

Expanding participatory theory. Towards a radical diversification and localisation of participation.

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Introduction – a broad approach beyond politics

The concept of participation has been used in a variety of fields, varying from the arts, health, urban planning, development and media to democracy. But democracy, because of its concern with the inclusion of the people within political decision-making processes, remains one of the key sites of the articulation of the concept of participation. The centrality of people's participation is described in Held's (1996: 1) definition of democracy as "a form of government in which, in contradiction to monarchies and aristocracies, the people rule. Democracy entails a political community in which there is some form of political equality among the people". But at the same time, democratic theory also shows that it would be difficult to confine the political (and the logic of power and decision-making in society) to the realm of institutionalised politics. Democratic theory has (sometimes) incorporated such transformations, but these theoretical expansions did not develop in a void. They grew out of a diversity of political practices that originated from actors that often were (strictly speaking) situated outside the realm of institutionalised politics. Whether they are called interest groups, old/ new social movements, civil society or activists, these actors broadened the scope of the political and made participation more heterogeneous and multidirectional.

In some cases these political practices were still aimed at impacting directly on institutionalised politics, but in other cases their political objectives diverged from the 'traditional' and were aimed at cultural change. In many cases, several objectives and 'targets' were developed in conjunction. For instance, the feminist movement aimed for the re-articulation of gender relations, within a diversity of societal fields, combining identity politics (see e.g. Harris, 2001) with (successful) attempts to affect legal frameworks. Not only do we witness a broadening of the set of actors involved in political activities, but also an expansion of the spheres that are considered political. One example here is the feminist slogan "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1970), which claimed the political nature of social spheres such as the body and the family. Millett (1970), for instance, coined the term sexual politics, extending the notion of the political into the sphere of the private. In her chapter on the *Theory of Sexual Politics*, she introduces her sociological approach with the simple sentence "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family" (Millett, 1970: 33). A few pages on she notes that "The chief contribution of the family in patriarchy is the socialisation of the young (largely through the example and admonition of their parents) into patriarchal ideology's prescribed attitudes toward the categories of role, temperament, and status" (Millett, 1970: 33).

In these feminist projects we see (a plea for) the political (to) move further into the social. We can apply a similar logic within democratic theory, since a considerable number of authors who tend towards the more maximalist versions of democratic participation have sought (and found) solutions to the scale problem in large democracies by reverting to civil society, the economy and the family as sites of political practice. Here, Mouffe's (2000: 101) concept of the political, as the "dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations", can be used to argue that the political touches upon our entire world, and cannot be confined to institutionalised politics. Here, also, the difference Mouffe makes between the political and

the social is helpful because she locates this difference in the sedimented nature of practices. To use her words:

The political is linked to the acts of hegemonic institution. It is in this sense that one has to differentiate the social from the political. The social is the realm of sedimented practices, that is, practices that conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution and which are taken for granted, as if they were self-grounded. Sedimented social practices are a constitutive part of any possible society; not all social bonds are put into question at the same time. (Mouffe, 2005: 17)

At the same time, hegemony and the taken-for-grantedness it brings is never total or unchallengeable. Sedimented practices can always be questioned, problematised and made political again. This is what democratic and social movement theorists, together with political activists, have attempted to do in a variety of societal fields: to disrupt the taken-for-grantedness of a specific social ordering and to show its political nature.

These logics do not apply only to the realms often discussed in democratic theory (such as the economy); they apply also to the cultural/symbolic realm and the media field, which has to be implicated in the broadening of the political. In other words, the representational is also political. The concept of the politics of representation (see e.g. Hall, 1997: 257) can be used to refer to the ideological logics in representational processes and outcomes. Dominant and/or hegemonic societal orders feed into these representational processes and outcomes, and at the same time are legitimised and normalised by their presence (or in some cases by meaningful absences). Organisations such as publishers and broadcasters – to mention but a few – act as discursive machineries that produces these representations, but at the same time they are organisational environments with specific politics, economies and cultures where, for instance, the politics of the expert or the professional create power relations that impact on the organisation itself, but also on the ‘outside’ world and who from this ‘outside’ world is allowed in.

