did not have a part in it, in our case the unemployed, but not exclusively. Since stability was becoming an hegemonic 'social imaginary' which constrained the democratisation of society, the UWOs' critique and resistance was publically perceived as 'destabilising' stability (Dinerstein 2001, pp. 1-7). This opinion would change dramatically between December 1999 and December 2001 when other movements, trade unions and popular organisations also mobilised against stability, particularly against governmental plans to 'zero deficit' launched in May 2001 to conform to the latest IMF demand further to reduce public expenditures. The national climate of protest led by the UWOs contributed to the expansion of disagreement and the collapse of the alliance in power due to differences within the Cabinet over prioritising or not the country's financial obligations (Dinerstein 2001).

The financial collapse and the default of the external debt were confronted with a popular mobilisation that forced the resignation of national authorities. In December 2001 people in the streets instigated a critique of the kind of democracy that had taken form under the aegis of neoliberal economic order. Such critique was reflected as much in the message of the protests, i.e. *¡que se vayan todos!* as in new forms of deliberation that were fostered by the crisis such as the neighbourhood popular assemblies (Dinerstein 2003; Dinerstein and Neary 2002), factory occupations and human right movements' protests. Without central coordination, protestors organised horizontally, united by the practice of direct democracy and a lexicon that indicated a departure from that of the traditional left or the labour movement. Words such as dignity, justice, autonomy and democracy were deployed in a variety of pamphlets, speeches and

gatherings. Deliberation in assemblies constituted the form of debating and deciding over punctual and general matters.

The Movement of Rural Landless Workers (MST) provides another significant example of the emergence of disagreement in South America. Inspired by both liberation theology and Marxism, the MST emerged as part of civil society's struggle against the dictatorship, informally organising and abetting those involved in land occupations during the 1970s. In 1984, a year before Sarney took office and the democratic transition formally commenced, the MST became a national organisation.

Neoliberal policies in Brazil affected both the rural and urban economies. The introduction of mechanised soybean production, as part of the agricultural modernisation, made a significant portion of workers redundant. Almost 30 million Brazilians were forced off the land into the cities between 1960 and 1980. Labour flexibility and outsourcing were introduced in the most industrialised sectors. These policies resulted in greater employment insecurity, the deterioration of working conditions, and the growth of the informal sector.

The Brazilian transition to democracy resulted from both elite pacts and increasing pressure from civil society. On the one hand, the former aimed at reassuring economy growth with stability through both the flexibilisation of labour in the industrial sector and the mechanisation of soybean production in the agricultural sector. The oligopolisation in agricultural production, displacing large segments of the population out of the land. The 'landless' migrated either to areas assigned to agricultural colonisation established by the government or to the cities industrial suburbs. On the other hand, land occupations had been taking place between 1979 and 1984. In the late 1970s, strikes in the suburbs of São Paulo marked the emergence of new unionism (*novo sindicalismo*). Popular street-demonstrations against the dictatorship, organised by a variety of actors, demanded better wages, the land, and rejected the privatisation of public services and the flexibilisation of labour.

Resistance was led by both urban-industrial sectors but also from rural-recently-displaced peasants. The *novo sindicalismo* and the MST joined efforts against the neoliberal modernisation project, and advocated political democratisation. The MST encouraged land occupations as an organisational tactic to push for a long awaited agrarian reform. Whilst direct action provoked a violent reaction from both the state, land owners and private security forces, it gave the MST recognition among the landless as the movement delivered land successfully for the landless, by forcing state intervention and eventual land expropriation.

### **3.2 The expansion of disagreement: embracing 'dignified work' and 'food sovereignty'**

During the second half of the 1990s and the beginning of 2000, the UWOs transformed many neighbourhoods of the country into spaces for resistance and innovation. They managed to simultaneously maintain high levels of grass roots mobilisation and organisation, and implement (up to the day) autonomous cooperative projects that linked communitarian work with political organisation. Resources for the projects came from the governmental allocation of individual programme benefits by the municipal, provincial and national government to the UWOs for their management that the UWOs fight at the roadblocks. The allocated resources are distributed by

the UWOS among those unemployed workers who are registered with them and are willing to undertake community work and engage in the UWOS community projects. In this sense, the UWOs' demand for more employment programmes is directed to their project of transforming the shortcomings of Argentinean employment and social programmes (fragmented, not transparent or clear criteria for access, non universal) into opportunities to develop locally crafted community-based projects whose common feature is the creation of new and autonomous forms of cooperation, work and sociability.

