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Brazil's Civil Society between Myth and Reality: Comparing Two Different Research Approaches

The political role of civil society versus the political role of political institutions is a high controversial theme, which provokes fairly polarised discussions. With their concise but highly informative analyses, Encarnación (Bard College) and Nylen (Stetson University, Florida) offer a representative example for two pole positions that nevertheless show many surprisingly convergent points.

1. Encarnación's approach: necessary, but not sufficient

One can say that the mainstream of social theory in the last quarter of the 20th century has had a strong bias in favour of civil society as the main actor for democratisation. And the main names in favour of the theoretical and empirical foundation of this bias were new interpreters of Alexis de Tocqueville's classical "Democracy in America" such as Putnam and Lary Diamond. Solidly founded in political theory and broadly relying on empirical research, Encarnación's book follows an original, albeit vehemently discussed idea against the mainstream.

The author's attempt consists in demonstrating that the consolidation of democracy does not properly correlate with a strong civil society, but much more with strong political institutions. To believe Encarnación, there is rather an inverse causal relation between social capital and political institutions, i. e. the political institutions are more important

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for the creation and strength of social capital than social capital for that of political institutions. In a certain sense, E. seeks to restore the supremacy of political factors for explaining political processes over that of non-political factors, such as social capital and civil society. So this question reminds the reader of the unsolved question about what came first: the egg or the chicken... E.'s high profile statements of the initial chapters continue all over the book and remain so interesting, that one does not like to interrupt the lecture from beginning to the end.

Under a methodological aspect, the author follows the logical way: He takes a country such as Spain, with – as he states – a surprisingly weak civil society and strong political institutions, and a country such as Brazil, with a notorious strong civil society, but whose political institutions are commonly described as weak.

The author develops his theoretical framework through a vivid dispute about Tocqueville's analyses of American democracy and the role of civil society in it, complemented and actualised with a vigorous analysis of Putnam's description of civil society in North Italy and of Diamond's general use of this approach to explain consolidation of democracy. This way Encarnación arrives to his analytical instrumentarium, based on the concept of 'social capital' and of 'political institutions'. Social capital's strength or weakness are investigated by using indicators such as association density, grass root movements, advocacy functions and labor movement. For the analyses of political institutions he uses three main indicators: the government's efficiency towards democratisation, the legacy of states structures in meeting social needs, and the capacity of party system to integrate and represent society.

Undoubtedly, at a first glance the author succeeds brightly in his attempt. He proceeds strict logically for both countries in applying strictly this schema to both countries. Unfortunately, however, a second glance reveals a fundamental weakness in the empirical and analytical handling of arguments by the Author, so that the whole thesis can be reverted into its contrary.

First of all, the author compares only a fine slice of the reality – the “mine” or “associational density” – and leaves the whole mountain without consideration: The different historical paths of both countries are a decisive factor for the different meaning of the same factors in different contexts. Spain has profited in some way from the heritage of civil war acting on behalf of the efficiency of its corporate organisations (trade unions and employer's organisations) and state structures (among others, after Franco's dictatorship an “enlightened monarch”, who ensured the transition to democracy). Otherwise than the Brazilian ones, Spain's social corporations revealed to be sufficiently strong to generate a fundamental social pact preliminary to the reintroduction and consolidation of democracy after the Franco dictatorship. Inversely, Brazilian civil society has experienced no civil war, and at least since 1930, with the revolution of Getúlio Vargas, who governed first (1930-37) with democratic means and then (1937-45) with dictatorial ones, civil society was kept under leading strings by corporatist State. The social conflicts in the post World War II era developed amidst the Cold War, and ideological disputes between Western democracies and the socialist block rebounded in the mobilisation of trade unions and social movements, especially in the 1950s and early 1960s. But the social mobilisation was never so strong as to reverse political institutions, but surely strong enough as to provoke in 1964 the military intervention against the “Communist” danger. There was certainly an enormous social capital in Brazilian society – but it was

