

## **Whither Democracy in Brazil**

### **An Interview with Leonardo Avritzer**

Émilie FRENKIEL

**The president of the Brazilian Political Science Association, an expert of democratic innovations, discusses how Brazilian political scientists are taking stock of the Workers Party president's curtailed electoral mandate in favor of Michel Temer and how it impacts their research orientation.**

Leonardo Avritzer is professor at the department of political science at the Federal University of Minas Gerais. He is the author of many books on democratic innovations, among them *Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America* (Princeton University Press, 2002) and *Participatory Institutions in Democratic Brazil* (John Hopkins University Press, 2009). He is currently the president of the Brazilian Political Science Association. His current research is on democratic theory and political participation in Brazil.

He obtained his PhD at the New School for Social Research and his dissertation received the New School for Social Research Albert Salomon Dissertation Award. He has held visiting positions at Tulane University, the Woodrow Wilson Center, and MIT. Professor Avritzer is one of the most renowned political scientists in Brazil. He is particularly well known for his groundbreaking work on innovative forms of political participation, including the participatory budget experience in Porto Alegre (celebrated and replicated all over the world).

In addition to his ongoing research, Professor Avritzer is the chair of PRODEP, a research consortium funded by the Ford Foundation and various Brazilian government agencies. This consortium has organized data collection on democratic participation in over 40 municipalities, with the involvement of scholars from São Paulo, Campinas, Brasília, Recife and Porto Alegre. Results from this effort have already been published in several books and articles.

**Books & Ideas: What is your main research focus? Would you say that your research focus has greatly evolved over the years?**

**Leonardo Avritzer:** I have a specific research focus, which is how democratic innovations, such as participatory budgeting councils and national conferences, are important to democracy,

and how democratic innovations are important to developing democracies or new democracies. The first point of my research was to base this idea on new democratic or participatory institutions in Brazil, particularly participatory budgeting. The focus of my research has remained the same over the last twenty years, but I have honed the approach based on the evolution of experiences themselves and on the interaction with other elements of democratic theory. I still think that these democratic innovations are of key importance to democracy, but I am less optimistic about how successful they can be in different political contexts.

I'm working on a new book in which I am trying to be more precise on the conditions needed for the emergence of democratic innovations, but also on the problems related to the broad diffusion of democratic innovations. It is important to point out that participatory budgeting became a widely known experience as well as a widely expanded experience of participation. However, it is not very clear that it always keeps its democratizing elements as it is expanded. This is a concern in my current research: what are the conditions for the extension of democratic innovations and in what conditions do they lose many of their democratizing elements?

A second element is whether democratic innovations should be expanded to the judicial institutions. What I mean here by "judicial institutions" is perhaps known in France as counter-democratic institutions or institutions of accountability that are not based on the vote. Brazil has such institutions, especially what is called in Brazil "*Ministério Público*", which is a democratic innovation of the 1988 Constitution. I try to show – and this is a second aspect of my current work – that expanding innovation to these institutions might be very dangerous, because they may lose their original grounding in the rule of law.

**Books & Ideas: What are the main sources, inspirations and collaborations that have contributed to your research?**

**Leonardo Avritzer:** I also think that there has been much evolution in this regard. I started my work with the idea that democratic innovation could be the equivalent of a linguistic innovation, and on that point I was very much inspired by the habermasian framework. However very soon,

in my first book published in English in 2002, *Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America*, I became critical of this framework, in the sense that it does not allow us to institutionally ground innovations. I then discovered the deliberative democracy theory. Most of my work was grounded on the idea of the deliberative institutions, that is to say: it is not enough for social actors to be willing to democratize their relation with the state, and it is not enough for the state to be willing to democratize their relations with social actors. It is important to design institutions that may be able to do so. The work of Joshua Cohen has been a great inspiration at this stage of my work.

More recently, I have also become really interested in the idea of how it is possible to reorganize democratic legitimacy: in this regard, the work of Pierre Rosanvallon is very much influencing my current work, especially regarding the idea that we have a loss in the legitimacy of majority institutions, particularly political parties. I still think that the issue is how to connect innovation with the political system. In this regard, I referred much to the work of Jane Mansbridge and John Parkinson on the idea of deliberative systems, though I think it needs many adaptations in order to be applied to the current Brazilian situation.