The UWOs offered a critique of 'capitalist work'. Unemployed workers contested the hypothesis that unemployment means the *lack* of work leading to social exclusion, to show that unemployment is a *form* of capitalist work that force the unemployed to become the invisible subjectivities of labour, still subordinated to the rule of money and the dynamics of the labour market but in a deceiving form (Dinerstein 2002). The "unemployed workers", which designates those who simultaneously are workers in projects run by the UWOs and recipients of state programmes for the unemployed (Dinerstein 2010). As a female unemployed worker from the MTD Solano put it, 'I have been working as an unemployed worker since 2001' (Solano 2002, p. 137). In the neighbourhoods, the UWOs in general and the autonomous grouping of the movement in particular, began to elaborate on the idea of 'dignified work' (*trabajo digno*), which became the cornerstone of their imagined world. *Dignified work* is at odds with capitalist work, including 'decent work' championed by ILO. *Dignified work* rejects exploitation and the logic of profit-making altogether, it is genuine, cooperative and useful and underpins the flow of creative action - in this case at the community level, free from exploitation (Fernández Álvarez and Manzano 2007, pp. 143-166; Giarraca and Wahren 2005, pp. 285-196). The defence of dignified work does not call for a transition 'beyond' the wage-society sustained by the state through basic income (Levitas 2001, pp. 459-460; Gorz 1999) but the possibility of *not being* the working class (Holloway 2010). This is premised on their view, often voiced repeatedly by leaders and regular members, that to wield or influence power in a political system impregnated by values that fail to respond to society is tantamount to doing little if social relations and methods of political and economic self-organisation do not begin to change them as subjects (Bogo 2005)

Since the creation of the MST, more than 350 families have been settled after resisting hostile conditions of occupation and temporal precarious encampments (with the land still under legal dispute). The MST *agrovilas* are formed by groups of between 20 and 30 families facilitating the access to essential services like water, electricity and primary schools. But like the neighbourhoods organised by the UWOs, the settlements and *agrovilas* constitute territorial spaces where new values and norms are performed and learnt through practice, including democratic decision making, collaborative production strategies as well as the institution of solidarity networks within settler, encampment and *agrovilas* both constructing a common identity and cementing organisational structures. The development of a significant number of *cooperativas de produccion agropecuarias* facilitated the production (opening access to financial credit and technology) and distribution (in the market) of settlements' agricultural products. Cooperatives are key for achieving organisational and financial autonomy although this has led to a routinisation and (re)signification of the meanings of agrarian reform by the MST in that they require bureaucratic negotiations with the state which prevents demands for greater transformations to be heard.

At the *agrovilas* the MST is implementing an agrarian reform de facto that exceeds the demand for land distribution to embrace what La Via Campesina calls 'food sovereignty', a term constructed in opposition to market-led agribusiness. Food sovereignty is considered a human right that should be protected by international law: 'the right to have regular, permanent and unobstructed access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to qualitatively and quantitatively adequate sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and ensuring a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free from anxiety. Governments have a legal obligation to respect, protect and fulfill the right to food' (O'Donnell and Valenzuela 1992).

Food sovereignty entails not only agrarian reform based on land distribution but also access to food, environmental protection, respect for cultural diversity and democratic control over decisions on trade, production and distribution. The food sovereignty paradigm embraces a 'land reform from below' (May 2008, p.15) and, therefore, it is at odds with World Bank and state promoted reforms which do not tackle the underlying causes of poverty and exclusion for they are still based on the model of agrarian reform based on the agribusiness model. The MST opposes such model as it is built upon the concentration of capital and land, and a high dependency on transgenic technology which, in turn, leads to sophisticated levels of mechanisation and oligopolisation of crops production

