Techniques of Absence in Participatory Budgeting: Space, Difference and Governmentality across Buenos Aires

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Techniques of absence describe some of the potentially anti-deliberative practices that haunt recently widespread participation-based governance schemes. Techniques of absence remove certain kinds of people – on a spatialised basis – from crucial ‘democratic’ conversations. To illustrate these, I use ethnographic accounts from the implementation of a city-wide participatory budgeting programme in three neighbourhoods across Buenos Aires, Argentina, modelled after the vaunted budgeting process pioneered in Porto Alegre, Brazil since 1989. I position absencing as part of an emergent urban governmentality related to participation. This allows for an analysis of the Buenos Aires participatory budget across very different areas of the city: Puerto Madero, Abasto, and La Boca. Discussion centres on dynamics of participation and non-participation observed during extensive fieldwork in 2004 and 2005. The research aimed to establish intense co-presence through participant-observation, yet instead yielded an ethnography of absences, entailing analysis of how, why and with what consequences there was lacking participation in this participatory experiment. The phenomenon of absencing points to an emergent governmentality that enables ironically pernicious, territorialisised regulation of difference, which must be countered to fulfil the promise of such widespread experiments.

Keywords: participatory budgeting, deliberative democracy, spatial governmentality, urban governance, Buenos Aires.

‘We are an idiosyncratic people! We are tired of eating toads! We deserve our own meeting!’ Such was the call of Liliana, an elderly widow from central Buenos Aires, who marked each thought with the performative punctuation of a tensed hand chopping through the smoky air around her. She stood before a participatory budgeting meeting of 60 fellow residents, dramatically claiming her title as a ‘neighbour’ (vecina), but of a locale smaller than the more expansive urban service district represented by the mass of attendees. Her insistence on a separate meeting was part of an episode that nearly derailed an inclusionary experiment in urban political participation within the Argentine capital during mid-2004. That night, in the hazy basement of a municipal government...
building, debates raged about where the next budget meeting would be, involving whom. In this public school, or that firehouse? Nearer to a population of less mobile retirees, or any site at the other geographical extreme from the current location? As just one of many efforts to create absence amidst participation, this instance illuminates an underexplored facet of urban budgeting experiments: their potential to introduce new spatialised power dynamics, specifically regarding which social groups are encouraged to participate with whom, where and on what terms, across the neighbourhoods of the city.

Such experimental reforms in urban governance span Latin America. In the wake of widespread dictatorships, neoliberal programmes of state decentralisation shifted more responsibilities (if not more resources) to subnational levels, especially to cities by the 1990s. Simultaneous encouragement of citizen participation in the narrower purview of these governments is a hallmark of the era, ostensibly signalling states more open, localised and responsive than the corrupt, biased and authoritarian regimes of the not-so-distant past. This contributes to an emergent governmentality in the region’s cities: an art of government bringing residents into new relations of rule that, despite promises, can render strikingly basic inequalities in the regulation of possibilities for self-management across urban space. Imperfect inclusions may be a fact of democratic practice, but in participation programmes that are replicated widely it is important to understand the nature of absences and their implications.

Among the region’s urban reforms, district-level participatory budgeting in the southern Brazilian city of Porto Alegre is the most praised, scrutinised model (Koonings, 2004). Its system for public prioritisation of services in the city budget has become a paradigm for participation in deliberative democracy exported to local governments throughout the global South as a ‘best practice’ of urban governance (see Goldfrank, 2007). But optimal outcomes rely on two basic assumptions: equality or comparability across sites within a polity regarding (a) the state’s orientation toward participation, and (b) citizen access to the public sphere of participatory decision-making. This article highlights striking differentiations in the participatory budget-making process across three socio-economically varied locations in one of those cities that wholeheartedly imported the Porto Alegre model: its megacity neighbour to the south, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

I offer an ethnographic critique of the participatory budgeting model based on the effects of its territorialising instruments and the anti-deliberative, uneven governmentality this can engender, particularly in techniques of absence: manoeuvres by state agents involving division, secession, or exclusion in participatory governance, as well as dispositions toward or against participation acted out by neighbourhood residents. To frame my analysis of these techniques, I outline relevant perspectives on governmentality, space and urban participatory experiments in the global South. I then describe the Buenos Aires case and my field sites across the city, where I base my empirical discussion of participation, non-participation and their dynamics as observed during fieldwork in 2004 and 2005. To conclude, I relate my conceptual contemplations from these specific Argentine neighbourhoods to the broader context of urban experiments in participatory governance, underlining the utility of a governmentality lens.

