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Introduction

BUDGETING JUSTICE

ON MAY 25, 2020, an African American man named George Floyd was murdered by a White police officer, Derek Chauvin. Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck and back for over nine minutes, until Floyd could no longer breathe. That summer, twenty-six million people participated in protests against police brutality and aligned with Black Lives Matter, making them the largest movement in US history.¹ The protesters foregrounded the need for institutional reforms and demanded that cities nationwide divest from police.

To me, that summer demonstrated that organizing related to budgets could make a profound difference—putting pressure on governmental bodies, foundations, and even corporations to do something about issues of equity. Bureaucracies could codify inequalities, but institutions could also be made accountable. I especially appreciated the many conversations I observed over what rules neighbors wished to live by, what communities might want or need to invest in, and what communities want to divest from. I was surrounded, in other words, by struggles for budget justice: public budgets that give everyone, especially those from historically marginalized communities, resources and power to address their needs.

In the years since, responses have been woefully inadequate. Though Chauvin was found guilty of killing Floyd, the prosecution's case hardly mentioned race. Beyond his conviction, cities around the country

issued apology statements for institutionalized racism—acknowledging the role of urban planners in disinvestment of Black communities—and formed commissions for racial justice. But the results have been disappointing. The Philadelphia commission on Pathways to Reform, Transformation, and Reconciliation, for instance, launched economic programs aimed at Black small business owners, not wagedworkers, freelancers, and the unemployed.

These moves give companies and governments a semblance of righteous action, even as they leave intact the histories and structures that enable police violence. They fail to redistribute funds toward new visions of community safety, freedom, and spaces where all individuals can flourish.

Meanwhile, it is not a coincidence that people around the United States continued to experience a grave affordability crisis. Both city- and household-level budget crunches have only become more acute. Between an end of federal assistance from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, an economic downturn, and seemingly endless euphemistic “rightsizing” by corporate employers, US households are suffering.

After the pandemic, lower- and middle-income New Yorkers, disproportionately Black and Latine ones, left the city in droves. They could no longer afford to live in the city. But New York will not function properly without them. As sociologist Andrew Beveridge put it, “If you want a subway system, an office sector, a restaurant industry, you need these people.”²

I myself questioned whether my family’s financial anxieties were exceptional or widespread, until I read that New York lost at least one-third of its childcare workers from 2020 to 2023. Most of them are women of color and cannot afford to live in the city.³ Further, City Comptroller Brad Lander released a report stating that, “From 2019 to 2024, the average cost of child care for infants and toddlers in family-based care grew a whopping 79% (to \$18,200), and center-based care was up 43% (to \$26,000)—while the growth in average hourly earnings was only 13%.” It is no wonder that over the same time period, families with young children left the city in droves.⁴

So I looked up the hourly rates my family paid for my child's day care—caring, safe, home-based programs without frills like fancy facilities or a Montessori curriculum. We paid \$14 an hour in 2020, or approximately \$2,500 a month for care so that two parents could work full-time. My child then began to attend public school. But had she needed full-time childcare just three years later, we would be paying \$20 an hour, or around \$3,600 a month.

The federal government states that childcare is considered affordable when it costs less than 7 percent of a household's income. For \$3,600 a month to be considered affordable, a family would need a household income of over \$600,000.

The childcare affordability crisis is a nationwide one.⁵ A 2024 national survey found that instead of the recommended 7 percent, families were spending an average of 24 percent of their income on childcare, and that 47 percent of families reported spending more than \$18,000 on childcare the previous year.⁶ How could they balance their family budgets? When Congress's Joint Finance Committee in 2023 refused to extend pandemic era funding, experts predicted the eventual closure of 70,000 childcare centers around the country, jeopardizing care for 3.2 million kids.⁷

What can be done? In New York, both the city mayor and state governor repeatedly rejected proposals to tax the wealthy, fearing that any tax hikes would prompt millionaires and billionaires to move elsewhere.⁸ But an analysis from the nonpartisan Fiscal Policy Institute finds that the top 1 percent of New Yorkers (individuals earning incomes of more than \$815,000 a year) have not left the city since the pandemic. In fact, they generally move at much lower rates than lower-income earners; further, when they do leave New York, they tend to move to other high-tax states.⁹ The report suggests that raising taxes could help fund programs like universal childcare without scaring away millionaires, who after all can afford to live wherever they please.

These different dimensions of budget justice—policing and childcare, safety and affordability for everyone—are often parceled into separate conversations, but they are profoundly linked.