circumscribed to the respective side behind the social “wall” that divided Brazilian society then and that divides it also nowadays. Also in the 1980s and 1990s civil society’s strong mobilisation did not succeed in its campaign for direct democratic elections in order to pose a clear end to the military regime in 1985 – what is to say that it was not strong enough as to determine the way of transition to democracy. But also the military regime was just able to determine this way, but not more able to retain power, since its candidate did not achieve the majority of the indirect election, because its main supporter and president of ARENA (the civil arm of the military regime), José Sarney, had timely changed to opposition party MDB. This apparent stalemate between civil society and political institutions continued after the introduction of the “New Republic” (1985-1990), because the whole transition to democracy was barely the result of a negotiation within state elites, and the presidency fell in the hands of José Sarney, the former president of military ARENA, who as vice-president assumed the office after the sudden death of the elected president, Tancredo Neves.

This stalemate situation persisted also after the democratic presidential election of 1989, the first direct election since 1960, because the elected President Collor ought his victory decisively to the massive vote of “descamisados” (“shirtless”), to whom he promised besides the end of inflation also a veritable hunt of “maharadschas”, so as to put an end to the generalised corruption of political parties and failed economic programs of the “New Republic”. Because none of these promises was fulfilled and over that Collor himself was investigated and judged guilty by Brazilian Senate because corruption in 1992, the president renounced in december under strong pressure from civil society’s mass demonstrations and in anticipation of the verdict from Senate. So once more neither states institutions nor civil society succeeded in imposing the respective views.

Also President Cardoso (1995-2002), the first Brazilian president to be reelected immediately after his first terme, could not realise his whole liberalising and/or modernising and moralising program of economic, political and judicial reforms, partly because of strong opposition from political parties, among them thereafter victorious Worker’s Party PT under ideological leadership of Lula, partly because of the organised mass protest of trade unions, Catholic Church’s ‘Bases Communities’ and social movement’s organisations such as of the landless workers MST and others. Nowadays one could add about President Lula, elected and reelected with record votes from leftist till mid-rightist parties, that also this former trade union leader with clearly leftist and social programs has not been able to implement his whole reform program particularly regarding political moralising reform, land reform, tax reform, and social as well as ecological sustainable economic development – though civil society has markedly increased its pressure on most of these items.

That is to say that neither Brazilian civil society nor Brazilian states institutions were as strong as E. sustains, logically obliged to do so as a consequence of the analysed three indicators regarding both of them. The reason is of epistemological nature: The isolation of individual factors might facilitate a comparison between different countries, and an analytical view within a single country, but it can also lead to overseeing the different meanings of the same factors in different societies and in different historical contexts, as well the right assessment of the cause-effect relations between the actor’s activities and institutional changes in their whole context.

But self a discussion about the single indicators can reveal some weak points in E.'s arguments. Particularly regarding post-transition democratic institutions they have not rightly captured their strength, as showed by the example of Collor's dismissal in 1992 after strictly observed regulations under the new democratic Constitution, passed only four years earlier and already submitted to its hardest proof regarding democratic consolidation. Collor was replaced by his Vice President, that is, without any rupture of institutional normality. But this fact does not receive the right weight under the light of the indicator "government's efficiency towards democratisation or consolidation". The achieved stage of democratic consolidation was far higher than admitted by Encarnación's. Perhaps the A. was himself captured by his own hypothesis corset. Regarding the discrepancy between neo-Tocquevillean expectancies for civil society and what Brazilian case reveals for democratic consolidation, Encarnación did not ignore that there are "alternative explanations". But his discussion of these alternatives remains quite superficial (pp. 125-7).

Summarising, Encarnación offers a very interesting and informative essay about civil society and state institutions in Spain and Brazil, both in authoritarian regimes and in civil regimes as well as in phases of transition to democracy and of democratic consolidation. But he does not demonstrate convincingly what factors are really overwhelming in the transition to democracy and in the democratic consolidation. At least in Brazil one cannot deny a certain stalemate situation in the relationship between state actors and political institutions on the one side and civil society mobilisation on the other. For this purpose it is necessary to go further in the analysis of statistical evidence, so as to assess the link between social trust and the degree of effective participation of people in their organisations, the link between regional unequal distribution of associations density and the distribution of social capital, and the link between socio-economic groups and the social trust within each group and among them. Only after such an in-going and differentiated analysis of civil society it's possible to assess accurately its effective influence on state structures, political institutions and concretely the consolidation of democracy.

