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Participatory Democracy

The Case of Parish Development Committees in Jamaica

In Participatory Democracy: The Case of Parish Development Committees in Jamaica, Marc Anthony Thomas expands the existing knowledge on participatory democracy. Parish development committees were established as a means for Jamaicans to inform government policy, and Thomas explores the extent to which supportive institutional, infrastructural and superstructural conditions allow for robust implementation of this democratization initiative. His analysis is bolstered by an appreciation of the emancipatory politics employed by the country's general population since slavery not only to survive oppression, but also to influence the nation's political agenda. Riots during slavery and in the present day, for example, have offered citizens an avenue towards self-determination. The democratization initiative symbolized by parish development committees promotes inclusiveness yet is led predominantly by older, educated middle-class individuals with talents and capacities garnered from several years of experience in various fields. Thomas argues that the opportunity cost of a more inclusive order explains this fact, in that Jamaica's finite resources mean there is limited space for a learning curve and the cash-strapped committees have only been able to survive when their members could help to defray the cost of their operations. By observing more than one hundred hours of parish development committee activities and interviewing sixty key informants and four focus groups, Thomas finds that the emergence, survival and thriving of parish development committees in Jamaica is determined largely by the extent to which emancipatory political tactics are successfully applied by committee stakeholders to combat a number of continuing challenges. His analysis provides a micro-scale view of the interaction of factors that have shaped the power and possibility of Jamaica's democratization initiative.

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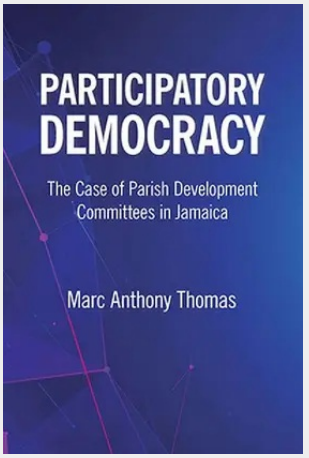

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