Theoretical Transformations: Tradition, Postmodernism and Participation

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─────────────── Abstract ───────────────

The emergence of new technologies has spawned new social movements across the globe, notably in established democracies and countries experimenting with the liberal idea. The fulcrum of this transformation is dictated by the new media's gradual possession of the centre in activating citizens' participation and ensuring publicness in our daily lives. The thrust of this transformation calls for a rethinking and shifts in theoretical arguments and postulations. As we move away from traditional approaches and understanding of political participation in the contemporary public spheres, we must begin to forge new ways of theorising on issues of participation and publicness. This shift could be anchored in what we might term civic participation – actions outside the political realm.

Introduction

New media have begun to emerge at a time of an important power shift from political to economic actors in the system of market globalisation. The first question which will be addressed in this paper is: What are the consequences for public participation of this shift of powers, together with the mediatisation of politics and the process of individualisation? Partially enabled by the transfer of power from political to economic actors, and partially driven by the transformations of power from material to symbolic codes, participation is extending from political to the civic realm. The actions in this civic realm are less standardised and coordinated, but more individually-based and personal in their origins.

The second question is: How important and effective can the new media be, as a tool to facilitate these new ways of public participation? On the one hand, new media play a vital role in facilitating changes in public participation – globalisation could never have reached its current intensity without the support of the global digital media. On the other hand, these changes determine how and for what purposes new media can be used, with regard to the public participation of citizens. As participation extends to the civic

arena, new media seem to provide individuals with enormous potential for (re)constituting the public. Historically, access to traditional mass media has been restricted to only a very small number of people, though this has been regarded as 'public participation'. With the new media, the number of people making contributions has dramatically increased. Paradoxically, however, now that we have the technology that enables virtually every citizen to participate, their output is no longer self-evidently understood as participation.

Defining Participation

Public participation, citizens' participation, political participation – whatever we decide to term it – is a contested terrain, full of ideological disputes. A quest for a definition is inevitably burdened with different, even opposing normative positions about the political, the democratic, nature of individuals and the definition of the common good. The theoretical disposition here is taken from participatory and deliberative democracy's theorists (Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984) and most notably Dewey (1954) and his concept of the public/private distinction. Dewey builds this distinction on 'the objective fact that human acts have consequences upon others, that some of these consequences are perceived, and that their perception leads to subsequent effort to control action so as to secure some consequences and avoid others' (Dewey, 1954, p. 12). According to Dewey (1954), a transaction is private when the consequences only affect persons directly involved in the transaction, and it is 'public when the consequences affect others beyond immediate involvement'. He defines the public as 'consisting of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transaction to such an extent that, it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for' (Dewey, 1954, pp.15-16).

Since there are individuals who are not direct participants in transactions with public consequences, it is, according to Dewey (1954), necessary that certain persons be set apart to represent them, and see to it that their interests are respected and protected – this is a process where the public organises itself and eventually becomes a state. But Dewey (1954) does not totally equate the state with political agencies. The formation of states must be an experimental process. The state must always be rediscovered. Political institutions can even obstruct the organisation of a

public and transform themselves into a new state, leaving the public some-times with no alternative but to break with existing political forms.

Analogous to Dewey (1954) and with the additional support of Barber's (1984) work, the following definition of public participation is proposed (and used) in this exposition:

Public participation refers to actions of citizens who are seeking to regulate the consequences of public transactions in two possible ways:

>   (a)   to influence regulators of public transactions (political agen-cies), or
>   (b)   to start constituting the public (which ultimately becomes the state) and to seek to regulate public transactions directly.

Action means that 'politics is something done by, not to, citizens' (Barber, 1984, p. 133). Participation does not encompass political elites and is not a paid-for activity. It is something that citizens do because of their interests and sense of responsibility and not because they are guided by the prospect of individual benefit. It also means that participation is something that is performed; it is an activity and more than a mere interest in public issues or attitudes toward these issues (Brady, 1997).