**Books & Ideas: Is Brazil the only fieldwork for your research or are you interested in other countries where innovations are also taking root?**

**Leonardo Avritzer:** Brazil is my main area of interest, in theoretical terms, but I have always tried to conduct more research beyond Brazil. In my first book, I already did fieldwork in Mexico on electoral institutions, and counselors, exactly because it was an interesting experience in innovation, which has had an important impact on the Mexican political system in the last decades. I think of the creation of the IFE (*Instituto Federal Electoral*) and the institution of a Counselor system. I have also tried to look into experiences of participatory budgeting in other parts of the world, for example in Rosario, Argentina. I am currently working on that. In Argentina participation emerges, not because of the lack of access of poor actors to public goods but because of impoverishment due to the huge political crisis and its impact on the poor and the middle classes. However, it is interesting that participatory budgeting in Argentina could take advantage of the “*assembleas barriales*”, the neighborhood assemblies that took place in the country in 2002 and 2003. Thus, this can be an interesting exercise to compare how different contexts can generate similar concerns for democratic innovation.

Most of the time, I try to work on the same region: Brazil, Argentina and Mexico are the main empirical cases on which I have been working. These countries are not usually studied in a comparative perspective and when they are, it is not Latin American scholars who are making these comparisons. Comparing these countries from a Latin American perspective that places the issue of democratic innovation is very important and allows us to see both what is working and what is not working. For instance, participatory budgeting in Sao Paulo and Buenos Aires did not work for similar reasons: the political system that dominates both cities. However, very few studies compare the two cases.

**Books & Ideas: Can you tell us about the advantages, and maybe the more problematic sides, of your double hat of researcher and consultant in institutional innovations, like participatory budgeting or national conferences?**

**Leonardo Avritzer:** I started my career as a researcher: my first book, which was about participatory budgeting, was written as a researcher. But since 2002 I have also started doing consultancy on the experiences of participation. My first consultancy was on participatory budgeting in Sao Paulo. I tried, through my university, the Federal University of Minas Gerais, to provide infrastructures to participatory budgeting: students would go to Sao Paulo and they would help with the organization of the original assemblies in the city. I think that very soon the following issue emerged: how do you write about experiences in which you are also personally involved as a consultant?

In regard to Sao Paulo I did not write about the experience of participatory budgeting as I was a consultant, but I incorporated it in my second book written in English called *Participatory Institutions in Democratic Brazil* (2009). I did not want to be critical of the Sao Paulo experience, while I was working for it, but I also did not want to praise it. So the idea was to keep some sort of independence from the experience on which I was working. In the end, what I wrote about Sao Paulo has helped with other experiences of implementation of participatory budgeting. I highlighted the problems for the implementation of participation when you have a very divided political society and pointed out how much effort and money should be placed in participatory experiences.

In 2007, when Lula was president of Brazil, I became consultant of the General Secretary, which was the institution that was in charge of implementing participation at a

national level in Brazil, particularly through the organization of national conferences. Again, this “double hat” was important because I have tried to work on these national conferences, and I have tried to support their implementation, but I was very critical about the limits of participation at the national level in Brazil, particularly in key areas of the federal government, such as infrastructures or economic policies. So again, the issue is: you can work as a consultant in one direction, which is promoting democratic participation in Brazil, but you have to remain unbiased regarding the experience you are working on. And in my view I have tried to be critical in the sense that participation could have been stronger in both experiences, that are Sao Paulo and the national level.

**Books & Ideas: You are also very much interested in the innovations that are taking place thanks to new technologies and the Internet. Can you explain that part of your research?**

**Leonardo Avritzer:** This is still at a very initial stage. Since June 2013, when there were massive demonstrations in Brazil – that started on the left but were picked up, in my view, by conservative social actors –, I wanted to study more what was happening with social networks in Brazil and their political impact. In our research center we collect data about major political events. Brazil has experienced many major political events in the last three years, especially in this last year! There were demonstrations in favor of the government, and these last few weeks, demonstrations against the new president, Michel Temer. We study the identity of those demonstrating and the way they do it. Therefore, we analyze Facebook profiles of important conservative movements in order to understand what kind of role(s) they are playing in Brazil. We have focused our analysis on three of these conservative movements: MBL (*Movimento Brazil Livre*), *Revoltados ON LINE* and *Vem Pra Rua*. These have been key movements in the last 18 months in Brazil. MBL started in June 2013 at exactly the same time as the demonstrations. We analyze the “shares”, the “likes”, we analyze Twitter, and we try to create maps of left- and right-wing demonstrations in key moments when left and right are facing each other in Brazil.