Budget justice requires a new sort of democracy that emphasizes three points of analysis and practice: first, budgets are moral documents that make explicit what communities choose to *divest from* and *invest in*; second, *direct democracy* must engage everyday constituents rather than elected representatives in a range of decision-making conversations and actions about collective needs; and third, in turn, city residents must themselves practice *new modes of citizenship* as neighbors as opposed to individual consumers or members of voting blocs. Together, these practices will help communities to imagine, articulate, and forward truly different public policies—not just bandages to make the status quo a bit more tolerable.

This book begins with what ails city budgets, but it ends up grappling with what it will take to nourish small *d* democracy, writ large. It is divided into three main parts, each focused on one of the three points of analysis and practice mentioned above. The short chapters here serve as stepping stones on a citizen's journey toward budget justice.

Throughout the book, I refer to citizens as residents who belong to the city polity via their daily activities there, regardless of what papers they do or do not hold. I do so despite some reservations, knowing that among some communities, like those of undocumented immigrants or some Indigenous nations in the territorial limits of the United States, the word *citizen* is fraught at best. After all, in common parlance, notions of legal citizenship—predicated on declarations of allegiance to a flag—reign supreme. That notion of citizenship refers to the passport one holds, dictating the official rights and responsibilities one has vis-à-vis a nation-state. Legal citizenship is also a typically exclusionary one, rendered concrete by borders and literal walls; policymakers talk about whether someone is a citizen or noncitizen, and whether one might be eligible to hold dual citizenship.

While I sometimes use “constituent” or “individual” as alternatives to the word *citizen*, I primarily use the term *citizen* in the rest of this book purposefully, to broaden popular definitions of citizenship. Indeed, the shared Greek etymological roots of city (*polis*) and citizen (*polites*) underscore how everyday residents have stakes in a political life.¹⁰ These shared roots also point to the importance of grassroots

politics writ large, as opposed to politics confined to the perches at the top—the presidency, Congress, mayoralty, and city council.

Though I mainly draw on my research on New York City, this book’s driving questions apply to cities across the country—and indeed across the world. To compare notes on the triumphs and challenges of budget justice across cities, each of the book’s three interludes consists of an interview I conducted with an activist and thinker in another city working toward budget justice: Jackson, Mississippi, in part I; Porto Alegre, Brazil, in part II; and Barcelona, Spain, in part III.

Policymakers usually make budget decisions behind closed doors. When elected officials do make public budgets transparent, they frequently present them as neutral documents and claim that “numbers don’t lie.” Budget numbers do, however, often obfuscate our everyday circumstances and needs. For example, without a sense of historical data or where exactly money is going, it is difficult to discern whether additional funds for a particular school benefit all the students, barely make up for the prior year’s budget cuts, or add amenities for a small selection of honors students.

While public budgets are typically and intentionally portrayed as technical, neutral, dull, and impersonal, they are moral documents that reflect specific public values, theories of government, and judgments about what is right or wrong in response to common social challenges. The numbers in our public budget shape and reflect the literal bricks and mortar as well as figurative bread and butter of urban planning and services: where waste treatment plants are located, whether subway signal systems from the 1930s are properly maintained so that trains run on time, or whether food benefits for residents and licenses for street vendors can be processed in a timely way.

Focusing on the *budget* part of budget justice prompts communities to articulate divest-invest strategies that redirect money away from expenditures the community doesn’t value and toward those it does. For instance, in summer 2020, protesters camped out in front of City Hall

for more than a month, asking the New York mayor and city council to cut the police budget by \$1 billion from a total budget of \$88 billion, and instead invest in much-needed forms of community care: health care and social services, childcare and elderly care, and well-maintained streets, gardens, parks, and libraries. Although the police eventually cleared the encampment, the monthlong Occupy City Hall protests significantly shaped the 2021 fiscal year budget, with more than \$865 million in cuts to the police department's operating expenses compared to the 2020 budget.¹¹ (Then Mayor Bill de Blasio acknowledged the protests' impact by including lower fringe benefits in his calculations, precisely so that he could claim \$1 billion in cuts.) According to the city council, these savings then went in part to summer youth programming, family social services, and broadband access in public housing.¹²

Citizens also need new tools to meaningfully hold city politicians accountable. Articulating concrete visions for budget justice is especially challenging because of pervasive institutional opacity and obfuscation of public budgets and how they get decided. It should not be so hard for the average citizen to access, read, understand, and compare one city's budget with another's.