Moreover, Barber argues that politics describes a realm of action, but that not all action is political. 'We may more properly restrict politics to public action, to action that is both undertaken by a public and intended to have public consequences' (Barber, 1984, p. 123). He adds: 'When l act, the pub-licness of the act can only be measured by the publicness (or privacy) of its consequences, when we – the community, the people, the nation – act, the act is public regardless of its consequences' (Barber, 1984, p. 124). The definition of participation given above was constructed in order to include both actions that are traditionally recognised as public participation and actions which citizens seek to work on solving common problems outside the political realm. This broad definition allows us to incorporate the shift in theoretical thinking which moves away from the traditional understand-ing of public participation and pins its hopes on actions undertaken outside institutionalised politics.
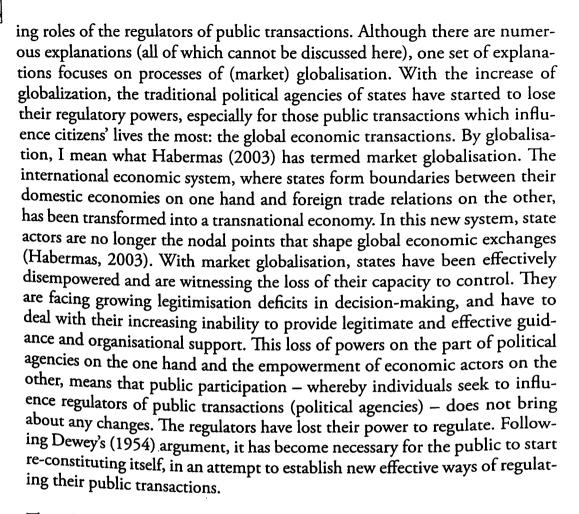
The above definition of public participation includes the traditional under-standing of political participation (by political theory scholars) as actions which are directly or indirectly trying to influence government officials (Verba & Nie, 1972). It also, however, extends this understanding through theories of social movements, in which participation is seen as actions out-side the system of official state politics and is regarded as actually comple-mentary to routine political participation (Goldstone, 2003). Although the definition builds on ideals of theories of participatory democracy (Pateman, 1970), it does not include their normative distinction of 'true' from 'false' participation. Pateman (1970), for instance, asserts that 'full' participation is only equal participation in decision-making, where the individual has equal powers to influence the outcomes of decisions. Pateman thus defines partici-pation on the basis of what an individual succeeds in doing and not on the basis of what an individual is seeking to achieve (as Verba and Nie [1970] do). This is what I will refer to as the problem of publicness. If we start with a normative distinction between 'full' and pseudo-participation, we can overlook all actions which the public is still in the process of beginning to constitute itself, which happens within the realm of private and is performed only by one person or a small group of individuals.

From Political to Civic Participation

As modern and postmodern society is defined by capitalist markets, bureau-cratic states, scientised relationships, and instrumental rationality, there is a shift of action, according to theories of new social movements, against the 'colonising efforts' (Habermas, 1984). This is due to the invasive and con-trolling aspects of social life in late modernity (Buechler, 2000). The indi-viduals within society are developing what Cohen and Arato (1994) refer to as 'defensive' responses – where the primary targets of new social movements are the institutions of civil society. 'These movements create new associations and new publics, try to render existing institutions more egalitarian, enrich and expand public spaces of political society, potentially expanding these and supplementing them with additional forms of citizen participation' (Co-hen & Arato, 1994, p. 548).

The shift from political to civic participation is partially based on the chang-

ing roles of the regulators of public transactions. Although there are numerous explanations (all of which cannot be discussed here), one set of explanations focuses on processes of (market) globalisation. With the increase of globalization, the traditional political agencies of states have started to lose their regulatory powers, especially for those public transactions which influence citizens' lives the most: the global economic transactions. By globalisation, I mean what Habermas (2003) has termed market globalisation. The international economic system, where states form boundaries between their domestic economies on one hand and foreign trade relations on the other, has been transformed into a transnational economy. In this new system, state actors are no longer the nodal points that shape global economic exchanges (Habermas, 2003). With market globalisation, states have been effectively disempowered and are witnessing the loss of their capacity to control. They are facing growing legitimisation deficits in decision-making, and have to deal with their increasing inability to provide legitimate and effective guidance and organisational support. This loss of powers on the part of political agencies on the one hand and the empowerment of economic actors on the other, means that public participation – whereby individuals seek to influence regulators of public transactions (political agencies) – does not bring about any changes. The regulators have lost their power to regulate. Following Dewey's (1954) argument, it has become necessary for the public to start re-constituting itself, in an attempt to establish new effective ways of regulating their public transactions.