This all-encompassing process of the broadening of the political, where all social realities become (at least potentially) contestable and politicised, means also that the notions of democracy and participation can no longer remain confined to the field of institutionalised politics. All social fields are the potential objects of claims towards democratisation and increased participation, although these claims (and the struggles provoked) do not lead necessarily to their realisation, and the resistance in some societal realms turns out to be more substantial than in others.

Participation in a diversity of fields and the role of power

The presence of participation within a diversity of social fields can be illustrated by focusing to two examples: spatial (urban) planning and the arts. The field of spatial planning is still closely related, of course, to politics, but at the same time it is a field where participation is widely accepted (albeit in varying degrees of intensity) and has become embedded in the legal frameworks of several countries. Of course, spatial planning has not always emphasised public participation explicitly. The so-called pioneers of planning, Howard and Geddes (see Hall, 1992; Lane, 2005: 287), with their respective focuses on the garden-city and on structured forms of regional planning, based their ideas on blueprint planning that privileged the planner.

A necessary step towards participation becoming integrated into spatial planning was the recognition that planning was a political activity and the rejection of its articulation as a neutral-technical decision. Taylor (1998: 83) points to the work of (mostly American) planning theorists such as Norton Long (1959), to articulate the political nature of planning. Long (1959: 168) is quoted as saying, “Plans are policies and policies, in a democracy at any rate, spell politics. The question is not whether planning will reflect politics but whose politics it will reflect”. At the same time, participation is often translated as consultation, and planning authorities use “prepare, reveal and defend” – and in some cases even “attack and respond” – strategies (Rydin, 1999: 188, 193; Cullingworth and Nadin, 2002: 360). This situation led to a seminal critique by Arnstein, who in 1969 published *A Ladder of Citizen Participation* in which she links participation explicitly to power, saying “that citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power” (Arnstein, 1969: 216). She continues:

It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which the have-nots join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out. (Arnstein, 1969: 216)

In the 1970s, these more maximalist versions of participation became more dominant in planning and architecture theory, but as Smith (2005) remarks, the triumph of neo-liberalism since the 1980s has impacted strongly on planning processes, including the role of the planner and the importance attached to participation. Nevertheless, the (very end of the) 1980s saw a rise in the communicative approach to planning (e.g. Forester, 1989; Healey, 1992), which again reserved an important role for participation. In the 1990s and 2000s, this emphasis on participation was strengthened by a focus on the possibilities of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to support participatory processes. These more recent evolutions confirm that Alfasi’s (2003: 185) words are still very applicable to the field of spatial planning: “Public participation is an idea that has been around for a long time, as long as modern urban planning. Yet it refuses to exhaust itself or become jaded”.

In the world of the arts, participation has been thematised and practiced in many variations, although what is termed participatory art can hardly be considered a canonised art movement (any longer). Moreover, the artist has a strong power position in the creation of the artwork, but this position is not dominant. As Duchamp (1959: 77) wrote, “In the last analysis, the artist may shout from all the rooftops that he is a genius: he will have to wait for the verdict of the spectator in order that his declarations take a social value and that, finally, posterity includes him in the primers of Artist History”.

An important starting point for these reflections on participatory art is Richard Wagner’s essay *The Art-work of the Future*; in a plea for the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (or the total artwork) Wagner accuses the arts of egoism, partially because of their split into varieties of genres, and disconnection from the people who are seen as the source of all creativity: “The Art-work is the living presentation of Religion; – but religions spring not from the artist’s brain; their only origin is from the Folk [*das Volk*]” (Wagner, 2004: 18).

Twentieth-century art movements, such as Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism, used provocation and scandal to reduce audience passivity by transforming the audience member into a “hostile participant, provoked, attacked and beaten by authors and actors” (Melzer, 1976: 43). But especially in the 1960s, a series of arts movements focused strongly on the

concept of participation and maximalist articulations. In addition to the community arts movement (see Binns, 1991), following Bishop (2006: 15), we can identify three other movements: Situationism in France, Happening in the United States and Neo-concretism in Brazil.