In part I, I consider some of the basic makings of budget injustice. I argue that budgets feel daunting and off-putting not because they are too technical; they are designed to be antidemocratic and discourage public accountability or dissent. Viewing budgets as moral documents reveals policymakers' austerity as a political choice rather than necessary sacrifice.

Budget justice requires communities to "flip the gaze," giving government budgets the sort of scrutiny usually reserved for personal finances. I also examine trends in municipal budgets, showing how the federal government has unduly punished cities with austerity measures—which they, in turn, pass on to their most vulnerable residents—for half a century.

I end part I with a call for a right-to-the-city budget, in two ways: citizens have the right to democratically decide what it looks like, and they have the right to a city that helps them to thrive.

But campaigns for budget justice are unlikely to be spearheaded by those already in power. Those most impacted by overpolicing,

unaffordable housing, and underfunded schools must have the chance to inform and make budget decisions as well. Likewise, many of the participants in the 2020 protests against police brutality argue that voting is not enough; they claim that demographic or descriptive representation along with placing “Black faces in high places,” as African American Studies scholar Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor writes, have not addressed racial inequalities nor stopped the killing of Black people in the United States.

In part II of this book, I examine how everyday citizens might begin to combat budget opacity and inform how local public funds get spent. I contend that budget justice entails more than fighting voter suppression and fixing the electoral college.

I use the term *ecosystem of participation* partly to emphasize that democracies cannot live on any single set of institutions. Planting monocrops looks efficient, but it is not sustainable.¹³ It fails to give both the land it uses and people it attempts to feed an adequate range of nutrients. Likewise, democratic politics need diversity to stay alive.

Instead of formal chambers of power, like Congress or city hall, this book takes a closer look at formations of grassroots politics taking place in quotidian library meeting rooms, church basements, and on the streets. Shifting the setting of my ecosystem analogy from a farm to a North American forest, I turn my attention away from the commonly photographed treetops of stately red oaks and toward the spaces below, with their wandering mosses and soft lichens brimming with algae, cyanobacteria, and fungi. There, hybrid, mutualistic, provisional assemblages and entanglements defy planning or scientific categorization.¹⁴ The forest canopy giants may hog the sunlight and limelight, but in the under-story, the plot thickens.

Integral to such grassroots politics is participatory budgeting (PB), a process by which residents, rather than elected officials, allocate public funds. Since it first began in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989, PB has spread to over eleven thousand cities worldwide. In past cases of PB, diversity in participation by gender, income, and racial background contributed to the legitimacy as well as redistributive potential of the processes.¹⁵ In the United States, PB has spread from a single local process in 2010 to over five hundred currently active district, city, or institutional processes.

New York's PB process, run by the city council and known as PBNYC, is the country's largest by far. Since 2012, New Yorkers have decided how to spend more than \$250 million on almost a thousand projects through PBNYC. I draw on a decade of fieldwork on PBNYC to ground my ideals of budget justice, the limits and uses of the foundation laid thus far, and how communities might build on PB processes for budget justice.

I attended dozens of PB assemblies, usually held in school cafeterias and auditoriums in which residents gathered to discuss what they wanted to spend public funds on. At one assembly in East Harlem, a middle-aged White man from the Upper West Side walked across town to pitch new amenities for his daughter's school. As he listened to elderly Asian American, Latine, and Black neighbors talk about the need for laundry in their buildings and the neighborhood's largest concentration of public housing in the country, he changed his mind. He decided to withdraw his proposal for his daughter's school and instead help his neighbors advance *their* proposals.

Through exchanges such as these, communities around New York have used PB to articulate and reprioritize funding allocations. An analysis by social researchers Carolin Hagelskamp, Rebecca Silliman, Erin Godfrey, and David Schleifer shows that from 2009 to 2018, capital spending in districts with PB were markedly different from those without. Schools and public housing, for instance, received more funding, while parks and housing preservation received less.

Whereas electoral politics typically engage the "usual suspects"—higher-income, older constituents—PB engages traditionally marginalized constituents, including youths, formerly incarcerated people, and undocumented immigrants. Research coordinated by the Community Development Project shows that nearly one-quarter of people who voted in New York City's PB process were not eligible to do so in typical elections.¹⁶ The first citywide rulebook dictated that anyone over sixteen who lives, works, attends school, or is the parent of a student in a district could participate in neighborhood assemblies and project vetting, and residents over eighteen, including undocumented immigrants, could vote on the allocations. Enthusiastic and strikingly fruitful youth participation in neighborhood assemblies then convinced adults to lower the PB voting

age to sixteen and the participation age to fourteen in 2012. The voting age lowered again in subsequent years, now standing at eleven.