The other set of explanations focuses on the changes in the ability of regulators to represent new moral issues and the changing needs of the citizenry. Melucci (1989) stresses that the rise of a 'complex society' has displaced the material production from the centre of social life, and replaced it with the production of signs and social relations (Melucci, 1989, p. 45). By implication, power is no longer concentrated in a materially dominant class; it is dispersed across the diverse fields of the social and resides in symbolic codes and forms of regulation. This has given rise to new social movements which concern themselves with cultural symbols, lifestyle, the everyday and identity. According to Melucci and Avritzer (2000), contemporary democracies are being challenged by the fact that more and more citizens do not see (or accept) that the plurality of moral values is adequately represented through the system of the aggregation of majorities.

> Institutions designed to deliberate on behalf of majorities become completely out of tune with the plural moral conceptions of a significant part of the population. As a consequence, the decision-making capacity of political institutions decreases due to their inability to channel new moral issues and non-economic needs through their decision-making process. (Melucci & Avritzer, 2000, p. 508)

The shifts of powers from political to economic and from material to symbolic codes contribute to the shift from participation within the political system (political participation) to participation outside the political system (civic participation). The more civil actions become embedded in the political system, the more political these actions become in the traditional meaning of political participation described by Verba and Nie's (1972) first three modes of political participation: voting, campaign activity and contacting officials. But the deflation of the state (described above) has inflated the political role of civil society, which allows the public to become (re)constituted, thereby increasing its own regulation and its civil participation.

In Dewey's (1954) approach, the constitution of the public always starts in civil society, and even in the realm of private, because the necessary condition for a public to constitute itself is built on the idea that some specific interactions have public consequences. Just as with any other innovation, the first realisation that a transaction has public consequences is still a personal moment. 'Invention is a peculiarly personal act, even when a number of persons combine to make something new. A novel ideal is the kind of thing that has to occur to somebody in the singular case' (Dewey, 1954, p. 58). This first personal moment of realisation only occurs in the eyes (and minds) of one individual or a small number of individuals. Later this person or these people (might) start informing and raising awareness among the citizenry. Only when the citizenry – those who are affected by the consequences of public transactions – perceive these consequences as such, can it be said that they have constituted the public. 'The lasting extensive and serious consequences of associated activity bring into existence a public. In itself it is unorganized and formless. By means of officials and their special powers it becomes a state' (Dewey, 1954, p. 67). When political officials regulate the consequences of public interactions, they can be said to be(come) the state.

If not, the public has first to (re)constitute itself in order to start creating a new state.

Media have always played a crucial role in this process. Traditional mass media have provided an effective means for a person or a group of people to initiate the constitution of a public. Firstly, newspapers, radio or television have transformed private perception into public perception – they were able to reach a large enough number of citizens who became aware of the indirect consequences of transactions. But this powerful way of informing the citizenry, has always been restricted to only a small elite. Now, with the advent of new information and communication technologies, it seems that the possibilities for constituting the public have grown enormously. Everyone who has Internet access can start writing his or her own blog; people can deliberate on public consequences through online newspaper articles, publish video documentary on YouTube, start a viral campaign through email person-to-person networks; publish group websites, write a wiki, do some adbusting, hack corporate websites, or work on free open source software. The use of Internet by so-called media activists or grassroots journalists has attracted a lot of scholarly attention, (explicitly or implicitly) building on the history of alternative and community media research (Atton, 2002; Carpentier et al., 2003; Downing et al., 2001; Jankowski, 2003). Carrol and Hacket (2006) define media activism as 'organised grassroots efforts directed to creating or influencing media practices and strategies' (p. 84). A most prominent example is the Indymedia network (Couldry, 2003). But the spectrum is much broader, from neghbourhood and local community online endeavours, to global human rights, anti-war and environmental online actions. Especially, the anti-globalisation movement (Yuen et al., 2004; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004) – also termed the anti-corporate movement (Rosenkrands, 2004, p. 57) – has been prone to use the Internet in the (at least potentially) global distribution of their warnings against global capitalism and its lack of social responsibility.