In addition to these three movements, an emphasis on audience participation was developing in the world of theatre. Again, this evolution was not new; in his 1924 essay *Theatre, Circus, Variety*, László Moholy-Nagy (2001: 25) had called for a new position for the audience: “It is time to produce a kind of stage activity which will no longer permit the masses to be silent spectators, which will not only excite them inwardly but will let them take hold and participate-actually allow them to fuse with the action on the stage at the peak of cathartic ecstasy”. Also, Bertholt Brecht (see Steinweg, 1995) had experimented with reducing the separation between audience and actor in his *Lehrstücke* project (which he abandoned, but which was revived by the Brazilian director Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, working with ‘spect-actors’ (Boal, 1979)). In the 1960s and 1970s in particular, more structural changes in theatre theory led to the re-articulation of theatre as a text-based art, to an open, playful and social event (Lev-Aladgem and Jackson, 2004: 207). In so-called alternative and third theatre, audience participation implied “taking part in the play: dancing, playing a scene with the performers, engaging fellow spectators in conversation as part of the play, removing or exchanging clothing, or any of the many other kinds of physical involvement possible” (Schechner, 1971: 73).

After the heydays of participatory art in the 1960s and 1970s, it gradually became less popular, which led Frieling (2008: 45) to describe the 1980s as “a decade that avoided exploration of participatory social concepts”. The digital revolution revived the popularity of participation in the 1990s in what Deuze (2010: 4) calls the “second wave of do-it-yourself practices”. Of course, participatory (or interactive) art in the 1990s and the twenty-first century was (and is) not exclusively new (or digital) media art. In this period, interactive art became a more popular concept to describe these practices (see Dinkla, 1996). There were also several significant changes related to the articulation of audience participation in this period, based on changes to the structure of the societal context. As Bourriaud (2006: 163) remarked in 1998, the “social utopias and revolutionary hopes [have] given way to day-to-day micro-utopias and mimetic strategies”. In the 1990s, the emphasis was on interactive art that focused on “the experience of the user as an act of communication, on the social space of the interface, and on the dynamics of interaction” (Penny, 1995: 58). One of the key concepts of the era, Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics, emphasises human relations and context as a starting point, where “[t]he status of the viewer alternates between that of a passive consumer, and that of a witness, an associate, a client, a guest, a co-producer and a protagonist” (Bourriaud, 2006: 168).

Despite their differences, these debates on participation nevertheless have a lot in common in that they all focus on the distribution of power within society at both the macro- and micro-level¹. The balance between people’s inclusion in the implicit and explicit decision-making processes within these fields, and their exclusion through the delegation of power (again, implicit or explicit), is central to discussions on participation in all fields. In democratic theory, Pateman’s (1970) book *Democratic theory and participation* is highly instrumental in

¹ Some prudence is called for here, as power is often reduced to the possession of a specific societal group. Authors such as Foucault (1978) have argued against this position, claiming that power is an always-present characteristic of social relations. In contemporary societies, the narrations of power are complex narrations of power strategies, counter-powers and resistance.

showing the significance of power in defining participation. The two definitions of participation that she introduces are the definitions of “partial” and “full participation”. Partial participation is defined by her as: “a process in which two or more parties influence each other in the making of decisions but the final power to decide rests with one party only” (Pateman, 1970: 70), while full participation is seen as “a process where each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions” (Pateman, 1970: 71). The emphasis on the *equal power position of actors in particular decision-making processes*, as Pateman’s definition of (full) participation indicates also allows distinguishing participation from access and interaction. Although it is necessary to define these decision-making processes in a broad sense (for instance by also including more informal decision-making processes), this definition of participation, containing two components, namely equalised power positions and particular decision-making processes, implies that participation is situated in always particular processes and localities, and always involves specific actors.