Social researchers Carolina Johnson, H. Jacob Carlson, and Sonya Reynolds found that PB participants were 8.4 percent more likely to vote than those who had not participated in the process; the effects are even greater for those who have lower probabilities of voting, such as low-income and Black voters.¹⁷

Indeed, participants repeatedly stated that the PB process allowed them to engage in discussions with neighbors they otherwise wouldn't have met—the proverbial “other” in deliberations. They emphasized PB's deliberative nature, along with its encouragement to exchange ideas and compromise. This differs from electoral politics, even for those already politically active. For many, the combination of working with others unlike themselves and working toward binding budgetary decisions gave the PB process a sense of impact lacking in their usual civic engagement.

Through PB, groups of residents and organizations that might usually lobby for funds independently instead joined forces and formed dynamic alliances. Participants spoke to how PB deliberations allowed them to stress more than one aspect of their lives and identities—as African Americans, grandparents, public housing residents, or artists—and highlight issues of intersectionality, their combinations of experiences along lines of race, gender, and other social axes. More than one interviewee stated that like the Upper West Side resident mentioned above, they ended up backing projects they would not have otherwise thought of, let alone supported.

When PB works well, both citizens and government workers have likely stepped out of their respective comfort zones, disrupted or even shifted long-standing assumptions, and shared decision-making power. But robust democratic processes are hard. Some researchers argue that PB has morphed from an empowering process into a politically innocuous (or worse, vacuous) set of procedures that reflect subtle domination by elites.¹⁸ When PB is *not* implemented well, citizens often feel burned out and even more alienated than they did before. Meanwhile, the issues they attempted to address in the city budget remain intact.

Participatory democratic experiments like PB are especially difficult in a context of deep-seated inequalities. White residents report higher incomes than other residents, and they frequently have the connections to navigate bureaucratic regulations more easily. This shapes both the inequities that residents experience every day and power dynamics of their deliberations. Race continues to serve, as cultural theorist Stuart Hall put it, as a fundamental “medium in which class relations are experienced.”¹⁹

Even if the entire New York City budget were subject to a participatory process, to what extent does PB truly begin to address New Yorkers’ varied and complex needs?

The city government’s budgeting becoming more transparent does not render it liberatory. The majority of winning PB projects in New York look like expenditures that city agencies would have implemented anyway, if they had greater funds: air conditioners, lights for neighborhood sports facilities, and curb extensions on dangerous street corners. Such “wins” feel like consolation prizes in a game of permanent, punishing austerity.

I examine how participants relate to the city bureaucrats, as well as *whose* proposals held sway. PB deliberations can perpetuate existing inequalities without attention to epistemic justice—actively questioning what bodies of knowledge are counted as expert, rational, and valuable. In PB, this concerns how city bureaucrats sideline local knowledge in favor of technical knowledge. For budget justice, someone with lived experience should be considered an expert on their own environments as much as someone who has crunched quantitative policy analyses or studied the law.

There are no shortcuts or algorithms for democracy. Unless the funds and scopes of projects are substantially expanded, PB remains the exception to how municipal budgeting usually works: a way for constituents to voice concerns, let off steam, and see some of their ideas come to fruition while most of the budget remains opaque and predetermined. Further, by focusing exclusively on the *invest* side of the equation, PB will remain incomplete. It thus risks propagating the myth that the problem is a scarcity of funds, as opposed to austerity as a policy.

These are not simply questions about institutional design but also power. On whose terms and to what ends is PB carried out? Can PB harness the sort of energy that feeds protests for social justice and channel it in newly generative ways?

Despite or because of its significant limitations, the most impressive and important impacts of New York's PB process have not been the winning projects themselves. Rather, they lie in PB's spillover effects and the changes prompted by the process itself. For example, some participants balked at putting discretionary PB funds toward school bathroom stalls so that seven-year-olds would not hold in their pee all day. Should that even be necessary? Enough complained so that a few years later, the city government quietly doubled its allocation for school bathrooms. Moreover, many groups sought and secured funds for *losing* PB projects elsewhere.

When PB's limits leave participants frustrated, indignant, and angry, the PB process also trains constituents to want, demand, and fight for more. PB can hence serve as a site for politicization.

