INSURGENT CITIZENSHIP

DISJUNCTIONS
OF DEMOCRACY
AND MODERNITY
IN BRAZIL

JAMES HOLSTON

It undermines Brazil's new democracy by advocating violent and illegal practices. For the chiefs, the law is still, as it has always been, "for enemies." In contrast, the gangs hurl their outrage at the historical abuses of this misrule of law and frame it in terms of the new democracy and its project of social justice. Their outrage is that of the Brazilian poor against the despicable quality of Brazilian citizenship. If, in the past, the oppressed found expression in millenarian religious movements, today they have a secular voice and it speaks in rights talk.

What is remarkable about this gang talk/rights talk is that even at this perverse extreme of society, insurgent democratic citizenship has become the common language and moral discourse for justifying the illegal as well as the legal. This new commensurability refers to the city and the nation beyond it as a public sphere to which all citizens have rights to a fair share. The rights claims of the poor—including those of the gangs—about this public substance constitute their understanding of a new democratic project of citizenship. Moreover, this new rights talk of the poor suggests that the law, which has oppressed them for centuries, has become something intimate to their sense of belonging to the public, something people want for themselves, no longer "for enemies" but for citizens. We can only conclude that this change in the culture of law promises to be fundamental for the development of Brazilian democracy.

The perversity of this democracy continues to be that it has not yet realized significant social justice and egalitarian rule of law. However, Brazil has never had either under any regime. It is too late for the gang members to avoid an awful fate. But at least they tell us, even if they cannot show us, that Brazilians have made social justice and rule of law central aspirations of their democracy and that Brazil's citizens, even at the extremes, have found in that project of citizenship a common ground.

Insurgent Citizenships and Disjunctive Democracies

Democracies that cannot protect a citizen's body or produce a just city far outnumber those that do today, even though the promise of these achievements constitutes much of democracy's appeal. To understand what is at stake in this problem, some (including myself) have elaborated Bobbio's (1989: 155–56) argument that contemporary democracy develops "above all through [its] extension beyond politics to other spheres." By that, he emphasizes "the transfer of democracy from the political sphere (where the individual is regarded as a citizen) to the social sphere (where the individual is regarded as many-faceted)." Thus, in one influential essay, O'Donnell (1992: 49) writes that democratic consolidation requires "the extension of similarly democratic . . . relations into other

309

[not just political] spheres of social life"; and, in another, he (1993: 1361) argues that "even a political definition of democracy (such as that recommended by most contemporary authors, and to which I adhere) should not neglect posing the question of the extent to which citizenship is really exercised in a given country." Although this question may not be defining for him, it is "politically relevant," both because "the ineffectiveness of the state-as-law" produces "low-intensity citizenship" and "brown areas" in new democracies, in which citizen rights are systematically violated, and because these conditions of citizenship have dire consequences for democracy.

I have only disagreed with limiting this kind of assessment "to the political theory of political democracy" (1993: 1361) and to emerging democracies. Typically produced in political science and international relations, most accounts do not acknowledge the centrality of more than political citizenship and related civil liberties for contemporary democracy. Rather, most focus on the transformation of political systems—on regime change, electoral competition, and their preconditions—and on the operations of government that are hallmarks of North Atlantic democracy. Such considerations are certainly fundamental. They establish that a majority of countries (63%) have now become democratic in the sense that they are electoral democracies and have done so at a pace in the late twentieth century never before experienced.[40] However, this kind of political focus fails to account adequately, if at all, for precisely the sort of disjunctions of citizenship that I have analyzed in Brazil and that are prevalent among most emerging democracies—namely, the coincidence of democratic politics with widespread violence and injustice against citizens. This disjunction has become just as global a condition of contemporary democratization as free elections.

These problematic developments mean that the realization of democracy for most citizens requires social and cultural changes that escape a classically narrow understanding of the political. They strongly suggest that although necessary, political democracy is not enough to secure civil and social citizenship or to produce a democratic rule of law. Without both, the realization of democratic citizenship remains disabled, and political democracy itself loses legitimacy as a mode of government. Therefore, the problem with narrow political conceptions of democracy is that they fail to analyze the very contradictions that characterize contemporary democratic developments worldwide and that undermine actually existing political democracies. Accordingly, these histories demand a revision of many standard assumptions about democratization. They demonstrate both the insufficiency of democratic politics for realizing democratic citizenship and the limitations of democratic theory based solely on politics for understanding this problem. Moreover, as the new democratization

is overwhelmingly non–North Atlantic, they indicate the inadequacies of democratic theory anchored in North Atlantic history and culture for understanding democracy's global reach and practice.[41]

Rather than a specific politics or a set stage of institutions, actors, and scripts, I have emphasized two perspectives: first, that the realization of citizenship is the central and not the collateral issue of democracy; and, second, that the processes and practices that define citizenship are inherently disjunctive–not cumulative, linear, or evenly distributed among citizens but always a mix of progressive and regressive elements, unbalanced, heterogeneous, and corrosive. In this view, democracy is necessarily connected to a fuller conception of citizenship, one expanded beyond the political, and its evaluation bound to the complexities of citizenship's realization in particular historical contexts. This complexity of ethnography and history, experience and institution, and performance and script constitutes what I view as an anthropological consideration, in which access to infrastructure (like electricity and sewage lines) and the security of the body can no more be neglected in the analysis of democracy than the right to vote. Thus, I stress that the extension of democracy to the civil, socioeconomic, legal, and cultural aspects of citizenship is as central to the concept of modern democracy as its extension to the political. Does that scope make democracy unattainable? No doubt, as a totality it does. However, I have suggested abandoning the idea of democracy as a totalizing project, arguing instead that what is productive about democracy is its condition of incompletion and contradiction, its wager to be always unfinished.