Participation in and through the media – how fields interlock

In order to understand participation, and the many different participatory practices with their sometimes very different participatory intensities, these characteristics, power positions and contexts of the specific processes, localities and actors have to be taken into account. Participation is not limited to one specific societal field (e.g., ‘the’ economy) but is present in all societal fields and at all levels. The contexts that these different fields and levels bring into the equation, is crucial to our understanding of any participatory process. For instance, in the theoretical debates on participation, we can see that at the macro-level, they deal with the degree to which people could and should be empowered to (co)decide on for instance political, symbolic-cultural and communicative matters. At the micro-level, they deal with the always-located power relations between privileged and non-privileged actors², between for instance politicians and media professionals on the one hand, and (ordinary) people who do not hold these positions on the other. Debates about participation focus exactly on the legitimisation or the questioning and critiquing of the power (in-)equilibrium that structures these social relationships. If we want to study participation, we need to take account of this locatedness of participatory processes, whilst at the same time acknowledging that different locations interlock and overlap. One way to illustrate this interlocking of several field is through the distinction between participation in the media and through the media, which is inspired by the way that Wasko and Mosco (1992: 7) distinguish between democratisation in and through the media.

Participation *in* the media deals with participation in the production of media output (content-related participation) and in media organisational decision-making (structural participation). As the name already indicates, participation in the media refers to participation internal to the field of media itself. These forms of media participation allow citizens to be active in one of the many (micro-)spheres relevant to daily life, and to put into practice their right to communicate. Although mainstream media have attempted to organise audience participation (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; McNair et al., 2003), community and alternative media in particular have proven more successful at organizing more intense forms of participation in the media (Girard, 1992; Downing et al., 2001; Rodriguez, 2001; Bailey et al., 2007). In many cases, especially in mainstream media, media production is restricted to a specific group of

² Although it would be too much of a simplification to define all privileged actors as part of one societal elite, these privileged actors do form (partially overlapping) elite clusters, that hold stronger power positions compared to individuals not part of these elite clusters.

people, who here are termed media professionals, who are characterised by specific forms of expertise and skills, institutional embeddedness and autonomy, and the deployment of management and power strategies to achieve specific objectives. In some cases, we can add a commitment to public service and the possession of an ethical framework. In these mainstream media contexts, where the participation of media professionals in the process of media production is guaranteed, the focus is shifted towards the participation of non-professionals in the professional system. This opening up of the media system can take more minimalist forms, but also more maximalist forms, since media professionals are often in positions to decide about the degree of power to be delegated and the intensity of participation that is allowed (for).

Participation *through* the media creates a bridge between the media field and fields external to that media field. This concept deals with the opportunities for mediated participation in public debate and for self-representation in the variety of public spaces that characterise the social. The media field serves as a location where citizens can voice their opinions and experiences and interact with other voices. Obviously, the structures and cultures of the media field itself (and its many components), and the ideological-democratic environment, still have a strong impact on the intensity of the participation, but participation *through* the media also emphasises the intervention of actors in other societal fields. In more maximalist versions, the consensus-oriented models of democracy (and participation) emphasise the importance of dialogue and deliberation and focus on collective decision-making based on rational arguments à la Habermas in a public sphere. Other authors (e.g. Fraser, 1990) stress more conflict-oriented approaches and point to the unavoidability of political differences and struggles, seeing the media as crucial sites for struggles over hegemony (Kellner, 1992: 57). What these maximalist versions have in common is first that they (implicitly or explicitly) use a broadly defined notion of the political, where the media sphere becomes incorporated into the political. Second, they articulate multiple sites of societal decision-making, where dialogue, deliberation, debate and struggle play a role within the media sphere itself, and affect the sphere of institutionalised politics, and many other societal spheres. This renders participation multidirectional, as the exercise of communication rights is seen not only to facilitate participation in institutionalised politics, but also as aiming to democratise a variety of other societal spheres, including the sphere of the media. More minimalist versions, captured, for example, in such concepts as informed citizenry (see Schudson (1998) for a critique) and the marketplace of ideas (see, e.g. the libertarian normative media theory (Siebert et al., 1956)), still accept the political nature of the media sphere, but simultaneously articulate it as a support system for institutionalised politics, which allows for opinion formation on matters related to this sphere and facilitates the functioning of representative democracies.