### 3.3 The displacement of disagreement

After the December 2001 crisis in Argentina, the recovering of both financial stability and trustworthiness in the democratic system became main governmental concerns. New large-scale programmes such as a 'Male and Female Unemployed Heads of Household' made cash transfers to two million beneficiaries in exchange for community work, training, or educating their children. The new policy was hand in hand with repressive measures towards the most radical grouping of the Piquetero movement. In 2003, President N. Kirchner launched employment policies that intended to attend to the UWOs' demands for job creation and resources. New social programmes also sought to incorporate the communitarian and solidarity principles and social practices that underpin the UWOs' endeavours into a 'new policy ethos'. The 'National Plan for Local Development and Social Economy: Let's Work' promotes bottom-up participation and encourages the development of the social economy by providing technical and financial support to NGOs, including the UWOs.

The government's dialogue with different sectors of the movement utilised mechanisms of co-optation, control, neutralise and/or isolation of the UWOS according to their political agenda, to incorporate, ignore and/or discard the UWOS into the post crisis democratic order. This 'contested institutionalisation' of the UWOS (Dinerstein, Contartese, and Meledicque 2010) implied a recognition of the UWOS by the state—which has been partly welcome by the movements—but also their *deradicalisation*.

The MST settlements paved the way for the development of formal and informal negotiations with state agencies, thus losing their contentious character within contexts where governmental policies tended to be receptive rather than hostile and repressive, particularly under President da Silva, when settlements have gone through a process of state intervention (via INCRA), and subsequent legalisation. Like in Argentina, the governmental approach 'normalised' -to a certain

extent, the MST demands for land distribution, although without advancing them into a full scale agrarian reform under the principle of food sovereignty. Social activists were offered governmental positions, e.g. the Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (INCRA) came under the administration of MST allies, and increased subsidies to MST cooperatives and education activities. Social expenditure increased almost one per cent in relation to GDP (from 13.3 per cent to 14.1 per cent between 2001 and 2004 (Hall 2006, p. 693). Through new schemes (e.g. Bolsa Escola and Renda Mínima), the government transferred cash to poor households (Sewall 2008, p. 175) but without changing its position towards agribusiness which stands in opposition to the agrarian reforms framed within the broad principle of food sovereignty demanded by the MST.

#### **4 Social movements' contribution to democratisation: Lost in translation?**

It is possible to differentiate (analytically) two dimensions of the social movement field: the dimension of 'real policies' and the dimension of 'imagined politics' respectively. By 'real policies' we mean the politics of demand to the state and the participation of the movements in governmental projects, policies and institutional devices that aim at their integration via policy. This dimension is empirically palpable in the movements' demands for employment programmes and land reform, and in their relationship with social programmes that intend to institutionalise their communitarian experience.

By 'imagined politics' we mean the non-institutionalised politics that 'disagree' with the realm of real policies, and instead, articulate new experiences that resist integration into the logic of state. This dimension is empirically evident in the values, endeavours, proposals and democratic practices that are embedded in the movements' autonomous practices and which are experienced by the movements as alternatives to the neoliberal/post neoliberal democratic order.

The possibility for the dimension of imagined politics to emerge lies in the irresolvable tension between institutional and non-institutional aspects, i.e. between the reluctance to be integrated into the hegemonic logic, and the demand for recognition to the state (Böhm, Dinerstein, and Spicer 2010). This tension indicates that the 'claim making' aspect of social movements and their role in representing, articulating and framing collective interests to influence political and policy environment (Della Porta and Diani 1999) is complemented by the movements' function as creators of 'new worlds' (Holloway 2010; Laclau and Mouffe 1985) which co-exists with the dimension of real policy, but overwhelms the limits imposed by democracy.

The new social policy rhetoric that has encouraged participation from below in Argentina and Brazil for a decade includes mechanisms of discursive interpretation that translate the movements' language of 'hope' into the language of 'empowerment', 'partnership', and 'participation from below' in order to encapsulate them into governable institutional dynamics.