In part III, I argue that PB is a necessary but necessarily insufficient part of larger struggles for budget justice—a node in an ecosystem of participation. In addition to elections and the government-initiated, *invited spaces* of participation (like PB) I will discuss earlier in the book, part III examines citizens' own, *invented spaces* too, like the mutual aid collectives that proliferated during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The last part of this book follows part II both temporally and substantively; it builds on my analysis of PB in part II to reconsider its role as a crucial entry point in a larger ecosystem of participation. While PB remains the center of my analysis, the view widens tremendously.

Emerging practices of citizen engagement across multiple spaces in an ecosystem of participation form, in turn, the basis for a new *ecology of citizenship*. At the heart of this ecology of citizenship lie contestations over how citizens engage the government and one another, especially in contexts with deep social inequalities. Namely, when even participatory spaces like PB often implicitly employ citizen-consumer logics—in which citizens “choose” social expenditures from preset menus of

limited options in a context of austerity—everyday residents must struggle to forward and enact new *citizen-neighbor* dynamics, valuing solidarity and cooperation in lieu of competition, making claims over public resources and public space, and insisting on abundance in lieu of scarcity.

When invited spaces like PB constrain or even demobilize grassroots action, invented spaces play pivotal roles in enabling communities to sustain mobilizations after protests and crises, imagine and develop new ways of organizing resources, translate demands into policy proposals, and mobilize power for participatory cogovernance. Because citizen-consumer approaches fuel budget injustice, solidarity economy initiatives—which focus on social benefits alongside the financial bottom line—are especially relevant invented spaces because they demonstrate alternative ways of organizing budgets and nurture alternative democratic practices of the citizen-neighbor.

Even in a limited PB process, citizens can sometimes take logics from invented spaces and sneak them into PB as an invited space. I call this *insurgent budgeting*. Residents then pursue and realize policies that governments would not have enacted otherwise. For example, when hate crimes rose after the 2016 election, residents voted to fund self-defense workshops by and for Bangladeshi and Muslim women. These projects, revolving around neighbors helping each other to keep one another safe, contrast more common community safety policies, such as hiring more police officers and outfitting them with more high-tech equipment.

Residents grounded their conversations with observations about actual incidents, accessed and shared stories and evidence about national patterns, and deliberated about what sorts of resources they appreciated, as well as why older Asian women tended to be disproportionate targets of physical violence. Along the way, their conversations touched on histories of anti-Black urban policies, anti-Asian xenophobia and the so-called War on Terror, and contradictory tropes about Asian Americans as both model minorities and “foreigners.” PB thus provides opportunities for tough conversations on the intersection between

policing and gentrification, the availability of health and employment services, and how community safety policies should be defined and implemented.

Residents then work *across* political spaces to pursue policies that governments would not have funded or enacted otherwise. Realizing budget justice requires that citizens themselves articulate the criteria they wish to live by, forwarding new logics of collective care and community control.

The contemporary goal of budget justice pays tribute to the idea of abolition democracy W.E.B. Du Bois examined in *Black Reconstruction in America* ninety years ago.²⁰ In recent decades, Black feminist, queer, Indigenous, critical race, and anticolonial scholarship have pinpointed just how systemic hierarchies persist in the afterlives of slavery and empire. As Harsha Walia writes, abolition democracy also demands the “imagining and generating of alternative institutions . . . prefiguring societies based on equity, mutual aid, and self-determination.”²¹ This project of world-building must be rooted in on-the-ground community organizing and radical democratic experiments.

Cities are the crucial, contested sites where austerity policies first hit the ground, where citizens gather to rise up in response, and from which entire communities might look across borders to ask, and learn from one another by answering: What is to be done? Can communities hold enough political power to hold sway after the next election? Will processes like PB exist, and will they be implemented in ways that hold public budgets accountable and center the needs of everyday residents? Will residents’ lives feel less precarious? Will their life savings and livelihoods not be at the mercy of the next recession, epidemic, or wildfire or hurricane?

Communities can only achieve budget justice by combining seemingly disparate forms of resistance and care in strategic ways, with a clear eye on the long game. Protests and elections are not enough. Budget

justice requires collective reworkings of nodes in ecosystems of participation and ecologies of citizenship, in ways that help everyday residents to understand what, precisely, is happening in their public budgets, and to reimagine what policies should look like in response—harnessed and sustained through organized initiatives that accrue political power. In so doing, communities conceptualize democracy not as a set of institutions, but rather a set of practices and situated solidarities.

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