The research, which aimed to establish intense co-presence through participant-observation, ended up being an ethnography of absences. Over more than two years, I maintained an active presence in the social and cultural life of neighbourhoods analysed in this article, achieved via numerous points of entry. Most useful were volunteer work and participation in social activities among peers, initially of my age (mid-20s at the time), but eventually broadening to a range of generations. This grounding aided me in the main method used for researching this article: attending public budgeting
meetings and understanding their local dynamics. I participated in meetings in all three
neighbourhoods, although occasionally two were scheduled simultaneously, so I relied
on notes and commentary from multiple contacts who attended gatherings I missed.
Yet not everything pertinent to the Presupuesto Participativo (PP; participatory budget)
was happening in the gatherings themselves. This ethnography of absences draws on
my broader interview-based research and longitudinal observation in these sites and
among Buenos Aires urbanists (architects, planners, developers) to understand how and
why specific groups were not present in the budgeting process, with what effects in the
crafting of budget priorities. Explaining absenteeism was not the primary aim (although
that is part of the subsection on secession); instead the goal was to document and
conceptualise absencing.

Santos (2002: 246) outlines a ‘sociology of absences’ as the effort to denaturalise,
query and explain social configurations that do not exist, because often these are
actively produced as non-existent within a hegemonic context. Borrowing from his
idea, my ethnography of absences delves into how and why the participatory budget
in Buenos Aires regulated spaces of difference as well as created different spaces for
separated participations; in essence, to elucidate the making of absences. The record
of events and relations in the course of budgeting points to particular techniques of
absence – secession, division and exclusion – that unsettle some received notions about
the more general Porto Alegre model, especially its ability to politically integrate poorer
residents without clientelism and create more egalitarian deliberative processes.

Political sociologists and anthropologists working in Latin America have ethnographi-
cally examined new forms of urban politics in practice, emphasising how disadvantaged
sectors participate in local governance to improve their livelihoods and enact their citi-
zenship, grappling with the state. This article, in contrast, advances two main arguments:
(a) Implementing the Porto Alegre model institutes participation parameters varying sig-
nificantly across socio-economic divides of the city, leading to differentiated inclusions
despite rhetoric of equality, and (b) More localised participatory frameworks experi-
ments can grant the urban state more latitude to shape citizen populations differentially
over its territory.

**Governmentality and Participatory Reform in the Global South**

The conceptual springboard for these ethnographic interventions is Foucault’s notion
of governmentality, which later interlocutors describe as the art of conducting conduct
(Dean, 2010: 17–21). Governmentality entails the logics, attitudes and mindsets of
governance, including disparate methods employed by state and non-state actors to
realise a form of social order. Foucault is concerned with how difference is created and
governed, as it shapes life possibilities for differentially categorised populations (through
‘bio-politics’) – whether distinguished by gender, race, religion, class, or another power-
laden dimension (Dean, 2010: 118–120).

The delimitation of recognisable territories where governmentality operates is funda-
mental in spreading rule across space, contributing to the creation of distinctly
located populations to govern (Foucault, 2007: 11). Further theorisations underline
*spatial governmentality* as shaping citizen behaviour through place-specific forms of
discipline, punishment and security (Merry, 2001). However, few theorisations broach
the fields of unequal power relations in which states and other agents work above,
below, through and around apparatuses of government to empower and enact certain
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assumptions and agendas. Ferguson and Gupta (2002) discuss governmentality as traditionally spatialised via ‘verticality’ and ‘encompassment’, yet disrupted in neoliberal programmatic interventions that reposition the state in varying ways, depending on specific reforms, necessitating further analyses of governmentality in experimental programmes. Roy (2009) uncovers new spaces for inclusive civic participation in contexts of great inequality, but she also delineates the demobilising and anti-political logics these governmentalities can instil amongst followers.

Drawing on these insights, I show techniques of absence to be key tools of the urban state but also of urban residents themselves in the art of territorially differentiated conduct of conduct across Buenos Aires in the wake of the Porto Alegre model. The paradigm of localised participation, ironically, creates a form of government where spatialised whimsy is emboldened, as visible in absencing that mars the utopianism of such experiments.

Utopian Experiments

Small-scale, participatory forms of politics in less-developed countries promise more deliberative decision-making processes and robust yet flexible engagement with civil society – an ideal endorsed by prominent observers in policymaking and the social sciences (Borja and Castells, 1997; Campbell, 2003; Fung, 2004). Experiments in Brazil, India and South Africa are cited foremost as imperfect but hopeful efforts in this direction (Heller, 2001; Evans, 2004). Such participatory models of governance have now reached most of the global South as ‘best practice’ (Devas, 2004; Shah, 2007), often embracing the goal of deliberative democracy – broadly construed as a process of reasoned, collective decision-making. Fung and Wright (2001, 2003) advocate ‘empowered deliberative democracy’ to replace adversarial, corrupt, inefficient politics on a local scale. They highlight ‘real utopias’ where specific public problems are addressed, ordinary citizens are empowered and solutions derived through reasoned deliberation (see also Wright, 2010), which fundamentally require a ‘rough equality of power, for the purposes of deliberative decision, between participants’ (Fung and Wright, 2001: 24).