The *Kinoautomat* as example

We can briefly illustrate the role of the interlocking societal fields with a brief analysis³ of the production and political context of the first interactive film, *Kinoautomat*. At the 1967 International and Universal Exposition (Expo 67), the Czechoslovak pavilion featured the interactive film *Kinoautomat – One man and his house*, where spectators could influence the storyline of the film by voting for one of two possible storylines. In order to enable this early form of audience participation, the film theatre armchairs were equipped with voting technology, and a basic computer processed the votes. Following each round of voting, results were projected onto the screen, the decision was announced and the film continued.

³ A more extensive analysis can be found in Carpentier (2011).

Kinoautomat shows that a wide diversity of media technologies (including film) can be used to organise participation, and that the participatory process is co-determined by the affordances of this technology. In the case of *Kinoautomat*, its authors altered the structure of the movie-going experience by allowing spectators to co-decide on the narrative they would receive. This shift in power relations between author and spectator, in one of the most sacred places of (media) authorship, was an avant-garde intervention and a participatory statement that can be considered maximalist because it is embedded within the context of traditional film production where audience participation is (almost) non-existent. But at the same time, the use of film technology severely restricted the authors' options to intensify spectator participation and co-decision-making. From this perspective, the film is a much less maximalist form of participation. The film production logics, which combined high-tech equipment, highly qualified staff, extensive organisational support structures and (thus) major investment, unavoidably kept most of the film's production firmly in the hands of professionals. Within the cinema theatre, the film projection logics again reduced the opportunities for the spectators to intervene more, because the authors had to use a forked structure and the film reels could not be stopped. Because of this, the spectators and stage performers were subject to strict time constraints, and democracy was reduced to voting.

But here too, the participation that the *Kinoautomat* allowed for, within the field of film spectatorship – temporarily disregarding questions about the film's participatory intensity – did not remain confined to the media field, as the performance of participation also played a complex political role at the global stage. An important and ironic dimension of the film's context was that it emerged from an oppressive communist Czechoslovak regime, which used the film as part of its cultural propagandist strategies. Since world exhibitions were sites where the symbolic and cultural Cold War was fought, often by displays of sophisticated national technologies that allowed claims of a contribution to the modernist project of progress, the high investment was of secondary importance. The *Kinoautomat* project was fully supported by the Czechoslovak regime, in spite of the various political preferences presented by the many authors and actors (Petr Kopal from The Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, 25 August 2009 interview). At the same time, *Kinoautomat* is not merely a story of incorporation into the Czechoslovak regime's discourses. *Kinoautomat* and many of the people involved in the production of this film were firmly embedded in the 1960s New Wave movement. Even before the Prague Spring reforms of 1968, the New Wave films had a political-critical dimension but “addressed political issues in an indirect, oblique or Kafkaesque manner” (Hames, 2006: 73), similar to the *Kinoautomat* narration and form. Despite these latent-critical attitudes the New Wave directors could still use the infrastructure of a film industry that already in 1945 had been nationalised. The opposing mechanism of the propagandistic use of technology to signify the communist regime's superiority and the artistic fascination with these very same technologies allowed for transgression of a series of traditional frontiers (between film and theatre, between art and politics, between human and technology, between presence and absence), combining and affecting a wide variety of societal fields.

A short conclusion

When studying participation it remains vital to take the contexts of the fields, in which the participatory practices are located, into account, as participation involves an always complex and instable power play, with a variety of actors that all deploy a diversity of strategies, leading to sometimes contradictory outcomes. The microphysical workings of power – used here in a Foucaultian sense – require analysts to zoom in, in order to scrutinise participatory

processes and to apprehend the participatory intensities of these specific processes. For this reason we need the radical contextualisation and localisation of participatory analysis.

Simultaneously, we should not remain blind for the fact that participatory practices can transcend specific fields, and intersect with a diversity of other fields, which all bring their own logics within the equation. In the case of media (participation), the logics of publicness and visibility, for instance, only facilitate the transgression of the frontiers of particular fields. This idea of transgression then generates the need for an evenly radical attention for diversification and multi-directionality.

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