
In December 1988, both houses of the Illinois state legislature passed a unique school reform bill by overwhelming margins. Calling for decentralized management of Chicago schools by locally elected councils, the legislation was hammered out by an unlikely alliance led by community groups and business executives in House Speaker Michael Madigan’s office over 16 weeks of negotiations. Each council would have authority over principal hiring, budgets, and long-term planning, with oversight provided by a central body responsible for both accountability and support. By 1989, over 17,000 parents, residents, and teachers ran for election to the Local School Councils (LSCs), and 5,400 were elected. Similar, if less dramatic, changes were brewing in the Chicago Police Department in the early 1990s, when community policing caught hold in the form of monthly planning meetings for residents in each of 279 beats in the city. Endorsed by both community activists and police administrators, beat meetings were enthusiastically received by locals, attracting 80,000 participants from January 1995 to May 1996.

What are we to make of these moments of popular participation in notoriously insular urban bureaucracies? Archon Fung, the author of a rigorous, measured analysis of the Chicago police and school reforms, claims that these “hybrid arrangements” (6)—lay decision making accompanied by accountability and assistance from local civic organizations and centralized administrators—are extremely promising indeed. Many others, including Sampson et al. (2005), have celebrated cooperative arrangements as marking a new era of “blended forms of social action”—a heartening evolution of collective civic engagement from sixties-era protests to twenty-first-century collaborations.

In this sense, Fung’s study provides much-needed detail and texture on what such decision-making processes might actually look like on the ground, paying attention to what happens after the initial deliberations have occurred, to the connections between state-level, regional, and local actors, and to stakeholder relationships among and within neighborhoods. Deliberative theory has ignored practice to its great detriment, and Fung is chiefly preoccupied with demonstrating the real potential of reforms in the face of detractors from both the rational choice and egalitarian sides. Marshalling both quantitative and qualitative data on deliberative groups working in “decidedly non-ideal conditions” (221), he systematically puts to rest the most common questions raised by these skeptics. The advantages of this approach are not just that Fung challenges many orthodoxies of deliberation theory, but that he provides a compelling story of how relatively simple reforms can link political coalitions, NGOs, social movement activists, state-level governments, city-wide agencies, and diverse resident groups in surprisingly effective ways.

Fung notes that the chief critics of participatory governance have overstated capacity and resource obstacles for poor and minority residents to engage in genuinely empowered and deliberative participation. Residents of poor neighborhoods participated in greater numbers and gained more through their participation than residents in comparatively wealthy areas. Although language barriers, domination, and Balkanization did occur, they were surmounted in Fung’s six case studies with the assistance of some basic participant training, sensitive facilitation, and occasional intervention from neutral outsiders. Further, Fung finds that, in unpromising circumstances of deep racial and class divisions within neighborhoods, reforms were a clear improvement over prior institutions. Such concrete evidence is welcome for advocates of deliberative ideals, who often focus less on the range and diversity of deliberative applications than on refining models and defining best practices. For its testing of oft-repeated criticisms and questioning of presumed virtues, Fung’s analysis of empowered participation as a workable reform is an excellent resource for students of deliberation.

But the Chicago cases raise more intriguing questions than they answer about the transformative potential and ultimate future of accountable autonomy. By using his rich case studies in service of his argument for deliberation, and in asserting the novelty of Chicago’s participatory reforms, Fung leaves unanalyzed creeping evidence—neatly sketched out in Chapter Two on the historical context of the reforms—that these innovations may not be so new or so distinct from market-based solutions. The turn to accountable autonomy was ushered in by managerial and professional consensus in the 1980s and 1990s on the power of limited decentralization to improve stagnating companies and entrenched government bureaucracies. Consultants at Booz, Allen, and Hamilton repeatedly came up with the same solution for Chicago’s troubled municipal agencies that community organizing groups did. For familiars of 1980s fashions in corporate management, enthusiasm about the efficiencies of the “Quality Instructional Program”
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beats and LSCs in general were more functional for
intimidation campaigns on both sides. Overall, the
beats that led to coordinated harassment and
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beats and LSCs in general were more functional for
poor neighborhoods than for rich ones because rich
ones already enjoyed the cozy relationships and preferred
solution that poor residents could cultivate in
their newfound access to agency administrators and
local authorities. If this is “reinventing urban democracy,”
then it is less about emerging ideals or evolving
approaches than about the trickling down of cyclical
normative and rationalizing managerial ideologies
(Barley and Kunda 1992) from the corporate sector—
ideologies which, not coincidentally, emphasize quies-
cence over contention.

With an engaging balance of realism and optim-
ism, Fung acknowledges that the small-bore solutions likely to be produced in empowered
participation are necessarily limited, but hopes that
these humble starts might lead to more ambitious
collective problem solving down the road as innova-
tive approaches are shared within the system. Given
the difficulty of maintaining momentum even in
these modest efforts—and Fung duly notes that
democratic gains were fragile and prone to erosion
once training budgets for local community groups
were cut or individual neighborhood leaders moved
on—Fung’s greatest accomplishment is not in
showing us that accountable autonomy may succeed
over the short term (it certainly can), but in demonstrat-
ing that, when it fails, it may not be for the
reasons so many deliberative democrats suppose.
Rather than blaming community-specific “patholo-
gies of local governance” (217) in cases of flagging
reforms, it is time for those who believe in delibera-
tive democracy to investigate why participatory solu-
tions can gain such overwhelming support from
legislatures, the private sector, and agencies them-
selves if they are so hard to sustain.

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The Politics of Sexual Harassment. A Comparative
Study of the United States, the European Union, and
Germany. By Kathrin S. Zippel. (Cambridge Uni-
versity Press, 2006.)

The Politics of Sexual Harrasment is a timely contri-
bution to the question whether states, and supranational bodies like the European Union, can legislate
equality. The answer that the author Kathrin Zippel
provides in this excellently researched study is a quali-
fied yes: State policies and legal frameworks shape
gender equality, but the way in which politics and laws
operate depends on specific cultural traditions, on
institutional factors, societal pressures, and transna-
tional influences. Drawing on a vast array of sources
ranging from legal documents, internal policy discus-
sions, and parliamentary debates to movement
accounts and personal interviews, Kathrin Zippel pro-
vides a process oriented narrative of how Germany,
the United States, and the European Union have insti-
tutionalized feminist policies—the prism being sexual
harassment.

The author rightfully debunks a number of con-
ceptual frameworks that have been used in the gender
equality debates of recent years as insufficient explana-
tory variables for her specific cases. Neither the exist-
ence of a strong male breadwinner orientation nor
strong feminist movement cultures can in and of
themselves explain the particular framing and imple-
mentation of sexual harassment policies in these three
political entities. The framework that Zippel intro-
duces instead focuses on the specific mode of regula-
tion that informs the institutional culture of her cases:
For the United States, she traces a legal-regulatory
route, for Germany a statutory-corporatist and for the
European Union a bureaucratic expert-driven route.

Process clearly informs outcome, with different
actors in each case framing the debates. Whereas in the
United States individual cases and court hearings pro-
vided platforms for social intervention, the European
Union instigated change with the help of strong
women’s units. Germany, by contrast, turns out to be
the quintessential laggard in regard to sexual harass-
ment. The lack of an explicit antidiscrimination law
resulted in there being no clear legal basis for a sexual
harassment claim, in courts considering it a private
matter, and in it being individualized because class
action suits were not allowed. In effect, using litigation
to fight sexual harassment was not really an option for
German feminists until the mid-1990s. This changed
with the 1995 Federal Employee Protection Law, but
Zippel argues convincingly that this law is nothing
more than a minimalist response by a conservative