Fung and Wright specifically praise Porto Alegre as a case of ‘empowered deliberative democracy.’ The city’s orçamento participativo (participatory budget) programme began in 1989 after the Workers’ Party prevailed in municipal elections. Participatory budgeting has evolved in the southern Brazilian city since then, but broadly maintains its original design. To summarise substantially (see also Prefeitura de Porto Alegre, 2010), the process of participatory budgeting works as follows: Porto Alegre’s 1.3 million residents, across 16 service districts, are able to meet and vote in district-specific plenaries twice yearly. Attendees discuss previous budget items and potential new priorities for improving the district, then elect two fellow resident representatives for a three-month term to a citywide council focussed on budget finalisation, and also comprising pertinent city employees. This council meets at least once weekly to collectively formulate a final budget proposal to the mayor of Porto Alegre. If the mayor vetoes the budget, remanding it to the councillors, they can modify the proposal or veto the mayoral veto with a supermajority vote.

Fung and Wright (2001: 19–21) find this extraordinary because it includes ‘ordinary’ people in deliberative decision-making, rather than inviting only elites to siphon funds technocratically, or corruptly: instead, an instance of deep democracy at its best. Other commentators laud its successful incorporation of poor communities into the practice of
government while circumventing clientelism (Abers, 1998); its efficient, just allocation
of public resources (Santos, 1998); its unprecedented transparency (Navarro, 1998);
and its ‘demonstration effect’, wherein residents begin participating passively, then
actively voice priorities after seeing neighbours influence the local budget (Avritzer,

Baiocchi (2005) offers the most ethnographic account of Porto Alegre’s culture
of participation, showing how district-level deliberation creates a public sphere that
is novel for urban Brazil, spurring everyday conversations and more formal assem-
blies that convene members of civil society in public-minded dialogue. Baiocchi’s
larger point is that residents of Porto Alegre have embraced the budget model on a
wider scale, instilling – as he shows in his fine-grained analysis of associational life in
the city – a much broader conception of participation and solidarity. Yet almost all
orçamentólogos – literally ‘budgetologists’ in Portuguese, as Baiocchi (2005: xiii) labels
them – explicitly investigate budgeting in Porto Alegre’s poor, peripheral communities. Orçamentólogos examine how these often-marginalised people become genuine actors
in the process of government, overcoming obstacles of traditional political arrangements
while also improving their own lot.

Despite the appeal of participatory governance, critics question the conditions of their
implementation, and the relations of power these shifts in jurisdiction and responsibility
inaugurate (see Silver et al., 2010). Roy (2002, 2009), argues that the essentialisation
of disempowered groups (e.g. women, minorities, the poor) in participation schemes
gives licence to a differentiated citizenship, assigning burdens and entitlements based on
categories defined by dominant groups. Addressing Porto Alegre specifically, de Souza
(2000) and others (Wood and Murray, 2007), draw attention to spatial differentiation
in what ought to be an integrally equal process. As participatory budgets always
emerge from more localised deliberations, de Souza (2000: 48–49) asks: ‘What is the
 correspondence of geographic areas to population sectors (i.e. class and race) that
make a difference in participation? What is the “geographicality” [geograficidade] of
participation and what difference does it make?’ Souza, Roy and likeminded critics
thus urge rigorous contemplation of the nature and location of participation that
urban governance reforms institute. In this view, there must be an awareness of
the governmentality – often specifically territorialised – that these experiments create.
The case of the Buenos Aires participatory budget offers a lens onto precisely these
experimental governmentalities in their spatialised expressions.

**Buenos Aires and the Prespuesto Participativo**

Among the many post-dictatorial experiments in Latin America, the Argentine expe-
rience is best known for its vigorous market liberalisation beginning in 1989, and
then the spectacular collapse of that economic model in 2001 (Grimson and Kessler,
2005). However, alongside market restructuring there were important experiments in
consolidating democratic governance that emerged in the 1990s and outlived economic
disaster. Those political reforms included the generation of a new urban constitution for
the Federal Capital, in 1996, entitling city residents to elect their head urban executive
(jefe de gobierno) directly – instead of the Buenos Aires mayor being a presidential
appointee (de Luca et al., 2002).

These reforms also created new administrative units across the city, devising mech-
anisms to incorporate porteños into municipal governance through these offices. The
Capital was divided into 18 geographical jurisdictions called Centros de Gestión y Participación (CGPs; Centres of Management and Participation), for the administration of services and mitigation of conflicts. An annual PP was to take shape through conglomerations of demands made by each CGP after deliberative sessions involving the participation of local residents. In the first years of the PP, residents developed and prioritised several broad programmes and specific operations for the city government (see Rodgers, 2010); official budget categories included: (a) Health and Environment; (b) Education; (c) Urban Space and Safety; (d) Socioeconomic Development; and (e) Culture and Sports.

