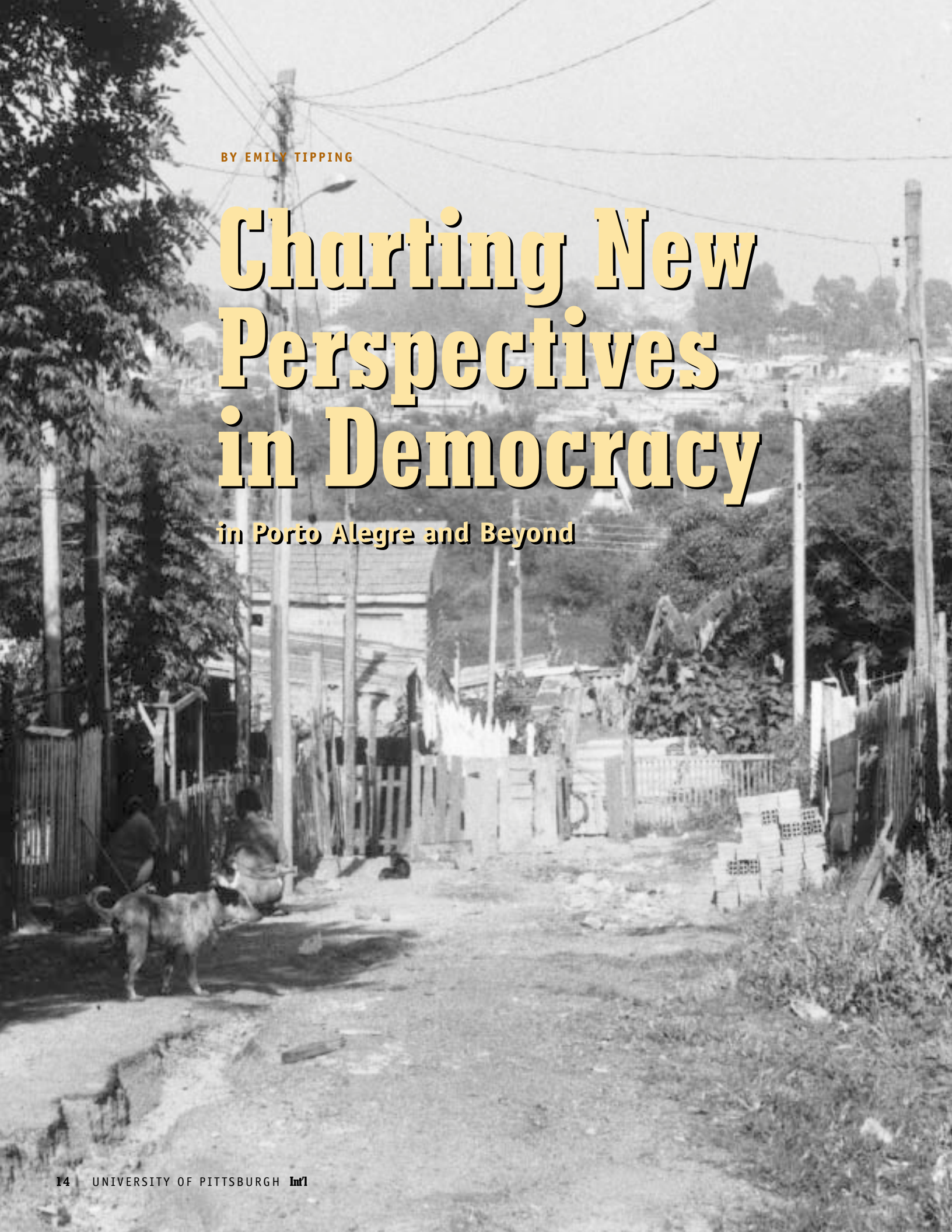

BY EMILY TIPPING

Charting New Perspectives in Democracy

in Porto Alegre and Beyond

Democracy can flourish in some of the most unlikely places and in unpredictable ways. Take the city of Porto Alegre in Brazil.