The merit of this book lies in the presentation of a very complex subject under the light of one or two instigating hypothesis that help the reader to order his ideas about the nature of relations between state and society in phases of transition to democracy and of democratic consolidation. Minor errors are light to be corrected, as for example:

- "The military's restructuring of the party system (...) began in the early 1970s with the creation of the PMDB and PDS" (p. 155). This is historically wrong. Correct: PMDB and PDS were created after the abolition of ARENA and MDB by a law approved by Brazilian Congress in 22.11.1979. PDS replaced ARENA (military support party), and PMDB the oppositional MDB.
- "...This effort continued under Itamar Franco, who replaced Collor in 1991". This date ist wrong. Vice President Itamar Franco assumed the presidency in December 1992, after Collor's resignation.

This failing accuracy in details can have huge consequences for the precision degree of historical analysis about decisive factors related to political parties and state institutions during the transition and the consolidation phase of Brazilian democracy. But

they do not reduce the high interest of this book for both scholars and politicians, who are accustomed to reflect about underlining substantial features which can explain the interplay between civil society and democratic consolidation.

2. Nylen's approach: unpretentious, but insightful

The book of William R. Nylen has precisely this point in the middle of its comparative analyses: the relationship between participatory structures of politics and civic engagement, contrasting with the relationship between elitist democracy and civic disengagement. The countries compared are Brazil and the United States.

This approach differs substantially from that of Encarnación. Instead of the relationship between 'weak democracy and strong civil society' or between 'strong democracy and weak civil society', what makes the core of Nylen's research is a practically and theoretically constructive one, namely the attempt made in Brazil by the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores PT*) to cope with one of the hugest problems of Brazilian democracy: that of the "country's infamously elitist politics" (p. X). Founded amidst the process of authoritarian guided political opening of the military regime in February 1980, the PT results from a joint initiative of civil society, trade unions and grass roots communities of the Catholic Church with the core claim to open up local politics to so-called popular political participation – that is, to individuals and groups that "were historically ignored by or excluded from political decision-making processes" (p. X). The tools found by PT to foster this inclusion in its first conquered local governments was the creation of sectoral "Councils" (health, education and so on) in mid 1980s in São Paulo, and later on the innovation of the "participatory budget" (abbreviated 'PB'), first of all in Porto Alegre in 1989.

Nylen analyses the PB in the drought-parched North-East region, and in industrial towns of the Southeastern state Minas Gerais since 1995. Such a budget represents for the Workers' Party the chance to break the power of economic and political elites on the local agenda of politics – through determination of spending priorities for public works by neighbourhood meetings and their delegates, who vote in a city-wide assembly on a final list of budget priorities. This list is subsequently submitted to city council for deliberation.

The bulk of empirical material consists of *qualitative interviews* (with common citizens, PT politicians and elected elite officials) and of standardised interviews with PB-delegates for quantitative examinations. For his theoretical framework Nylen puts forward in Chapter 1 Bobbio's concept of democracy as a "dynamic" system in which "the process of 'becoming' is the natural state". Democracy is accordingly for Nylen "a conflictual process of inclusionary adaptation". A democracy is stagnant when its "inclusionary process" stops (p. 4). Democracy can appear "stagnant" in the USA and "dynamic" in Brazil. This is the guideline of the whole book, whose both first chapters describe these processes "elitist democracy, civic disengagement and citizen politics" in the United States and in Brazil. Nylen argues that there is in the USA a disconnect between citizen politics as a nonpartisan form of political participation on the one side and the "well-entrenched official politics of political parties, politicians and their socio-economic elite supporters", on the other. Nylen adverts that a "bridge" between both sides is necessary,