Participants with a sufficient attendance record over several meetings would vote on neighbourhood representatives to take the district recommendations in each budget category to a cycle of public consultations with relevant functionaries (funcionarios), working in some technical capacity for one of its numerous topical Secretariats. The official role of the funcionarios is to offer technical expertise on neighbourhood budget recommendations, including suggestions about legislative and operational viability. The final PP then stands for approval by the municipal legislature, where locally elected representatives, allotted proportionally based on the share of the vote won by their party at the level of the entire Federal Capital, debate on its final revisions and implementation (for further details, see Crot, 2008).

Although the PP was mandated in 1996, the first citywide public budgeting only occurred in 2002 for fiscal year 2003 (Rodgers, 2010: 17–18). Meetings began in mid-2002, soon after the major political and economic crisis that shook Argentina – spurring widespread neighbourhood asambleas to voice discontent with the government and find clandestine solutions to local problems (see Dinerstein, 2003). Amidst upheaval, Buenos Aires jefe de gobierno Aníbal Ibarra concretised a plan to respond to constituents’ calls for greater accountability, attempting to transform the abrupt activation of civil society into the realisation of the Capital’s constitutional obligation of fomenting a participatory budgeting process (Peruzzotti, 2009: 47–56; Rodgers, 2010: 7–17).

A Subsecretariat of the Participatory Budget became the new entity charged with devising and maintaining a process of citizen outreach that would more directly engage ‘neighbours’ with the massive institutional apparatus of the urban state – comprising scores of offices and over 200,000 employees. The Subsecretariat and Ibarra consulted an array of municipal experiments in participation in the global South, following most consciously the standard set in Porto Alegre, Brazil (Landau, 2004: 19), with the aim of bringing the government into the lives and spaces of everyday porteños.

‘The Government in the Neighbourhoods’

Although the 18 CGPs do not map exactly onto the 47 official neighbourhoods of the city, they tend to agglomerate neighbourhoods rather than split them into separate jurisdictions (see Figure 1). The logo of the Government of the City of Buenos Aires, ubiquitous throughout the Capital, also emblazoned CGP paraphernalia alongside the slogan ‘the government in the neighbourhoods’ (el gobierno en los barrios; see Figure 2). As such, the CGP was the primary venue for crafting a closer relation of rule, with the government in the neighbourhoods.

Despite recurrent, relatively recent negative experiences with government all too present in the city – for example, through widespread state terrorism that penetrated even the household scale as recently as the 1980s – there is a general sense in Argentine political and academic discourses that the government has been rather detached from
most of its citizens (Taylor, 1998; Landau, 2008). The CGPs, then, are the urban state’s offer of a more localised government locus, presenting key services including registrations, licensures and neighbourhood recreational or professional programmes. There, urban residents can ostensibly find an accessible interlocutor with that state well above them – or participate directly, as with the budgeting process.

The three CGPs in my study of the PP were 1, 2(S), and 3 (see Figure 1). Each was part of my broader cross-class ethnographic research in the neighbourhoods of Puerto Madero, Abasto (mostly within the official designation of Balvanera), and La Boca (see Figure 3). Despite socio-economic and demographic differences (see Table 1), these areas share central locations and substantial historic character. CGP1 includes three ABs (áreas barriales, or neighbourhood areas): (a) the bohemian, gentrifying neighbourhoods of Monserrat and San Telmo; (b) the financial district and historical
Figure 2. City Government Poster Announcing the Participatory Budget Programme in Buenos Aires (Administered through the Centres for Management and Participation (CGPs), with the Slogan ‘The Government in the Neighbourhoods’).

Source: Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires; scanned image of public poster available throughout the City in 2005 (abridged along jagged line, due to space constraints; omitted content include a City map of All CGPs, addresses for the 18 CGPs, a toll-free telephone number for questions, and a large amount of empty space). Available through the Information Access Law of the City of Buenos Aires (Ley N° 104 de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires); free use according to Argentina’s Intellectual Property Law (Ley 11.723[235] el Poder Ejecutivo Nacional; Artículo 10").

centre in San Nicolás and Retiro, plus the renovated waterfront of Puerto Madero; and (c) Villa 31, a euphemism for a shantytown, located behind Retiro train station, surrounding the elevated Pan-American Freeway.

CGP2(S) has the city’s highest density, and contains three ABs: (a) south of Once train station is working-class San Cristóbal, while north lies Abasto, known for its population of Peruvians and rural Argentine migrants living amid high poverty, delinquency, vacant warehouses, and squatted homes surrounding a few high-end enclaves; (b) central Congreso, around the National Congress building, where many elderly have apartments, and the neighbourhood widely known as Once, mostly a wholesale fabric district; and (c) the southern and western parts of Congreso, home to a low-density, lower middle-class population.