When Gianpaolo Baiocchi traveled there from Rio de Janeiro to further study the effects of crime and fear in Brazil for his PhD dissertation in 1997, he realized that something remarkable was happening. People in the city's poor neighborhoods and squatter settlements wanted to talk to him about how their local government was bettering their lives. Crime and fear, it seemed, were not the only issues on most Brazilians' minds.

Intrigued, Baiocchi, now assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh, shifted his research to a new project—Porto Alegre's participatory democracy, a system that puts budgetary decisions in the hands of the community.

In short, citizens from neighborhoods decide what they need most—like affordable housing, paved roads, and good schools—then meet with government engineers and municipal officials to see if the project is feasible. A citizens' council consisting of delegates from the city's various districts then assigns each project a numerical value based on criteria such as need or population, and doles out money accordingly. The council has ultimate decision-making power on budgetary issues.

Considering 12 years of constant changes in Porto Alegre's history, Baiocchi calls the city's governance an "experiment," yet one that is a shining example of how participatory democracy can work wonders in a developing country under the right conditions.

"In academic discussions about democracy, almost everyone assumes the democratic impulse comes from a virtuous citizen, someone who is upstanding, civic minded, and who wants to do good things," Baiocchi says. "But I've learned that we need to not only look at attitudes of citizens but also at the changes in government that make it possible for people to get involved."

As Baiocchi continues to research Porto Alegre, he and several colleagues are also collaborating on a detailed, five-year comparative study of decentralized governments in the developing world. To advance this project, UCIS awarded Baiocchi a UCIS Faculty Fellowship that will enable him to focus on his research for one academic term. During the spring semester, Baiocchi—who is also a core member of Pitt's Center for Latin American Studies and the Global Studies Program—will do on-site research, but will mostly concentrate on writing grant proposals for long-term funding for the study.

Baiocchi and his colleagues—Patrick Heller from Brown University and Shubham Chaudhuri from Columbia University—will outline how and why participatory democracies are working in India, South Africa, and Brazil. Other researchers involved hail from the Centre for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India; the Centre for Policy Studies in Johannesburg, South Africa; and CIDADE-Centro de Assessoria e Estudos Urbanos in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

"These are very poor countries, and there isn't a city in any of them with 100 percent adequate provision of government services such as urban infrastructure," says Baiocchi. "There are very exciting things happening at the local level."

In each country, Baiocchi says, there is a left-of-center political party that has made this experiment a priority. In India, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) has had varied success in implementing decentralized governments in some states. In South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) has pledged to make participatory democracies commonplace across the country. Experiments in democracy

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in places like Durban appear to be similar to Porto Alegre, where councils provide townspeople with an active role in decision-making. In Brazil, it is the Workers Party (PT) that is instigating change.

Beyond politics, there are numerous variables that can make or break a democratic experiment. "We want to ascertain things like, does it work where there are pre-existing neighborhood groups? Does it work regardless of education and need?" Baiocchi says.

In Porto Alegre, people have learned by doing.

With 1.3 million residents, Porto Alegre is the largest city in and is the capital of the Rio Grande do Sul state. In 1988, soon after the end of dictatorship in Brazil, the Workers Party prevailed in Porto Alegre and won municipal elections. Then, the new mayor arranged meetings with residents in each of Porto Alegre's districts to see what services were needed, even though the city's budget was lean. There was no blueprint for what participatory budgeting would look like; it simply evolved over time, and it continues to evolve today. Now, the city has participatory assemblies throughout its 16 districts and six citywide "theme areas"—transportation; education; leisure and culture; health and social welfare; economic development and taxation; and city organization and urban development.

Each year, between March and December, an estimated 20,000 residents of Porto Alegre—many of them from its poorest neighborhoods—participate in one or more informal and formal budget meetings. The initial, regional meetings with the mayor, Baiocchi says, are more spectacle than business, with lots of shouting and accusations about what was and was not completed the previous year. Regular assemblies follow these meetings, where participants debate their needs and negotiate what projects will be implemented that year.

