

**Leonardo Avritzer. *Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). 205 pp. ISBN 0-691-09088-2 (paper), 0-691-09087-4 (cloth).**

*Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America*, by Leonardo Avritzer, is a work in comparative politics that casts a critical eye on many issues in democratic theory, using analytical and empirical frameworks to elaborate a normative theory of deliberative democracy – specifically for the recently emerging Latin American democracies. Focusing on the potential of the public space as an arena for the construction of meaningful participation, this book is timely as many Latin American social movements struggle to occupy, explore and give new meanings to public spaces.

Avritzer builds a strong case against the theoretical assumptions and claims of traditional democratic theory, showing how they do not account for or respond to the historical, political and cultural realities in this region. He thus proposes a model he terms “participatory publics” to suggest a path towards the development and strengthening of a participatory and durable democratic culture and structure in Latin America. He looks at human rights movements in Argentina and Brazil, clientelism and participatory budgeting in Brazil, neighbourhood associations in Brazil and Mexico, and election-monitoring projects in Mexico to build his case. While this book is a valuable contribution to the field, it does have a number of important weaknesses and fails to consider a number of major limitations and constraints in contemporary Latin America. Nonetheless, students and scholars of Latin America, cultural politics, democratic theory, and social movements will find here a useful review and critique of traditional theories, a promising new conception of public space and participation, and fertile ground for further investigation and inquiry.

In the first two chapters, Avritzer reviews and critiques democratic elitism and transition theories, showing that both are inadequate for the analysis of the formation of public places or the mechanisms of transfer from the public to the political spheres. He modifies Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, suggesting that such a renewed concept of the public sphere can provide an alternative solution to the apparent contradiction between participation and administrative complexity which democratic elitism was designed to overcome. He gives his discussion an institutional dimension with his conception of “participatory publics”, which involves the public problematization and politicization of issues, the public’s introduction of alternative practices, their separation from, but monitoring of administration, and the development of appropriate institutional formats. In chapter three, he extends this conception to Latin American democracies, emphasizing the specific cultural politics and political hybridization of the region.

In chapters four to six, Avritzer outlines the development of a new conception of the public sphere in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s and three social movements that emerged in this period. He fleshes out his model of participatory publics in greater detail using the examples of participatory budgeting in Brazil and election-monitoring in Mexico. He concludes in chapter seven with the proposal that Latin American democracies may overcome the specific challenges they face with the renewal and innovation of democratic practices that participatory and deliberative processes in public spaces can foster.

The strength of Avritzer’s contribution is two-fold. First, his analysis is extensive and enlightening in its examination and critique of traditional democratic theory, and its shortcomings when applied to Latin American democracies are made clear by the well-chosen and well-researched examples he provides. Second, by analytically and empirically including considerations of culture, he recognizes the importance of the collective creation of public space and attaches great value to its potential for the renewal and democratization of Latin American politics. His notion of participatory publics will likely prove a useful analytic concept in studies of social movements and democratization in the region and as such it opens many doors for further critical analysis.

One weakness of Avritzer’s treatment of democracy is the scant attention he pays to theories of radical participatory democracy. While his critique of democratic elitism and related theories is well-developed, he fails to demonstrate why radical democratic theories are likewise ill-equipped to provide a viable model of democratization. One assumes his position is that such theories cannot adequately deal with administrative complexity. However, further analysis here would have been valuable.

In addition, his treatment of the mechanisms by which public concerns, deliberation and innovations are taken up in the political realm is incomplete. In his examples of participatory budgeting and election-monitoring, it seems that such transfer was largely dependent on the acceptance of public proposals by political elites, and thus it is unclear how his model entirely moves beyond the elites-masses dichotomy he so condemns.

A further problem is Avritzer’s insufficient attention to critiques of deliberative theories of democracy and the need for mechanisms that promote democratic participation within the public space. How can we ensure that this space is accessible to the range of *different* voices in society? How are democratic decision-making processes to be employed? What safeguards can protect us from particularism? These are surely questions that further elaboration of Avritzer’s model will have to address.