CGP3’s population growth and density approximate citywide means (see Table 1). Neighbourhood composition is also more straightforward, with two ABs that map
Figure 3. Maps of each Centre of Management and Participation (CGP) Studied, with Designation of Constituent Neighbourhood Areas (Areas Barriales, or ABs).


exactly onto what locals see as specific neighbourhoods: (a) La Boca, with its prized but miniscule tourist hub and soccer arena, encompassed by a large deindustrialised area, with working-class and poor residents, including old tenements and new shanties inhabited largely by Argentine and Paraguayan migrants who sometimes lack legal claim to their homes; and (b) Barracas, with long stretches of heavy-industrial factories now inactive, and populations generally working in self-employed crafts or small-scale retail services. CGP3 also has some of the highest registers of disadvantage in health and housing in the entire Federal Capital (Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 2005: 136–145; di Virgilio et al., 2008).

The establishment of the CGPs in 1996 suggests not only a more localised face for the state, but also a spatialised aspect to its projects and knowledge. Indeed, studies of spatial governmentality highlight that mechanisms for controlling social order in this vein focus on populations as a whole and the management of risk within them, in a sort of the logic akin to zoning (Merry, 2001: 16–17). In the case of the CGPs and the PP, these foci coalesce in the territorialised management of populations via techniques of absence that shape the conduct of participation differentially across city neighbourhoods.
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Table 1. Population, Area, and Density of Centros de Gestión y Participación (CGPs)

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Source: Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires (2003: Capítulo 1.7).

Techniques of Absence

How can absence be a technique of participation? To be absent is a condition that can assume a plethora of forms and meanings, and in the Foucaultian sense can be productive, creating particular power effects. Absence is also always an inherently spatialised situation as the opposite of presence. In this section I detail several instances of absencing – of creating absence – in which both state agents and urban residents themselves territorially guided the ‘conduct of conduct’ related to participatory budgeting. I focus on three different forms (secession, division, and exclusion) in order to dissect their dynamics and repercussions for the utopian aims of participatory budgeting. As an ethnographic endeavour, my own presence amidst absences was the primary means for gaining insight on features of an emergent governmentality in Buenos Aires related to this experimental programme. These empirical examples of absencing illustrate efforts to create isolated, controlled and prevented participation, respectively. Rather than presenting a definitive evaluation of the PP, these show concretely how space and difference can figure practically in the governmentality of participatory budgeting – an issue essentially unexplored despite the booming proliferation of this model.

Secession: Foiled and Fruitful

I first encountered techniques of absence in the course of their frustrated use: the scenario described with Liliana’s quote above, when secession from group deliberations in CGP2(S) failed. What initially seemed cantankerous squabbles occasioned by unrestrained democratic debate later demonstrated clear patterns of self-managed participation by different kinds of vecinos – that is, distinct populations. Here I elaborate...
moments in participatory governance when secession was at work: the first two foiled, with very different results; the third, completely unobstructed, producing particular effects by creating absence.

First, in the case introduced with Liliana’s impassioned plea for separate meetings, several other interventions demonstrated the logic of secession. Why would Liliana want her AB3 to secede from larger CGP deliberations? Her testimony claimed her community comprised retirees like herself who received insufficient government payments for senior citizens even to ride the public buses to reach the CGP seat where meetings were held. In fact, the CGP building was inconveniently located for all ABs, on the eastern extreme of the district, near the border between ABs 2 and 3. This meant AB1 was most disadvantaged geographically, yet its attendance was highest. It was also the district with most poor residents (regardless of age) represented in the deliberations—meaning they travelled further on even fewer resources than the retired.

Others in the debate further illuminated this secessionist technique. Nicolás, resident in AB1, animated thorny discussions involving no budget matters whatsoever. The night Liliana beseeched secession, Nico repeatedly interrupted frazzled CGP staff, complaining the meeting broke protocol, according to the reglamento (rulebook) for the PP. Although these were only ever minor oversights, Nico insisted the group proceed with reglamento in hand to be sure. One night he wanted more residents invited; another, he requested meetings held in locations closer to his vicinity. The intent in those early stages was always to delay and displace. When it became clear on two occasions Nico was talking in code to promote his own political party while casting aspersions on others to advance his relocation goals, attendees exploded in personal protest, deriding him for coming to ‘hacer política y hacer lío’—to simultaneously make a mess of things and gain politically. Nico asserted innocence, though his ceaseless actions to postpone deliberation on the budget itself were highly suspect.