At stake in considering the disjunctions of contemporary democracy is thus the very conception of the political. Since Aristotle's *Politics* established the distinction, the canon in western social theory has constituted the political as a sphere of interests that excludes the realm of household affairs. As Agamben (1998: 1–8) reminds us, Aristotle (1978: 1252b) distinguishes the domain of the political, the *polis*, as that which "exists for the sake of the good life" from the household, the *oikos*, as that which attends "to mere life." Feminist scholars (e.g., Okin 1992; Pateman 1989) have long observed that this juro-political domain is defined in opposition to the domestic-kinship domain—to residence, family, reproduction, and the personal necessities of daily living—and therefore bars the participation of those people identified with it: women, children, servants, laborers. However, the political does not exclude this domestic realm by mere omission. The *polis* acts on the *oikos* by confining it to the custody of the head of household, the paterfamilias, as its sole authority. These distinctions establish a basic set of oppositions that characterize the two domains into which social life in the classical world is divided. The political constitutes the domain of the city or city-state as an association of citizens who are free adult men, equal as members, and equally obliged

by the laws they make in the course of managing the city. The domestic is the domain of household management, the affairs and members of which are ruled hierarchically by a paternal authority.

In one way or another, these oppositions of classical thought inform the dichotomous conceptualizations by which the political has been configured ever since, as public and private, political and personal, state and family, street and house, rule of law and lawlessness, juridical-institutional and biological, and so forth. There has, of course, been a chorus of criticism attacking such dichotomies, including Marx's (1967b: 227) critique of the project of political emancipation grounded on "the splitting of man into public and private," feminism's counter that "the personal is political" and its challenge to consider women as citizens who are not "like men," de Certeau's (1984) tactical readings of the practices of everyday city life, and Foucault's (1978, 1991) reconceptualization of politics as biopolitics in which questions of sovereign power increasingly revolve around managing the biological life of populations. These critiques and others mark the politicization of the *oikos* and its private, domestic, personal, everyday, laboring, sexual, and biological affairs as a decisive change in the development of modernity, transforming the classical orders of the social into the modern.

If it may be argued that classical citizenship also politicized everyday "mere life" by confining it to the realm of the household and its head, it did not do so to insure the subjection and servitude of citizens by reducing their living to a mere minimum. However mistaken, Aristotle considers his organization a "natural" means to further prosperity, education, and tranquility among residents of the *polis*. Yet what distinguishes many modern citizenships—as this book has shown for the Brazilian—is precisely this intent: they deploy a politics of legalized differences to reduce the lives of the vast majority of *their citizens* to persistent inequality and misery. That these reduced citizens retain their personal dignity, their laughter, and their music is certainly a measure of human resilience. But it is also a strategy of rule. Anyone who has ever dined with elites and then set foot in the slums of their cities and plantations understands the deep efficacy of this politicization of daily life, which reduces conditions of living to bare minimums but nevertheless allows certain vitalities. As a strategy of domination, the deployment of these differentiated citizenships as much deprives most citizens of their physical well-being as it diminishes their standing as citizens. By 1972, when residents of Jardim das Camélias beat up the court official, most Brazilians had been systematically denied political rights, disallowed education, excluded from legal property ownership, forced into segregated and often illegal conditions of residence, victimized by and estranged from law, and incorporated into the labor market as servile workers.

These conditions are a commission and not an omission of a particular kind of citizenship, one that Brazilian elites consolidated over the course of the nineteenth century in response to nationhood and the end of slavery, one that was from the start universally inclusive in membership and massively inegalitarian in distribution. Among its key features, I have shown that illegality has been indispensable to both its formulation and its exercise and thereby to the constitution of the Brazilian polity itself. Illegality is not only a pervasive condition of residential life that many citizens are made to suffer, with all the consequences that we have explored for their citizenship. It is also a political technique elites master for constituting legitimate power, in which illegal acts anticipate, reliably and predictably, legalization. Far from holding apart the legal and the illegal, just and unjust, public and private, and political and domestic, this regime of citizenship is based on managing their intersection.

Yet, under the sign of the city, the very same factors that produced this entrenched regime mobilize an insurgence of citizens. The same forces that effectively fragmented and dominated the rural poor by reducing their existence to a "mere life" incite the urban poor to demand a citizen's life. However, it is not at the factory or the union hall or the ballot box that they articulate this demand with greatest force and originality. It is rather in the realm of the *oikos*, in the zone of domestic life taking shape in the remote urban peripheries around the autoconstruction of residence. It is an insurgence that begins with the struggle for rights to have a daily life in the city worthy of a citizen's dignity. Accordingly, its demands for a new formulation of citizenship get conceived in terms of housing, property, plumbing, daycare, security, and other aspects of residential life. Its leaders are the "barely citizens" of the entrenched regime: women, manual laborers, squatters, the functionally literate, and, above all, those in families with a precarious stake in residential property, with a legal toehold to a house lot somewhere far from elite centers. These are the citizens who, in the process of building their residential spaces, not only construct a vast new city but, on that basis, also constitute it as a *polis* with a different order of citizenship.

Many cities throughout the global south today experience similar insurgent citizenship movements. Indeed, in these times of global urbanization, the basis of such new citizenships is likely to be that of the autoconstructed city, as I have investigated in São Paulo. Yet if this study demonstrates how an insurgent citizenship can irrupt on the very foundations of the entrenched, it also shows that the insurgent inevitably gets bogged down by the past it inherits as well as confronts. Their entanglement both corrodes the old regime and perverts the new. It turns the ethnographic present in which insurgent citizenships and their new democracies must take root to flourish into an unsettling yet vital terrain.

313