

Book Review

Cynical Citizenship: Gender, Regionalism, and Political Subjectivity in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Benjamin Junge. Albuquerque University of New Mexico Press, 2018. 286 pp.

Aaron Ansell
Virginia Tech

Anyone who has studied Brazilian history for more than ten minutes knows the cynical phrase, *Para o Inglês Ver* (For the British to See), meaning “We do the grand and proper thing not for ourselves, but for the approval of more powerful and self-convinced foreigners.” After reading Benjamin Junge’s *Cynical Citizenship: Gender, Regionalism, and Subjectivity in Porto Alegre, Brazil*, I understand better how this pernicious expression points to a broader disidentification with the ideals of participatory democratic citizenship.

Nowhere in Brazil are these ideals given more enthusiastic expression than in the southern (Europeanized) city of Porto Alegre where Junge’s ethnography is set. The PT ruled the city for years, creating numerous venues for the realization of progressive models of citizenship. Yet, as Junge suggests, a cynical bristling at idealized subjectivity abounds among Porto Alegrans, as do other (gender and regional) elements of identity that complicate their investment in received models of citizenship. What is of more interest, this

cynicism can in some ways contribute to participatory democracy.

Junge’s ethnography explores the ground-level enactment of Habermasian ideals of impartial, open, and accessible deliberation dedicated to the discovery of the general good; deliberation in which inequalities, and indeed, all personal dimensions of participants, are bracketed through reason. He follows Habermas’ feminist critics (e.g. Nancy Fraser) who allege the masculine bias of neutral rational discourse, and espouse the formation of multiple subaltern counter-publics that might productively merge private and public identities. Junge maps this debate onto the Porto Alegran context, focusing by turns on the 2002 state-federal elections, the city’s famous PT initiated Participatory Budgeting procedures, and the annual, anti-neoliberal World Social Forum (WSF). He dedicates two chapters to each of these three cases: the first chapter-pair analyzes the official discourses that call on “interpellate” Porto Alegrans to take up the roles and speech-forms associated with *cidadania* (citizenship). The second chapter of each pair shifts toward the perspective of community activists on the ground and uses “post-structuralist, feminist, and queer theory” (37) to explore “the instability” of official interpellations. There he contends that the irresolvable

plurality of personhood often derails such enactments of public democratic discourse. Nevertheless, Junge concludes that citizens' movement across personal (e.g. gender-inflected) and impersonal models of citizenship should not trouble democracy's exponents. Such movement is simply the inevitable product of "multiple, interacting identities" (219) that must be accommodated in new models of political subjectivity, confirming "the conclusions of post-structuralist feminist critics..." (218).

Junge executes the chapter-pair on the 2002 elections and the chapter on the WSF competently, but these discussions are not as gripping as other parts of the book. Part of the problem is that he largely drops the theme of regionalism in the second chapters of both pairs. He explores *Gaucho* identity, first in the official discourses of electoral campaigns where candidates donning the trappings of cowboy masculinity appear steadfast and trustworthy, and then in the similarly official newspaper articles that enjoin Porto Alegrans to embrace the left-wing international tourists whose visits to the city bring them self-expression, and sexual adventure, while bringing millions in revenue to the city. The two ethnographic chapters however, focus almost entirely on the gender imbroglions surrounding grassroots activists' political participation. Junge shows how constructions of feminine passivity underlie activist-women's insistence that PT candidates speak too aggressively, as well as the worry that their husbands will construe their presence at rallies as licentious partying. These interpretations were convincing, but I sometimes wondered if Junge's insistent focus on gender ignored other variables at play in these cases. For instance, Brazilian political culture gener-

ally emphasizes compromise, strategic forgiveness, and flexible alliances – think the *jogo de cintura* – which to me suggests the parallel workings of a gender-neutral aversion to the PT's "aggressive" rhetoric.

Junge is at his best in the chapter-pair dealing with the Participatory Budget (OP), a topic of considerable scholarly attention. He handles that literature elegantly in his discussion of the official discourses surrounding the OP, and then parses some half dozen contradictions immanent within the model of citizenship emerging from those official discourses; the tension between civility and defiance (126–127). Thus, Junge reveals that even official citizenship discourses do not simply recapitulate Habermas's prescription for objectivist, deliberative talk. The following ethnographic chapter then offers a gritty depiction of this tension. "What bullshit this is!" exclaims the HIV-positive Thais as she interrupts the more polished and technocratically-fluent Cesar after playing by the OP's discursive play-book proves ineffective. In her cynical allegation, Thais dramatizes the official call for people—especially women of color—to speak up and fight for their rights.

Herein lies Junge's best effort to integrate his focus on the plural, situated person into his concept of the cynical citizen. When Junge argues that "this form of cynicism is reflected in active participation (Thais calling out Cesar's bullshit) accompanied by ... reluctance to fully inhabit any particular vision of citizen participation," he implies a parallel between cynicism and the irreducible plural subject who is similarly ambivalent about official citizenship (158). I find this point compelling, but I remain uncertain whether his vindication of cynicism derives from his recognition of its energizing potential

or from cynicism's refusal of a masculinist and generic model of citizenship (157). Either way, this interesting parallel remains underexplored throughout the book. Still, I am captivated by Junge's emphasis on people's cynical movement "in and out of official discourses." Cynicism promises a redemptive framework for citizenship, an invitation for the fallen among us to imagine our moments of sincere deliberation as prodigal returns that revitalize our faith in democracy.

Cynical Citizenship is a meticulous and efficacious book. Junge's intuitions about cynicism are inspiring and his work on gender identity is solid. His writing is immaculate, ensuring that his conceptual engagements and argumentative structure are fully transparent. Overall, the book has much to recommend it for scholars interested in how ordinary people enact received models of democracy and it would make an excellent addition to a college syllabus.