Another resident, exasperated after substantive discussion was obstructed for more than half of a two-hour meeting, quietly displayed the same secessionist impulses as Liliana. ‘This guy [Nico],’ he leaned close to tell me, ‘is only trying to get the next meeting in his area so he can bring a pile of analfabetas [illiteranimals—a play on words] to support all his ideas.’ In later discussions, most other attendees agreed—though in different terms—that Nico was attempting to use public deliberation for personal gain, seeking reinstitution of clientelistic relationships with the platform of the state as a legitimising subsidy. Only Nico and one ally painted a different picture: one of disinterested concern for process and institutional integrity. While the CGP staff eventually curbed Nico’s secessionist drive, its toll was evident as chaotic eruptions among disputing factions recurred, and more than half the original participants simply left deliberations, saying ‘I can’t take it any more’ (no aguanto más) without visible budget progress over several meetings.

By the second year I participated in the PP, CGP2(S) was showing a different face. Aided by more stringent attendance requirements and a pre-arranged schedule of rotating meeting locations, Nico made no further appearances. Meetings included all ABs but were divided thematically into categories of working groups noted above (Health, Environment, and so on). It proved impossible to attend all these meetings due to simultaneous scheduling, but I was able to follow Urban Space and Safety, Socioeconomic Development and Education meetings. Although more tightly managed, these nonetheless fostered inclusion and deliberation. The attendance requirement added stricter discipline by sharpening interests rather than shutting out participation. Under attending participants, even if they could not vote or run for representative
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positions, were still encouraged to deliberate, suggesting ideas and reflecting on various political stances. At one point, this included me quite personally. In the final stages of community priority-setting for CGP2(S), residents selected me – an unlikely candidate as a non-native Spanish speaker – to draft the cooperatively refined proposals, a process that involved ongoing input and reflection. In the end, consensus was reached, but only through very organised, streamlined advancement toward a specific output goal. This example shows, however, that absencing, and seceding in particular, is not necessary for these conditions to obtain.

The final example of secession was completely successful, to the point of being unquestioned by any actor at any point in my research. This was in the case of Puerto Madero, part of AB2 in CGP1. When I attended the PP meetings looking for Puerto Madero residents, there was no one – out of a neighbourhood population over 1,000 (Corporación Antiguo Puerto Madero, 2008). Scholars of class and politics in Latin America note that wealthier sectors often participate in politics through informal means of influence and channels of pressure that evade accountability (Caldeira, 2009; Centner, 2012). Indeed, the avoidance of formal politics is a selling point of properties in Puerto Madero.

In 1989, by presidential decree, Puerto Madero was earmarked a ‘strategic territory’ to be privatised under the Corporación Antiguo Puerto Madero (CAPM). CAPM is charged with developing and maintaining all infrastructure that would have once been the responsibility of the state (Centner, 2007: 12–19). As a result, Puerto Madero is technically inside CGP1, but its fully private development and management allow it to flatly replace formal politics within its jurisdiction. In a lengthy interview with one of the managing directors of the CAPM (Ramírez, 2004), I asked him about some of the glitches in development during recent years – the kinds of grievances or shortcomings that would, elsewhere, potentially be addressed via the PP. He rattled off a list of problems: the stray dogs living like a pack of aggressive dingoes on Puerto Madero sidewalks, the lack of basic but non-essential services (groceries, schools), and the often-unwelcome staging of large events in the neighbourhood’s open spaces. So what do residents do if they do not deal with the PP or the GCBA more generally? Very proudly, this manager explained that they come to him. They give him a call or send him an email, and they later talk it out in person over a cafecito, a habano, or perhaps a fine malbec – ‘it’s all very civilised’.

If governmentality is about the art of conducting conduct, then in these experimental ambit we can perceive a particular orientation toward shaping deliberative actions: the will to isolate in order to create likeminded participation that effectively reduces the parameters of deliberation. But beyond secession, which leaves some room for autonomy in its effects, the other forms of absencing institute greater control over those designated ‘others’ in the process of participation.

Division: Disempowering and Disciplining

My encounter with another kind of absencing came in the early PP meetings for highly diverse CGP1. I was interested in who would attend, with what concerns for public deliberation, and how they would interact with people across socio-economic divides. In fact, there was no interaction at all, for two reasons. First, there was the secession and establishment of parallel political avenues just described. Second, and more surprisingly, the three socio-economically distinct ABs in the district never saw each other because they always met in separate places. AB2 convened in the seat of the CGP, across
the street from the National College of Notaries Public, one block from the national Supreme Court, and two blocks from the stately Teatro Colón opera house. At the same time, there were meetings in a soup kitchen inside Villa 31 (AB3) and a public building in southern AB1.