Both the UWOs and the MST are valued for their ability to generate communities (neighbourhoods and settlements) for the excluded or dispossessed. In Argentina, the discussion has been articulated around the process of money transference and the legal status of the

UWOS to manage state resources from social and employment programmes. In Brazil, the discussion has tended to focus on technicalities surrounding the 'productivity index' in order to legalise land expropriation. These take place at the expense of the problematisation of radical demands such as 'dignified work' and 'food sovereignty'. Such normalisation of the movements' politics into the logic of the state during the first decade of the 2000s has excluded the 'democratic excess' that was encapsulated in the demands for food sovereignty and dignified work in Brazil and Argentina respectively. The movements have not been completely impenetrable to this kind of translation but their 'institutionalisation' is highly 'contested' (Dinerstein 2008), which does mean complete normalisation of movements' lives into the hegemonic order, but the struggle to integrate them.

What is then lost in translation by participatory democracy theorisations? By lost in translation we mean the displacement of disagreement into the realm of dissent during the process of conceptualisation of new practices; translation which, whilst recognising antagonisms and new forms of opposition, neglects the movements' collective action that has no grammar. First, the movements disagree with the fixed subject of democracy. Participatory democracy does question 'representation' on the basis of the redefinition of identity giving space for innovation and difference (Santos and Avritzer 2007, p. xlix) thus points to the incompleteness of democracy as a political relation that requires the constant reproduction of empty signifiers to enable the function of representation. But new democratic subjectivities inexorably disarticulate the hegemonic discourse (Mouffe 2000). Democracy is not about 'defending the rights of pre-constituted identities, but rather in constituting those identities themselves in a precarious and always vulnerable field' (Mouffe 2000, p. 148). This view of democracy helps to come to terms 'with the hegemonic nature of social relations and identities, it can contribute to subverting the ever-present temptation that exists in democracies to naturalise its frontiers and essentialise its identities (Mouffe 2000, p. 150). However, both the Piqueteros and the MST are engaged in a process of naming their 'invisible subjectivities' (Dinerstein 2002): i.e. their naming is political rather than classificatory, and intends to give a voice to a subjectivity that has no grammar (Rancière 2011, p.2) but is re writing the social grammar (Santos and Avritzer 2007, p. xliii), this is an unnamed grammar that is not reflected in the participatory democracy canon.

Secondly, the movements have altered the geography and dynamics of participation by creating autonomous territories for the experience of direct democracy, so that impoverished neighbourhood and the idle land becomes sites of hope. Participatory democracy makes room to the geographical reorganisation of participation. But the settlement and the neighbourhood are not meant to be instituted spaces for the development of institutional innovations that result out of dissent. They counterpoise instituting practices, which contest the idea of participation as an aggregation and/or representation of individuals that occurs within instituted spaces. Unlike instituted spaces, instituting practices speak of the undefined boundaries between individuals and their communities and the practice of 'horizontalism' (Sitrin 2006). In these instituting spaces there will be almost inevitably room for disagreement that cannot become dissent. These spaces are 'informal sites of social and political interaction', i.e. 'transformative spaces' (Ellison 1999).

Thirdly, the movements engage in democratic practices wherein democracy is synonymous of politics, self-realisation and counter-power. Participatory democracy allows the development of

appealing forms of 'participation from below' that question both the state as well as the relationship between civil society and the state. However, the movements discussed here are reshaping 'the given distribution of the individual and the collective, and the accepted boundary of the political and the social' (Rancière 2006, p. 84)

In short, new theorisations that embrace participatory democracy are vital in capturing democracy as a permanent process of recreating identity and forms of participation and deliberation with great impact on the public sphere, and the way in which democracy is conceived, thus contesting the hegemonic cannon. However, they have also been significant to the process of translation of disagreement into dissent.

The theory rightly emphasises the communitarian or collectivist aspect of democracy, which has potential for the articulation of common interests beyond the boundaries of liberal forms of representation and participation, and therefore participatory democracy discursively overcome the individualistic approach of liberal democracy and connects with the dimension of the social movement field, i.e. real policies. Participation, deliberation, and empowerment are key factors in devolving substantial power to participants. But, since the ultimate goal of participatory democracy is to identify how the institutionalisation of ongoing processes of participation from below can guarantee fairness and efficiency within a deliberative framework, it is the state that discriminates and selects what issues 'it can cope or cannot cope with'; and the issues that can forge consent out of dissent successfully under new forms of participatory governance. Disagreement, and the place that such disagreement has within the process of democratisation is unavoidably silenced, i.e. lost in translation.

