

Prologue

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O'DONNELL, G. Prologue. In: SORJ, B. *Latin America's Elusive democracies* [online]. Rio de Janeiro: Centro Edelstein de Pesquisas Sociais, 2007, pp. 4-6. ISBN: 978-85-99662-21-2. Available from SciELO Books <<http://books.scielo.org>>.



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PROLOGUE

Guillermo O'Donnell

This is a refreshing book: it contains nothing trite, rejects conventionality and academic fads, and unswervingly asserts a clear position on thorny issues. With this book, Bernardo Sorj has demonstrated once again what those of us who have followed his career already knew: not only is he an excellent sociologist, but above all, he is a true intellectual, a critical thinker who tackles the main issues of today's world, and Latin America in particular.

Sorj begins with the typical question posed by intellectuals of his kind: "What times are these?" Obviously, this question casts our thinking in many different directions. But Sorj's quest is disciplined by a central thesis that gives meaning to the book's title ("The Unexpected Democracy" in the Spanish version, T.N.): "Democracy seems to have been consolidated, but it is not the democracy we expected." Although I am not sure I agree with the notion of "consolidation," this thesis frames a challenge that I share completely: in order to understand our countries and their democracies, we must first understand the nature of global changes and second, discern their specific manifestations in countries such as ours, with their oppressive legacy of poverty, inequality, and socially-entrenched authoritarianism. This is an enormous undertaking, one which Sorj approaches with lucidity and to which he makes important contributions.

In this undertaking, Sorj delves into various issues that I will refrain from summarizing here as they are articulated clearly in this book, which the author has had the prescience to keep short. I would, however, like to highlight a few points. The first is his reflection on the "dual difficulty" posed by the study of citizenship in the Latin American context and his incisive critique of numerous works (not only on citizenship) that approach this topic solely from the standpoint of how it deviates from the (idealized) image of citizenship in advanced capitalist countries. Here, Sorj is right on target (once again defying much of the literature in vogue) when he asserts

a strong analytical and historical link between citizenship, on the one hand, and nation-people on the other.

A second point is that the notion of citizenship leads inexorably to that of rights, but Sorj argues convincingly that rights should not be understood only in the abstract, but also, and most importantly, in terms of how they interface with the specific characteristics of our societies. It is precisely those characteristics, as Sorj will argue throughout this book, that enable us to understand the current hypertrophy of certain rights, the acute breakdown of others, and in general, the judiciary's excessive involvement in adjudicating certain rights as the representative functions inherent to political parties have evaporated.

The third point I wish to stress is that in order to develop these analyses, it is necessary to accomplish—and accomplish very well—two inherently complicated tasks: fully grasp the theories relevant to the issues and understand the unique historical and social aspects of the cases under study so as to reconstitute those theories appropriately. The entire book reflects this, yet I would draw attention particularly to Chapter II (“From labor rights to minority rights”) as a masterful application of this level of sophistication.

My fourth comment is that, as I alluded to earlier, we must thank Sorj for his willingness to take a balanced and critical look at the various idealized perspectives of civil society, nongovernmental organizations, and human rights. While he does not deny the importance of these spheres and their contributions, he does not hesitate to point out the errors—in theory and practice—resulting from the idealistic and moralistic postures that frequently go hand in hand with such perspectives. Similarly, with a particular and, in my opinion, completely justified critical edge, Sorj examines the various conceptions of social capital (particularly those of the World Bank).

These positions are openly controversial. But whether one shares them or not (and I share nearly all of them), the aim of this book is to spark debate. Sorj's mastery of theory and his informed excavation into the reality of our countries (not only Brazil, although that is the main reference point for this Uruguayan and

“Rioplátense” whom the winds of repression deposited in Brazil some twenty years past) has exposed the many myths clouding our perceptions of the reality, and the potential, of our countries.

That is why I began this brief prologue by saying that this is a refreshing book. I hope it is now clear that I use the term as the highest praise that can only lead to the recommendation that it be read with a mind as open as the vigorous thinking of the author.

January 2005