CGP1 staff broke PP meetings into Thematic Commissions during both years. After a brief AB2 meeting with less than 20 attendees, we self-sorted into topical groups that continued meeting weekly to draft recommendations for the consultative rounds with GCBA functionaries. It quickly became clear a governmentality that divisively territorialised possibilities was at work: appropriate behaviours for given spaces and by certain populations were the clarion call. Concern for unemployment, as one example, was present; however, the members of AB2 were generally more interested in barring undesirable forms of actually existing employment from specific spaces. After the economic crisis of 2001–2002, a new kind of worker emerged – scavengers, most commonly known as cartoneros, who sift paper and metal from trash to receive payment from recyclers securing dollar-based (rather than peso-based) prices for their products overseas, hence the economic desirability of this work (Chronopoulos, 2006). AB2 residents wanted cartoneros to be specifically regulated, with strict standards disguised as safety measures regarding health and child labour. But this resulted in adding layers of control to rationalise anarchic economic activity. Cartoneros themselves, however, do not generally live in AB2 but, if anywhere in the CGP, then in the overwhelmingly poor AB3, where, on the contrary, this kind of work does not occur very widely. Because these two groups of residents never meet face-to-face despite their mutual participation in democratic deliberation, we witness division as a distinct technique of absence: regulation is highly uneven but also predatory and disempowering, with no chance for mutual representation of interests across geographic and socio-economic lines.

Division was visible in another form as disciplining. The first time different AB residents in CGP1 interact is among neighbourhood representatives elected to attend advanced, thematically specific negotiations with relevant functionaries and representatives from all other CGPs. In these meetings, everyone is ostensibly equal, as in CGP-specific deliberations. While there is a hierarchy of facilitation, all are entitled to speak and receive dignified treatment. If governmentality entails self-management in accordance with the norms of social order, and a territorialised version of this deals with populations situated in space, we can expect to find spatialised norms of behaviour enacted as discipline across territorial divisions. In contrast to the disempowerment created by situations without communication across boundaries, division can also be disciplining in its imposition of those boundaries in all settings where governmental rationality is at work. Hence in this round of negotiations, although representatives from the three ABs of CGP1 were well-coordinated in their presentations, the way they interacted and articulated their proposals belied a spatialised governmentality that followed them everywhere. In all cases, representatives from AB3 – the shantytown – were younger, less European-looking, more poorly dressed, and struggled more with vocabulary and their own footing in this open interaction where they clearly were disadvantaged because they were not dedicated full-time to this kind of civic activity whilst many others were. In effect, the highly disciplined presence of poorer ABs was diminished to near-absence because of their ineluctable deference to representatives of wealthier ABs and the more privileged functionaries.

In contrast to secession, these instances of division create forms of participation where groups are able to exercise an important degree of control over others, shaping the nature of their involvement and indeed their efficacy in realising the aims generated...
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through deliberation. Most pernicious of all, however, is the technique of absence that blocks or disables participation altogether.

Exclusion: Paternalistic and Patriarchal

The last case of absencing is exclusion from participation: either people are denied access to participate by some authority that deems them unfit for the task, or they are allowed to participate but only via proxy, replaced by an ostensibly wiser (yet unelected) representative from the beginning. Both of these were happening in CGP3, where meetings went smoothest – kept as they were to the professional or quasi-professional governance elites of the neighbourhood.

For the first PP meeting in CGP3, I walked roughly 1 km from the nearest residential-commercial hub to reach the building at the end of empty Calle Suárez, almost surrounded by large, walled institutions and industrial detritus: a mental health asylum, a major hospital, railyards, and an elevated freeway. The space inside is large and open, unlike the confines of other CGP seats, yet despite physical capacity, the meeting was small – although not due to poor turnout. Instead, only leaders of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local social movements or soup kitchens were encouraged to attend these priority-setting PP meetings for the CGP.

Although both ABs meet together, there is no interaction of different types of constituents in deliberation because they are not invited. Indeed, it was difficult to obtain information about this formative meeting: I had to make numerous calls and search to find meeting times for this CGP, yet many residents in this poor district lack access to either technology. During the meeting, while planning smaller meetings to target specific groups of residents through each local organisation, CGP staff conjectured that residents would not have attended this first key meeting anyway – because it was game day for the area’s notorious football team, the Boca Juniors, they surmised. Furthermore, their explicit ideal was not to mingle the constituencies, as experts should debate the details of their budget priorities. This system has benefits, such as bringing participation very close to residents via NGOs and other services they use frequently and necessarily. But this ties their participation in urban governance to identities around which these organisations mobilise: as poor, as women, as malnourished or as Paraguayan, for example. This excludes citizens from the process of deliberation in paternalistic fashion through control of who should participate with whom, and under what identity marker.

In contrast, the patriarchal version of exclusion entails muzzling particular voices based on differences in power – possibly but not exclusively gendered. In one of the more advanced consultative stages of the PP in 2005, a female resident chosen by peers to represent La Boca (AB1) stood before a session of other AB representatives, observers and a panel of functionaries offering technical assistance on budget proposals from CGP-level deliberations. As she calmly raised the concern of neighbourhood residents about potential expansion of expensive housing towers into open fields near the Boca Juniors stadium, the woman suddenly faced vociferous opposition. Standing in her modest attire, slightly hunched with nervousness while gripping handwritten notes, trying to read without mistakes in the middle of a schoolroom, she faced a formally dressed functionary seated at the teacher’s desk among his suited colleagues – a man able to hush her through sheer will and unchallenged authority. He petulantly exclaimed her statements about possible new constructions were ‘lies’ (¡mentiras! ¡mentiras!). Over her shy responses in protest, the functionary grew louder until screaming and hanging
the desk, silencing the woman for the remainder of the session by asserting his greater knowledge and trustworthiness, thus excluding her participation.