Finally, Avritzer’s emphasis on the public space and participation falls short for two related reasons. First, he does not seem to fully consider the important effects of extreme levels of both poverty and social injustice in Latin American societies. Truly participatory and inclusive processes of interest articulation and public deliberation are likely in many cases to result in calls for fundamental changes to the economic and political order. Indeed, this is precisely what seems to be happening in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia and Mexico, where proposals and demands from civil society go beyond institutional reforms and participatory projects and are often explicitly not only anti-capitalist but also autonomist and anti-institutional. While a concept of participatory publics may well be able to respond to such calls, Avritzer’s treatment seems to be applied only to democratization within the currently dominant capitalist framework. It is unclear whether or not he considers that his model could accommodate calls for radical structural change.

Second, and following this first point, Avritzer’s model seems to ignore the increasingly limited possibilities of Latin American nations to autonomously propose and implement economic and political changes in the current historical conjuncture. Structural adjustment requirements, skyrocketing debt payments, military presence, and other forms of direct and indirect interference from central political and financial powers undermine

the possibilities of individual Latin American countries to foster the development of public spaces and incorporate the political innovations that participatory publics can propose and demand.

*Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America* is important for its well-developed critique of traditional democratic theory and its contribution to the literature of a model of democratization in Latin America based on participatory publics, grounded in the public space and both analytically and empirically defended. As new meanings and practices of democracy are constructed in the public spaces of Latin America, this book is a timely reminder that new models of democratic theory must account for the participation of civil society. Such models must also respond to geopolitical and global economic realities, local and regional tensions and hardships, and innovative and inspiring forms of resistance and struggle. Herein lays the book's weakness: its incompleteness and its failure to address a range of problems related to the design and implementation of mechanisms that would allow a model of participatory publics to function in Latin America today. Yet, there is much opportunity here. Students and scholars in related fields will find much value in this work and will hopefully build on Avritzer's model and further develop a truly significant and useful contribution to our understanding of democracy and democratization in Latin America.

## In the Métro

Leela Viswanathan

**Marc Augé. *In the Métro*. Translated and with an Introduction and Afterword by Tom Conley. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). 125 pp. ISBN 0-8166-3436-X (hardcover), 0-8166-3437-8 (paper).**

*In the Métro* is ethnologist Marc Augé's exploration of the Paris subway. The book consists of Augé's essay, complemented by an Introduction and a 40-page Afterword both written by Tom Conley. Through Augé's theorising and his personal descriptions of subway experiences, the reader can consider how the subway can be viewed as a microcosm of a city influenced by the forces of globalization. As an academic work, *In the Métro* contributes to the body of literature that explores local, urban, and physical manifestations of the forces of globalization. It is a timely read, given the current resurgence in interest in "urban narratives" and everyday practices in the city. Augé's reflections, united with Conley's deft and helpful contextual analysis, make this a book worth reading by urban researchers.

*In the Métro* describes specific rituals of subway travel through the time and space of everyday life. Augé observes how individuals negotiate their experiences and encounters on the subway in a manner that is context-driven, based on time and space, and with the aid of symbols and maps. Time and space are constructed as part of the quotidian ritual, a mundane routine of necessity where an individual must get from home to work to sleep – "métro, boulot, dodo" (subway, work, sleep) – but is locked in space that is mapped according to the grid of subterranean transportation. Augé's narrative is much like the narrative of anthropologies of "everyday life" where the relations between itineraries and maps, or reading and cartography, are drawn out; what Michel de Certeau calls "the relation between two symbolic and anthropological languages of space".<sup>284</sup> Maps are imposed and reflect how individuals can move through space. Maps are documents that outline routes for discovery, whereby individuals can negotiate space, networks of routes, and the language of travel. Augé notes that individuals use these itineraries every day, the kind of "itineraries they have no choice but to follow."<sup>285</sup> Transfers [North American] or "les correspondances" [French] or "coincidences" [Italian] document on slips of paper the possibilities for subway connections and junctions to be made through space, dependent on windows of time.

If the métro is indeed, as Augé would suggest, what the rider (and the reader of this book) brings to it over space and time, what then is it about the subway that makes it a

<sup>284</sup> Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. (Berkeley: University of California, 1989), 119.

<sup>285</sup> Marc Augé. *In the Métro*. Translated and with an Introduction and Afterword by Tom Conley. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 25.