Another consequence of market globalisation is that the world is facing the indirect consequences of global capitalism, which has created what Beck (1992, 2000) has called the 'risk society'. The public has to constitute itself in a way that bypasses national borders in order to start regulating the indirect consequences at the global level. This has resulted in new ways of public

participation, which could be considered glocalised (Robertson, 1995) actions. Attention is drawn to these actions by analysing environmental movements. These are best depicted by the Greenpeace slogan: 'Think globally, act locally' (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 26).This form of participation is glocalised in the sense that individuals try to act on a local level, 'repairing the damage' that has been caused on a global scale.

New information and communication media have an enormous potential for internationalising participation. This may be seen in the global online activities of 'big' civic players such as Greenpeace or Amnesty International. But it can also (and even more) be seen in the global distribution of collective initiatives such as adbusting or freehugs, which are distributed online but work offline. In both cases, individuals participate offline – they 'bust' advertisements, or they give hugs to people on the street – and provide information about events and communicate online. The locality of the offline event could be anywhere in the world and at the same time they try to constitute an international public. Furthermore, these online spaces for interaction are not limited to national or local peer-networks. They are much more globally dispersed, with networks extending beyond national divisions. Just as is the case with the claim that mass media could bring about a cosmopolitan identity (Thompson, 1995), when people become aware of their connection to the global (Tomlinson, 1999), the same argument could be even more valid for Internet applications where individuals can learn about the world from other individuals (and not only from mass media organisations that provide global information).

From Coordinated to Individual and Collective Participation

Beck, claims that (as a consequence of processes of individualisation and globalisation) we have witnessed the development of 'sub-politics'. Sub-politics is built on the processes that shape society from below. Its arenas are media publicity, the judiciary, citizens' initiative groups, and new social movements; its ultimate field is privacy (Beck, 1992). Because of processes of individualisation, it is up to individuals to engage in a self-driven identity construction which is characterised by diversity, fluidity and an emphasis on 'weak ties' in personal relationships rather than on obedience to strong traditional authorities (Beck, 1994). Sub-politics, therefore, means the transfor-

mation of public participation, from a form of participation, coordinated by organisations towards more individual and (ideally) collective participation. Bennett (2003) calls these new forms of participation the actions of the 'self-actualising citizen' in contrast to the traditional notion of participation, which is represented by the 'dutiful citizen'. This new self-actualising citizen sees his/her political activities and commitments in highly personal terms, and performs in the field of consumerism, community volunteering, or transnational activism.

This shift implies the rise of individualised forms of participation. This does not necessarily concern interaction but something that an individual does by her/himself (e.g., 'lifestyle politics' [Giddens, 1991], or environmentalism), or the first step taken in an interaction, trying to inform the citizenry (e.g., writing blogs, initiating a petition or viral campaign, writing a letter to the editor). Participation can also be collective, when it is based on the interaction (meaning two-way communication) of individuals, forming associations and starting to constitute the public. There are two kinds of associations: ones where an individual is still an equal partner and is still able to participate in collective decisions ('full' participation, according to Pateman, [1970]; e.g., deliberation, cooperative work, participating in a 'spontaneous' protest) and others where an individual is not an equal partner anymore but is guided by the associational leaders, and where her/his action is coordinated from a top-down perspective – participation thus becomes coordinated.

The research which has been done on the Internet and participation outside official political channels has mostly been based on social movement organisations and their online top-down mobilisation activities through the use of websites and emailing (Scott & Street, 2000; Washbourne, 2000; Smith & Smythe, 2000; Rosenkrands, 2004); it was therefore focused on coordinated participation, and not on individual or collective participation. New media do not favour collective or individual participation over coordinative, but they do give individuals or small groups a chance. Reasearch on online individual or collective participation has been mostly within a frame of analysing the 'quality' of people's deliberation, usually with Habermasian (1984) criteria of an ideal public sphere (Schneider, 1997; Tsaliki, 2002). But, as Graham (2007) stresses, these studies have focused on politically oriented discursive forums, thereby neglecting the plethora of non-politi-

cal spaces available online. And these non-political spaces are exactly where
individuals start to form the public. If participation is extending beyond the
coordinated and political field, then interactive Internet applications (online
discussion forums) and web applications (blogs, Myspace, YouTube) are ex-
actly the online spaces where such participation is found.