when the slide from stagnant to decaying democracy is to be stalled or even reversed. He asks whether this bridge can exist in form of the PT's experiment of "PB" in Brazil. His answer is univocal – both theoretically and practically. For him the PB is not a panacea nor a Utopia – but a "blueprint for a necessary democratic revival in the twenty-first century" and as such not a substitute to representative democracy, but a "complementary set of inclusionary institutional reforms that could help to harness the 'social capital' inherent in citizen politics everywhere and, thereby, revive some of contemporary democracy's lost lustre" (p. 12). This way Nylen carries on Encarnación's research and sets it under a positive light.

After describing Brazil's nearly hopeless situation regarding civic disengagement as the "rule rather than the exception" and as the outcome of the "combination of elitist patrimonial social structures and political traditions with new forms of organized social violence" (p. 18), Nylen describes in Chapter 2 the emergence of "a series of autonomous nonelite movements" in the late 1950s and early 1960s, their "violent squelch" by the repressive military reaction to them in the period 1964-1985 and the "resurrection of civil society" that accompanied the "elite negotiations" towards redemocratization in the mid-1980s. And he argues, with civil society's researcher Kathryn Hoschstetler, that the transformation of "former antiauthoritarian activism into participation in democratic political parties" preserved the "healthy presence of critical citizens in Brazil in confronting an otherwise dreary postauthoritarian political history of elitist politics and civic disengagement." The articulation of many of these critical citizens into a progressive party committed to further democratisation – the Workers' Party – built according to Nylen the searched "bridge" between "official political institutions and processes" and "the 'citizen politics' of nonelite political activism" (p. 20).

After discussing his conception of participatory democracy in the context of "empowerment" and "Neo-Tocquevillian" positions, Nylen reveals his practical interest in research, setting off in Chapter 3 the common characteristic of the theoretical controversy, polarised between "political society-centered" and "civil society-centered" positions. The convergence between Neo-Tocquevillian and New Left approaches was made possible by the willingness of the post-Cold War New Left "to work within the rules of the game of formal-institutional representative democracy while, at the same time, professing a transformative vision of reforming democracy in a more participatory direction". This convergence resulted in a "reduced support for the civil society-centered approach to empowerment politics" and an increased support for the political society-centered Neo-Tocquevillians, which seek "to bring the Participatory Democratic model down from the realm of political theory into the real world" (p. 34). The concrete experience of this attempt is what Brazilian Workers' Party realised in local and state governments it administered since end 1980s: the PB.

Chapter 4 analyses the origin and evolution of Workers' Party PT in the sense of an institutional learning and at the same time in the effort to invert the priorities of local and state politics, leading to increased popular participation. The Popular Budget was seen as an innovation capable to solve the contradiction between party commitment people had to hold within and through the councils on the one side and people's nonpartisan empowerment on the other.

Chapter 5 is a descriptive presentation of the experience of PT in implementing the PB in Betim, a medium-sized industrial city (300.000 inhabitants in 1998) in the metro-

politan area of Belo Horizonte, capital of the state of Minas Gerais. In its two PT-governments (1993-1996 and 1997-2000), Betim experienced successively a march forward to greater popular participation and a march backward to greater influence from official administration. This contradictory evolution was somewhat compensated by a narrower scope of influence in the march forward (limited mainly to decisions about public works) and by a broader scope of the smaller popular participation in the march backward (broadened to decisions about the entire city budget). A summarised description of the whole process can be quickly found in pp. 59-60, characterised as “representative of the universe of cases of PT-administered PB programs”. Two main features are worth to be mentioned: a) the involvement of neighbourhood as the basic cells and b) the not so unproblematic parallelism between this new channel of popular representation and the traditional representative city council, explicitly legitimated by elections and parties.