These sessions can be boring to an outsider, says Baiocchi, who came to the United States from São Paolo as a teenager and still has family in Porto Alegre, especially when talk turns to sewer pipe sizes or the cost of gravel. But some residents have spent much of the year making deals with each other like, "I'll vote for your street light if you vote for my road." Baiocchi finds it remarkable that people with no formal education are willing to engage in technical discussions and negotiations in order to get results.

After 12 years, Porto Alegre's system has become self-sustaining and highly successful, a radical kind of democracy that has drawn attention from around the world. In 1996, the United Nation's Summit on Human Settlements in Istanbul nominated the Porto Alegre experiment as an "exemplary urban innovation."

According to a case study by the World Bank Group, between 1989 and 1996, the number of Porto Alegre households with access to water services rose from 80 percent to 98 percent; the population served by the municipal sewage system rose from 46 percent to 85 percent; the number of children enrolled in public school doubled; and revenue increased by nearly 50 percent because the new "nothing to hide" government motivated people to pay their taxes.

Many other cities in Brazil have tried to duplicate Porto Alegre's success, and the Rio Grande do Sul state is currently experimenting with participatory budgeting on a state level.

According to Baiocchi, Brazil has a long history of experiments with participatory democracy, perhaps the longest history among developing nations. A good number of those experiments failed and continue to fail, and even the successful models like Porto Alegre have their struggles. Public sector unions have often opposed municipal participatory budgeting decisions that in principle might deny them raises. Some sectors of the neighborhood movement have also sometimes opposed it because they demanded more of a complete commitment to urban improvements in poor neighborhoods at the expense of parts of the city. The elected, paid officials in city council who ratify the city budget have complained that they are mere spectators to the budgetary

process. And the Workers Party contains its own factions and political disputes.

Baiocchi says the collaborative project will shed light on the similar problems and successes realized by decentralized governments in India and South Africa. In South Africa, the black majority has been given new power, and subsequently new responsibilities, in planning local budgets and trying to undo apartheid's damage to the economy. In Kerala, India, an ambitious campaign to decentralize the government has given local people a say in how roughly 40 percent of the state's development budget is spent.

In each country, state leaders have actively supported the move toward participatory democracy by granting more local authority or approving new initiatives. While there has been a great deal of research on specific experiments, the collaborative project will explore three main questions:

Politics: How does the local political scene and the mobilization of political movements make decentralization possible? Giving citizens a say in how the government spends its money means that government structure has to change; local, state, and national politics can make or break decentralization efforts.

Institutional Design: How important is the structure of the decentralized government? Considering the bureaucratic issues that plague state projects funded at a national level, local governments have to work much more efficiently to get anything accomplished. The local government cannot have its hands tied by state or national politics.

Social Context: A city's social conditions and political history could eventually quash a participatory democracy. Researchers will examine the relationship between government reforms aimed at decentralization and existing political and social structures to determine if the interaction helped or hindered the participatory process.

Baiocchi has addressed such questions as they relate to Porte Alegre in an upcoming book that he has edited, *Radicals in Power: The Workers Party (PT) and Experiments in Urban Democracy in Brazil* (London: Zed Press), to be released in December during the World Social Forum. Additionally, Baiocchi is working on a book manuscript based on his dissertation research titled "Militants and Citizens: Civic Practice and Participatory Governance in Brazil."

International interest in Porto Alegre is not surprising considering that fewer and fewer people turn out to vote in many democratic countries, Baiocchi says. Studying how the Workers Party gets ordinary citizens fired up about local government could one day lead to changes in democracy as we know it.

While it's hard to imagine anything like a Porto Alegre happening anywhere in the United States, watching the government of Porto Alegre in action has offered Baiocchi a new perspective of democracy in America.

"Arrogance might be a strong word, but it's interesting to me as someone who lives in the U.S. that we think we have a lot to teach other people about democracy," Baiocchi says. "Americans often feel very divorced from decisions of their local government, but I've found that there are ways to bring 'ordinary people' into those spheres of decision-making. And democracy really is working in some unlikely places."

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