Participatory democracy has innovated democracy, but after the translation, the disagreement that informs the 'democratic excess' (Bensaïd 2010, p. 24) that speaks of the unrealised which cannot be subordinated to any democratic order, remains unnamed. And this manifestly contrasts with the political activity towards democratisation articulated by the movements, which steer towards the experience of alternative forms of democracy and social interaction. Whilst the movements are vulnerable to state pressures and policies for and against reform, agribusiness, better, better living conditions for peasant families, a different rural development, they persist in their search for alternatives that contest the dominant discourses. The 'democratic scandal' - paraphrasing Rancière - does not lie in the lack of recognition of the contribution of these movements to 'democracy' by the theory, but in how such contribution is understood. In this case, we argue it has been translated as the widening of spaces for participation and deliberation by new actors via the recognition of what the movements can 'bring' to the project of consensus/agreement to the relatively flexible but yet established order.

## **5 Instead of a conclusion: Pushing the theoretical borders**

The reconfiguration of established democratic 'borders' by new democratic subjectivities naturally touches the theoretical 'borders' between hegemonic and non-hegemonic signifiers. We have posed and explored two questions: what is the contribution of social movements to the process of democratisation, and whether this is captured by new scholarly work on participatory democracy We have acknowledged a significant shift within the theory of democracy from the state-centric 'transition' debate of the mid-1980s towards an analysis of participatory processes

‘from below’ which resulted in significant transformations in the forms of ‘dissent’ in South America (although not exclusively). The rich experience of many new movements and/or coalitions which resisted neoliberalism and reinvented politics inspired us to join those who are interested in assessing the influence of these movements on the processes of democratisation. By engaging with the tradition of radical democracy, and in particular with Rancière’s work, we offered a critical assessment of conceptualisations of new forms of participation, informed by the MST and the UWOs.

Our focal point of contention was that participatory democracy accounts for dissent but not for disagreement. Partly the reason for this is that the movements’ political contention is underpinned by the dilemma between rebellion and integration. But the dimension of their subjectivity that is unwilling to submit to the liberal or the ‘participatory’ democratic cannon and to the logic of consensus (or consensual dissent) has been neglected, as consensus presupposes ‘the inclusion of all parties and their problems that prohibits the political subjectification of a part of those who have no part, of a count of the uncounted’ (Rancière 1999, p. 166).

We proposed that democracy is defined as the possibility of emergence of disagreement that rises within an incomplete hegemonic democratic regime. Our critical engagement with participatory democracy has highlighted the ability of the latter to inform emerging forms of dissent, deliberation and participation, but its limitations to account for disagreement, whose form is undetermined but which has a tremendous power of revitalising democracy, as they (involuntarily) silence the alternative realities created beyond the state horizon by these movements which do not fit into the framework provided by the institutionally devised dissent.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos has called for an innovation in critical theory able to give an account for ‘non-conformist subjectivities’ (De Sousa Santos 2000, p. 35) which, like those explored here, have emerged and consolidated in the region. Can the theory of democracy embrace such aspiration, or will it remain a constituent of the hegemonic discourse that subordinates radical democratic subjectivities to the logic of the given order? The Habermasian conception of democracy i.e. ultimately as a reconciliation of values has been challenged by those who offer a conception of the public sphere as ‘deliberative public spaces’ (Avritzer 2002), and consequently promote ‘institutionalised forums of face-to face deliberation where contentious issues can be politically addressed and alternative practices brought into the political real’ (Shöönleitner 2006, p. 39). However this seems insufficient. A better ‘work of translation’ would require an alternative conceptual (and epistemological) strategy that takes us from the discussion of the tensions between liberal and participatory democracy to a conversation about the dilemmas between participatory and radical democracy, and the problem of ‘dissensus’ (Rancière 2001). In sum, the contribution to social movements to the process of democratisation in today Latin America might be grasped, following Rancière, by listening to the disagreement that lies at the heart of the word ‘democracy.’

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