The following chapters elaborate the discussion about the arguments pro-PB and anti-PB in such a manner as to enable the reader to judge himself the usefulness of this innovation for deepening democracy. The fundamentals of the discussion are a sage combination of empirical findings with theoretical assumptions. As such, the conclusions are somewhat disillusioning, as quantitative data of Chapter 6 about gender, education and employment of PB participants reveal: The popular character of those men and women participating in the PB is given, but the empowerment effect is not evident, since about 80 percent were already engaged in neighbourhood associations previous to their engagement in the PB. That is to say: the poorest of the poor were not present, and the majority of powerless people were not empowered (p. 71). But empirical findings in qualitative interviews enhance theoretical assumptions about the positive contribution of PB to democracy: Direct election of PB-delegates and the need to negotiate with PB-delegates of other neighbourhood associations, direct challenging of antidemocratic clientelistic distribution of public services and goods, greater accountability through open distribution of informations about municipal finances by PB-delegates confirm that PB constitutes a veritable new layer of political representation.

Chapter 7 examines four anti-PB criticisms (parallelism to existing representative body, low participation index, partisanization of people, and absence of participation know how), which are differentiated in the light of the above cited findings.

Chapter 8, the last one, tries to summarise the findings under a theoretical eclectic view, in an explicit opposition to overwhelmingly materialistic and hegemonic approaches to (elitist) democracy. Nylen illustrates this eclectic view with abundant citations of his qualitative interviews about life histories of PB-participants, that are “inspiring tales of personal commitment to an ideology of democratising democracy.” Nylen concludes summarising: “Standard motivations of money (licitly or otherwise gained), power (including careerism), and traditions or mainstream political cultures cannot explain such a commitment [to PB-engagement], at least not in the Brazilian case”.

In his “Conclusions”, Nylen draws six lessons from the Brazilian case. Besides the relevance of PB for “the ills of US’ elitist democracy”, Nylen warns against unrealistic expectations, stresses the positive PB’s contribution to representative democracy through inclusion of nonelite activists, presents PB as “schools of democracy”, underlines the need for PB-strategies guided by relevance, efficacy, realism, and nonpartisanship; and he finally concludes with the necessary commitment of PB administrators to the ideal of Participatory democratic reform.

The research result is neither euphoric nor discouraging. The poorest of the poor remain out of the political process, but common citizens and politically engaged citizens, who find time to participate, have greater influence on the results of PB than otherwise, through simple participation in a city council. This result seems modest. But in his assessment about this “masterful little book”, Lawrence Dodd (Univ. of Florida) writes: “To imagine thousands of American citizens joining together in local meetings in their neighbourhoods, and then in collective assemblies, and then at city council meetings, pushing for the budget priorities they have embraced through local deliberation and mass votes – that is a vision worthy of de Tocqueville” (p. XVII). What might have lead Dodd to such an assessment? I think, substantially the accurate empirical research against a backdrop of a well based democracy theory.

3. Conclusions

Comparing both books, one cannot oversee their different approaches to empirical study, their different theoretical positions, and their partly contrary, partly complementary conclusions about civil society contribution to politics. Encarnación’s empirical work consists mainly of secondary literature about contemporary Brazil under a historical and political aspect, and his scope was the whole Brazilian society and politics – a “macroanalysis”. Differently, Nylen has developed his own field investigation in form of a case study about a strictly delimited object in a geographically well defined region. Encarnación’s theoretical approach could be described as strictly institutionalist, so far he considers political institutions as the main factor explaining social capital’s birth and death. Encarnación takes clearly distance vis-à-vis Neo-Tocquevillian positions and leaves no doubt about his consent with civil society criticisms. Nylen, on the contrary, tries to integrate and to further develop the Neo-Tocquevillian approach, even to the point of turning it to its contrary – from a civil society-centered to a political society-centered view. And at this point, he meets Encarnación. So the reader may stone over the fact that both authors come to a similar cautious conclusion about the role of civil society for deepening democracy. Neither Encarnación nor Nylen mystifie civil society. But Nylens “eclectic” (or ecumenical) approach gives far more constructive propositions for including civil society participation in political channels than Encarnación’s narrow institutionalistic approach.

Bibliography

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