Participation and democracy in Brazil and Germany

Marcella Nery from Brazil has been a German Chancellor Fellow at the HWR Berlin since 1 October 2024. She is researching the topics of participation and democracy in Brazil and Germany.

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Marcella Nery will be a visiting researcher at the HWR Berlin for one year. She will be mentored by Prof. Dr. Carolin Hagelskamp, Professor of Social Sciences at the Department of Public Administration. Previously, Marcella Nery was project coordinator at Delibera Brasil, a non-profit, supra-partisan organization that aims to contribute to the strengthening and deepening democracy by promoting citizen deliberation. Last year, she and her team developed a methodology for including marginalized forest peoples in the First Climate Assembly in an Amazonian City.

Ms. Nery, You are researching the inclusion of marginalised groups in Brazil and Germany in participatory processes, particularly with regard to protecting the rights of these groups and achieving fairer results. Can you give us an example of what this means?

Participatory institutions are often described as tools for mitigating traditional political inequalities by providing access to excluded actors. However, they are not immune to criticism, particularly regarding their tendency to reproduce social and political inequalities within their frameworks. Empirical research consistently highlights how socioeconomic inequalities deeply shape political engagement, limiting who participates in deliberative and participatory institutions. This often leads to the underrepresentation of marginalized groups, such as working-class individuals and Black women from quilombola communities in Brazil—communities with a heritage rooted in the resilience of enslaved Africans, which was the focus of my master's dissertation.

For instance, my master's research revealed that women from these ethnic groups who serve on Participatory Public Policy Councils—institutional spaces designed to include citizens in decision-making processes alongside government representatives—face significant barriers in influencing decisions. While they may bring up issues like lack of access to basic sanitation or essential medications for prevalent health conditions in rural Black communities, these concerns often fail to be incorporated into the final recommendations of the participatory processes. This means that their participation does not always translate into substantive outcomes, reflecting what scholars describe as "deliberative inequalities." Their bodies are present but remain underrepresented in key decisions, perpetuating the very social and political disparities that participatory processes aim to address.

How did you decide to look at these two countries in particular? What similarities between the countries are already apparent in your research? Where do you see differences?

Brazil has been a global pioneer in participatory institutions, introducing the world's first participatory budgeting process in 1989. Today, the country hosts more than 40,000 participatory institutions at the local, state, and national levels. In contrast,

Germany was the first to experiment with deliberative democracy through the random selection of citizens by lot. Over time, various German federal units have developed their own participatory processes based on sortition. At the national level, for instance, the German Bundestag approved the establishment of the first Citizens' Assembly mandated by Parliament. Similarly, this year, the town of Pinneberg became one of the first municipalities to integrate a citizens' jury followed by a referendum. These examples provide valuable insights for Brazil, particularly as the country has yet to undertake major experiments in integrating participatory processes into parliamentary decision-making or, as seen with referendums, in aligning broader public opinion with participatory institutions. Germany's approach serves as a significant example of advancing the institutionalization of participation.

On the other hand, Brazil’s participatory processes have evolved to address deeply entrenched social, ethnic, and economic inequalities while navigating the influence of diverse and vibrant social movements that shape and contest these participatory spaces. Much of the Brazilian literature focuses on the different groups involved in these processes and their practices for influencing the public agenda through participatory efforts. As a practitioner, I have observed how these groups navigate and occupy participatory spaces, how inequalities persist within them, and over the past year, worked more actively to reduce these asymmetries.

During the first Climate Assembly held in an Amazonian city, I coordinated efforts to ensure the inclusion of indigenous peoples, Brazil nut collectors, rural ethnic communities, and riverine populations. The process was designed to align with their social imaginaries, enabling these communities to co-create participatory methods that reflected their cultural practices, communal dynamics, and decision-making traditions. This approach fundamentally reshaped the deliberative process.

Such inclusive practices in Brazil resonate with recent efforts in Germany to engage marginalized groups such as immigrants, homeless individuals, people with limited formal education, and, more recently, youth—a demographic that has proven particularly difficult to involve in participatory processes. These experiences create an opportunity for dialogue, shedding light on shared challenges and uncovering pathways to strengthen meaningful participation across diverse contexts.

You have a Master's degree in public administration and one in sociology as well as a Bachelor's degree in architecture and urban planning - that sounds like an unusual combination at first. How did this come about? And to what extent do these three subject areas complement each other in your research?

During my bachelor's degree in Architecture and Urban Planning, I gained a deep understanding of the significant challenges involved in developing urban policies that genuinely include marginalized groups, such as those living in squats, the homeless, and the majority of residents in São Paulo’s outskirts. This experience showed me how these groups organize themselves to secure representation in participatory structures, such as participatory budgeting and participatory public policy councils for housing and urban planning. Driven by a desire to understand how these participatory spaces work in practice, I delved into the theory of social movements, particularly in the context of participatory institutions—a focus I explored through sociology.

Over time, I came to understand that focusing solely on social movements was not enough; it became equally essential to examine their interactions with government structures to fully grasp the challenges and progress that shape key decisions. This realization led me to pursue a master’s degree in public administration, a field that, particularly in Brazil, has been devoted in recent decades to analyzing the dynamics between society and the state, especially in policies aimed at

promoting and expanding social justice practices.

The topic of democracy is more topical than ever. What prompted you to focus on participatory processes - and where would you like to see links to practice based on your research findings?

For over 5,000 years, we have developed various forms of democracy—electoral, direct, deliberative, and participatory—often in separate and at times competing waves. However, we are now witnessing a theoretical shift from these isolated ‘waves’ to interconnected ‘ecosystems,’ where diverse democratic practices work together in balance. Lerner’s work in ‘From Waves to Ecosystems: The Next Stage of Democratic Innovation’ explains this concept and serves as the foundation for my research.

Traditionally, we think of democracy as a fixed and singular system, primarily one where people elect leaders. If these elections are free and fair, democracy is considered to be in place. However, when we adopt the perspective of democracy as an ecosystem, we recognize that it is more diverse, interconnected, and dynamic. We cannot place the entire burden of political change on elections alone. Many crucial decisions for social justice, particularly at the local level, have been made through processes such as participatory budgeting and community assemblies. These participatory institutions—such as referendums, participatory digital democracy, and legislative theater—can influence various actors across the political landscape at different levels, creating new pathways for social change.

Regarding my research, my aim is to analyze cases of marginalized group inclusion in Germany, drawing on knowledge and practices from the Global South in inclusive deliberation and social justice concepts. I plan to publish a report that highlights key practices to influence both the empirical field, through concrete case studies, and the theoretical field, offering insights into indicators for evaluating these practices while integrating them into ongoing academic discussions.

Is there anything that you have firmly planned for your time in Berlin?

I am deeply connected to Brazilian literature. Black writers like Conceição Evaristo, Sueli Carneiro, Carolina Maria de Jesus, and Lélia Gonzalez have enriched me as a professional—not because they address professional ethics directly, but because they give voice to the social inequalities of my people in a powerful, poetic way. Their words bring poetry to the world and depth to exchanges rooted in social justice. Here, I’m excited to explore the major literary voices of Berlin and Europe and to journey with them as well. I also love to travel by bike; I've already cycled through Brazil, Chile, Uruguay in Latin America and can’t wait for my first biking adventure in Germany.

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