**Books & Ideas: Since you are the president of the Brazilian Political Science Association, can you give us some kind of overview of what political science is like in Brazil?**

**Leonardo Avritzer:** Political science in Brazil has very much evolved in the last decade. It is rather a new discipline if we consider that the first graduate program in political science dates

back to the mid-sixties. They are now commemorating their 50-year anniversary. Compared to others, it is not a very old discipline in Brazil: sociology is older, anthropology is much older. Political science in Brazil has very much evolved in the last decade, because it has become more professional. Ten years ago there already were ten graduate programs in political science in Brazil; yet, all but one were concentrated in the cities in the South East of Brazil: Rio, Belo Horizonte, Sao Paulo and Brasilia. The programs are now in every region and their number is close to fifty<sup>1</sup>. With this improvement there has also been an important pluralization of perspectives. Political science in Brazil was mostly institutional in the sense that it only studied the executive branch, the electoral system and the Brazilian Congress. But now, there are many areas of study, from political participation to public policies, to judicial institutions. Thus, the scope that political science covers is now much larger. There is also the increasingly international impact of Brazilian political science. More people hire Brazilians outside the country, more Brazilians work outside the country, international scholars come to Brazil to cooperate: this creates a very productive environment.

**Books & Ideas: Would you say that being a political scientist in Brazil is not so different from being one in the U.S.? Or are there specificities, for instance more focus on participation, innovations?**

**Leonardo Avritzer:** In terms of methods perhaps, we are very similar, but in terms of concerns about what is political, we have a much broader approach. Our approach involves participation, democratic theories, innovations, and is much more decentralized than the American political approach.

**Books & Ideas: How do Brazilian political scientists assess Dilma Rousseff's impeachment?**

**Leonardo Avritzer:** I think that Dilma's impeachment constitutes a major problem for those working on the Brazilian democracy, but also for those working on institutional innovations

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<sup>1</sup> From 2005 to 2011, Professor Avritzer chaired the political science committee of CAPES, the government agency responsible for accrediting, evaluating and overseeing all graduate programs in political science in the country, as well as financing research. Under his guidance, CAPES sponsored the creation of new political science programs throughout the Brazilian North and Northeast. CAPES also authorized and supported new PhD programs in political science at major universities in the Centre and South of the Country, including Sao Paulo, Minas Gerais and Brasilia.

and institutional stability. We all assumed that Brazil had a fairly stable democracy – perhaps not as stable as in France or in the United States but still very stable in the last thirty years, from 1985, when democracy was restored in Brazil, to 2015. Because of that assumption, we believed in the strength of our political institutions, especially the presidency, the judicial system, the systems of participation as well as the systems of public policies. We witnessed improvements in the country as a whole and these were not achieved by mere chance: inequality and poverty were reduced, the currency was stabilized, inflation was curbed. All these are achievements of a democratic Brazil.

Then, how come the situation has deteriorated so fast? This is a problem that most Brazilian political scientists are trying to solve right now, and it is interesting because I think that it is a problem that concerns all areas of political science in Brazil: institutions, participation, the judicial system, the electoral system. The “period of the new republic” seems to have come to an end in the last few months. The New Republic (*Nova República*) was both a social and an institutional pact. The institutional pact meant those who were elected, such as the president, could govern. Moreover, there were center forces that were willing to stand by the government and help it to produce governability. I am mainly talking about the PMDB (*Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro*) that was very important during the Brazilian transition. It helped stabilize different governments in this new republic period. The New Republic was also a social pact in the sense that the Constitution of 1988 created a social program. The center was willing to support the left- or center-left-wing actors to implement this program, composed of more social rights, the *Bolsa Família*, the expanding of social systems. This crucial program was broadly supported by the Brazilian Congress.

Therefore, what we have seen since the election of 2014 is the breakup of this institutional and social pact, in the sense that the right-wing forces organized themselves, and the center no longer wanted to support the government. Then we saw a collapse of governability and a sharp division of the country. There are actors who want a conservative movement in Brazil and there are actors who want to stick by the left-wing program in Brazil. Yet the institutions cannot process this conflict: this, in my view, was a major reason for the impeachment.