Despite this move violating the reglamento and spirit of the PP, where all are supposed equals, there was no effort by other functionaries or the remaining neighbourhood representatives to intervene. The concerns of the AB were thus excluded from this session because of differing views about what constituted a legitimate concern for the budget, and the ability of one powerful voice within the state apparatus to drown out an entire neighbourhood’s deliberations. Regardless of efforts to be present at all the appropriate points in the process, the neighbourhood was made absent unilaterally by a single patriarchal outburst.

Compared to other techniques of absence, these moves to exclude most blatantly scuttle participation, showing a facet of this governmentality that is unequivocally anti-deliberative but also flexibly invasive. More than the zoning of population control (Merry, 2001), in these cases we witness the state apparatus invited almost to the doorstep of spatially specified populations, and then deciding capriciously (but unchallenged) exactly who merits a voice in this supposedly all-inclusive process of localised deliberative democracy – and who is absenced altogether instead.

Conclusion

The techniques of absence presented here – in three forms, with variations – are part of a spatial governmentality apparent in the experiment of participatory budgeting in Buenos Aires. They represent ‘the conduct of conduct’ brought to bear on specific urban territories, differentially shaping the participation of subjects within them. In many cases, this entails some form of inclusion in governance, but clearly these are imperfect inclusions with drawbacks as delineated in the accounts of absencing. Yet such flaws are not mere kinks in a new process or isolated breaches of protocol; instead they are fundamental to the territorial implementation of this model. With the city divided into separate zones for the budgeting process, and leeway given to local administrators to shape the terms of participation for different groups and territories within their bounds, what emerges is a set of political spaces with many noticeable absences. There is the absence of some groups from the process altogether because they do not want to participate, or cannot due to material factors. There is also the absence of deliberation across different classes of neighbours about shared issues. Lastly, there is the absence of direct participation among citizens marked as disadvantaged – either channelled through a range of identity-specific organisations, or silenced as uneducated and misinformed.

All of these absences raise questions about the nature of government, as ‘structur[ing] the possible field of action of others’ (Foucault, 1982: 222), in this experimental urban context, especially how it relates to different populations situated across its territories. It appears that overlaying the Porto Alegre model onto differentiated territories creates myriad opportunities for the endeavour of more direct participation to metamorphose into a geographically variegated process of determining more and less worthy citizens across the city. Moreover, due to the closer state–citizen interface that participatory schemes foster, the conduct of conduct can become more penetrating and thoroughgoing at the same time that it is more territorially differentiated. In highly unequal cities of the global South, scholars observe spatial governmentality in the inegalitarian regulation of quality of life across socio-economic chasms, which they diagnose as untenably
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destructive (Robins, 2002); with localised participation, by contrast, the making and management of absences become ordinary, potentially naturalising and deepening spatialised caprices in the art of government.

This research hinges on very specific, ethnographic encounters in a single city’s participatory budgeting experiment, but the purpose here is to contemplate the conceptual significance of absencing. Although the PP in Buenos Aires is barely recognisable any longer – suspended amidst partisan feuding (Rodgers, 2010: 23–25), later resurrected in a purely online version that only exacerbates the dynamics of territorially differentiated socio-economic advantage (see Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 2010) – the Porto Alegre model remains vibrant, with a growing list of cities adopting this framework (Shah, 2007) and other experimental localisations of governance throughout Latin America (e.g. Howard and Serra Vásquez, 2011). These underscore the expanding need to consider how participatory experiments are enacted, particularly in spatial terms, and the opportunities that exist for techniques of absence to render pernicious forms of incisively differentiated regulation.

Any localisation of political processes entails narrowing territory for action by both the state and its subjects; nonetheless, this article demonstrates the troublesome absences that can undermine efforts to bring ‘the government in the neighbourhoods’. Minimally, there must be overarching regulation of this model to avoid localised discretion becoming yet another technique in the long history of unequally dividing Latin American cities and differentially serving their citizens. Furthermore, the Buenos Aires case highlights the need to counter techniques of absence by consciously structuring territories of deliberation to include a range of neighbours, rather than have participants simply mirror each other. Quarrelsome debate among socio-economically distinct neighbours brought together across their slight geographic distances might be raucous, but without it, these points of difference are too often managed through more clandestine means that evade accountability and inaugurate a governmentality of variegated micro-level treatment, jeopardising the spirit of participation altogether.

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References


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Interviews