... To No Participation at All

Despite the above-mentioned societal transformations, the influence of the
'old' (political) actors has not disappeared. Some authors argue that the infor-
mational role of the mass media has been fused into new forms of infotain-
ment, with strong emphasis on the personal lives of political personalities,
horse-race journalism, spin and targeting, and the spectacle of public debate,
with no possibility for ordinary citizens to join this debate (Dahlgren, 2001;
Hardt, 2004). The political system has become highly orchestrated, profes-
sionalised and exclusionary (Bucy and Gregson, 2001). Due to the competi-
tion of social groups who serve as mediators between the government and its
citizens, the pluralist ideal of a well-balanced government is losing ground.
There is an increasing inability on the part of these groups to attract the at-
tention of, and mobilise these citizens. Their professional public relations
methods and rhetorical techniques – supported by professional communi-
cators – do not necessitate them having to defend their claims (Mayhew,
1997). This situation provides only rare and unconvincing possibilities for
participation. What Mayhew (1997) terms the 'New Public' is quite the
opposite of the public as Dewey understood it. It is rather a presentation, a
spectacle of the public in which political leaders claim to be prolocutors of
the citizenry. By using anti-discursive techniques, developed from advertis-
ing and created by media specialists, they pull communication away from its
mooring in the solidarity of (and among) groups (Mayhew, 1997).

It is, therefore, not surprising that these professional practitioners see the
Internet as a new tool they can use. 'Politics as usual' has managed to settle on
the Internet because the latter allows politicians to circumvent journalists by
creating a direct line of communication with their constituents. This direct
line is unfiltered and unrestricted by the norms and structural constraints
of traditional print and broadcast journalism (Stromer-Galley & Jamieson,
2001). Political websites are often critical one-way channels for providing

government information to the individual, and very rarely vice versa. The Internet is in this sense no different from other media in helping governments to maintain the status of the citizen as a citizen-consumer (Needham, 2004) – a passive recipient of information generated and delivered by the state. Even in situations where political authorities express their support for citizen input, their efforts remain only at the level of information distribution, with low levels of interactive communication (Astrom, 2004). But this is not only restricted to the sphere of the political. Civic organisations have been quick to adapt and exploit the advantages of new ICTs to facilitate top-down mobilisation as it is cheap to use, difficult to censor, and most importantly, gives access to potentially enormous numbers of people. Civic organisations are not by definition any more participatory than political institutions, as van de Donk et al. (2004) warn. The 'big players' in particular are powerful and centralised organisations, where communication remains one-way, helping to mobilise people to do something and not vice versa.

Conclusion: The Problem of Publicness

The traditional notions of political participation include only highly coordinated actions that belong to the state or to civic 'big players'. But individual innovative actions, even if they are performed by a group of people, have their origins in the realm of private. This is clearly shown by the historical development of collective action into modular forms (Tarrow, 1994): 'The strike became an institution of collective bargaining; the demonstration was covered by a body of law that distinguished it from criminal activity and the sit-in and building occupation were eventually treated with greater leniency than ordinary delinquency' (Tarrow, 1994, p. 46).

With the traditional mass media (e.g., Letters to the Editor) there was no questioning of the publicness of participation – it was assumed that the information reached large enough numbers of people who in Dewey's terms had started to perceive interactions with public consequences and begun to generate a common interest and thus to constitute the public.

Due to ICTs' capacity to (potentially) reach extremely large numbers of readers, it has been easy to talk about online participation as public participation. New media offer tools for new innovative ways of participation. As

anyone with Internet access can write blogs, comment on online articles, deliberate on online forums, screen a documentary, start a viral campaign, etc., this technology has an enormous potential for enlarging public participation. Online public participatory practices which today appear as only private because they are not standardised and in some cases include only a small number of people, can develop into potent methods of constituting the public (and finally the state). But this development is dependent on the scale of public participation. If individual actions remain at the level of reaching a small group of people and fail to inform enough people in order to start constituting the public, then these actions inevitably stay private. The basis of public participation lies therefore not only in what an individual tries to achieve, but much more in what she/he actually does achieve, and at what level this is being done.

Nevertheless, it has taken decades or even centuries for an action to become a modular and politically accepted form of public participation (Tarrow, 1994). Whether new media will show themselves to be useful tools for participation – extending to more civic and individual arenas – is a question that allows for no easy answer. New media do provide a substantial potential in these two spheres of participation, but the question of publicness of online public participation still needs a careful, long-term examination before we can come to conclusions about its effectiveness.

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