**Books & Ideas: You seem to imply that most political scientists in Brazil right now are trying to provide analysis to the current crisis. Are there many publications? Is there a**

**sort of consensus among these political scientists or are they also divided? Are the conflicts you mentioned also present within the field of political science?**

**Leonardo Avritzer:** Political scientists are divided about this very legally questionable process of impeachment – although the majority would not agree with the way the president was removed. They think that the institutions are not working well, and it is a problem. As most political scientists used to think that institutions were working well, impeachment is a sign that institutions did not work very well. The Brazilian Congress is mired in so much corruption: it is only representative of private interests because the electoral system favors the presence in Congress of very conservative politicians who represent only specific private interests. The Congress is in a very complicated situation. Besides, the judicial system, that used to be the bright spot of the Brazilian democratization, involved itself too much in this conflict. We can even say that the result of the impeachment was achieved both by the intervention and by the non-intervention of the judicial system, especially the Supreme Court, in key moments of this conflict. When the judicial system intervened, it was unfavorable to Dilma's government, and at other moments, when it decided not to intervene, it was also unfavorable to Dilma's plight against Congress. We notice here a sort of coalition among the main institutional forces against Dilma and the Workers Party, and it is not clear how legitimate this is. Now that we have a new president, we wonder how he will be considered by public opinion as a whole. 72% of the Brazilians want new elections, which means that they are not happy with the way political institutions have dealt with the crisis.

**Books & Ideas: Are the elections going to be organized soon and can they simply solve the problem?**

**Leonardo Avritzer:** No, I think that the problem is much more complex. We are currently seeing in Brazil a move toward the right that was not electorally sanctioned, and this move is coupled with an attempt to make important social cuts as well as to repress social movements. At this point, it is not clear how far this would go: depending on this, Brazilian society will become much more conflictual and even more divided than it is right now. If in fact the government of Michel Temer is going in this direction, it is unlikely that it will be able to stabilize governability in Brazil. It means that we will have a sharply divided country in 2018,



when new elections will take place. Can elections solve this? I think it quite unlikely because the only possible inclusive social pact that we had in Brazil was broken. The issue is: can a conservative alliance create a new pact? At this moment it seems unlikely.

**Books & Ideas: So this affair is certainly having an impact on your own research direction.**

**Leonardo Avritzer:** Yes. First of all, it is not clear where the country is heading. Second, it is very clear that democratic construction in Brazil is much more complicated than we assumed. Third, we see a large part of the middle class and institutional actors positioning themselves against democracy, against a democratically elected government. In addition to that, we have this very complicated role played by the *Ministerio Publico* and the judicial system, both being non-elected institutions: they are not “counter-democratic”, in Rosanvallon’s sense, but are clearly anti-democratic in the sense that they want to be the sole representatives of the public interest.

On September 12, a new president to the Brazilian Supreme Court was appointed. During the celebration of her nomination, the *Procurador* of the *Ministerio Publico* delivered a speech against the political system. This gives you an idea of the size of the conflict between judicial institutions and political institutions. For this conflict to be solved in favor of the institutions, you need to revise many of the things that have been written about democracy in Brazil.

**Books & Ideas: It seems that the Workers Party greatly encouraged participatory innovations. Is there still some willingness now to supplement democracy with more participation on the part of the public and on the part of the more conservative side?**

**Leonardo Avritzer:** I think it is too early to give a precise indication of the direction Brazil will have in the next few years. Certainly, participatory innovations are not going right now to be the priority of the government. But local innovation will surely remain important, as there will be important local elections in Brazil this October. In some cases the left is going to govern important cities, in which voter turnout will still be high. I have Porto Alegre and Recife in mind: these two cities will most likely be won by the left in the coming elections. Participation will be re-invented at a local level and we need to see how the Brazilian crisis is going to be solved because Michel Temer’s national project, has, in my view, no viability. In fact this project is viable as long as there are no elections.

**Books & Ideas: How does the conservative side justify what has happened? Do they use the term democracy? Is it part of the way they legitimize their action?**

**Leonardo Avritzer:** The Conservatives use the notion of corruption as the key issue, but this discourse has a problem: the president was not corrupt and she was not involved in corruption. But the vice-president is very close to corruption circles in Brazil. In addition to that, the president was impeached on a very technical issue of budgetary supplementations. This technical issue is a problem for the rule of law because it only applied to her. Every president before her did that; 16 governors are doing that right now. Two days after its confirmation of the impeachment, the Senate relaxed this rule for the next president. I say it again: this project is viable as long as there are no elections. Once there are elections, the process may be challenged. There is a conservative project in Brazil but its electoral viability is not clear. The left has been defeated but it's unclear whether it can recover electorally or not. That's why, in my view, we will have this continuous political conflict over the next two years in Brazil.

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