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## SYMPOSIUM

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# Plural Governance, Participation and Democracy in Cities

JUSTIN BEAUMONT and WALTER NICHOLLS

### Abstract

*In recent years there has been a growing interest in new participatory forms of urban governance. This introduction provides readers with a basic review of current debates in the literature and a summary of the articles presented in the symposium. The introduction highlights two major tensions in the literature. First, many scholars operate under an assumption that plural actors can achieve a lasting and rational consensus on certain issues. Others believe that where there is consensus, there is also a silenced margin. For these critics, rather than focusing on building power-laden consensus, it is better to recognize and respect conflict and difference as normal parts of the governance process. Second, the introduction considers some of the possibilities for cross-national comparisons of participatory governance regimes. Scholars should not limit their analyses to institutional designs across countries but assess the importance of particular sociopolitical contexts in giving formal institutions their actual meanings and functions.*

The collection of articles in this symposium of the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* assesses relations between governance, participation and democracy in cities, taking the debate in new directions. Our aim is to address the factors and conditions that favour or limit the participation of associations, movements and residents in the governance and decision-making processes of cities. The collection as a whole provides theoretical, conceptual and empirical insights at the interface between urban studies, geography, planning, sociology and political science to conceive new ways to achieve some of the promises of participatory governance. The articles have their origins at a series of sessions at the RC21 Conference in Paris (2005) *Cities as Social Fabric: Fragmentation and Integration*, 30 June–2 July. In this introduction we review the main lines in the literature with relevance to participatory governance and briefly summarize the individual contributions.

Social scientists have approached participatory governance and democracy from distinct conceptual angles. On the one hand, many scholars have focused on deliberative mechanisms that incorporate plural actors directly into the decision-making processes of their cities. The theoretical assumption is that when rules are *designed* to ensure equality for deliberating parties, there is a greater likelihood that participants can find a rational

consensus. On the other hand, others have incorporated poststructural assumptions into their interpretations of participatory governance. Institutions may help create a new 'rational' *consensus*, but this consensus is based on normalizing power relations and the erasing of difference. In the age of neoliberalism, new institutions of 'democratic' inclusion are typically designed to create a new consensus around neoliberal norms and to silence alternative voices and socioeconomic pathways (typical of the New Labour's 'Third Way' schemes for inclusion in Britain). Radical democracy, therefore, depends on recognizing and respecting difference and conflict as necessary elements of the decision-making process, rather than as aberrations that need to be overcome with power-laden consensus. These competing positions are rooted in the larger debates in social theory between Habermas and Mouffe (and Foucault for that matter). While recognizing the deep theoretical tensions that set these views in opposition, the empirical cases presented in the symposium show that modes of participatory governance often fall between these two conceptualizations.

Scholars have long been interested in the issue of governance, democracy and empowerment. In the twentieth century, this concern became a central point of contention between second-international Marxists, with revolutionaries like Luxembourg and Trotsky advocating the incorporation of workers into decision-making bodies in direct opposition to Lenin's dictatorship of the proletariat. Marxist-humanists like Lukács (1971; 1974) and Gramsci (1971; 1977; 1978) added fuel to the debate by suggesting that state institutions produce effects on civil society that could obstruct the empowerment of workers in capitalist societies. The Frankfurt School and its new left offspring addressed some of Gramsci's concerns but also incorporated Max Weber's critiques of bureaucratic rationalization (*cf.* Marcuse, 1955; 1964; Habermas, 1970). It was argued that the large, vertically integrated organizations governing capitalist and socialist societies not only concentrated power in the hands of small groups of elites but also subjugated the 'life spaces' of the people to innumerable bureaucratic controls. These critiques led new left writers and activists to seek more authentic, humane and empowering forms of governance, including governance experiments that stressed the autonomy and control of local residents and workers (see Markovic and Cohen, 1975). These thinkers and activists were therefore connected by their common interest in the ways governance mechanisms can augment meaningful, humane and empowering modes of participation in democratic societies.

Another important theoretical line is the seminal work of the Brazilian philosopher of education, Paulo Freire (1972). Rather than focusing narrowly on governance institutions, he believed that the political and existential empowerment of underprivileged people depended on their abilities to develop a critical consciousness of their societies. A principal vehicle for achieving this consciousness was the critical pedagogy of popular education, consisting of both content and technique. In terms of content, education should reveal how power relations subordinate people and identify the appropriate means for altering those relations. In terms of technique, Freire stressed that educators cannot empower if they reproduce authoritarian power relations with their students. The liberating possibilities of education can only be realized when avoiding authoritarian teacher–pupil distinctions, and when education materials are drawn from the actual experiences of the students (*cf.* Gopalan, 1997). This dialogic and egalitarian approach that is free from power distinctions focuses on people's innate creative capacities and intelligence, rather than stressing passive reception of information. By implication, this meant that educators should become enmeshed in the lives of students, creating 'base' or learning communities where constant critical exchanges between the educators and students contribute to raising the consciousness of both. In this sense, Freire stressed that real participatory democracy depended on the 'bottom-up' work of organizers and educators, with these actors slowly building critical communities that could enter political deliberations as conscious and empowered forces. While Freire's writings were widely disseminated, popular education became a standard organizing method for insurgents in the global South.

By the 1970s activists and scholars interested in participatory governance addressed the issue in different yet complementary ways. On the one hand, neo-Marxists focused primarily on analyzing how institutions affect the empowered participation of people. These concerns spurred (mostly) European activists and scholars to identify new institutional designs that could facilitate more satisfying and radical forms of democratic participation. On the other hand, grassroots organizers inspired by the Freirian tradition stressed that critically conscious communities were a precondition of empowerment. Sometimes inspired by liberation theology (Smith, 1991; Rowland, 1999; Gutierrez, 2001), militants in the global South worked to forge empowered 'base communities' that would then articulate a critical voice in the political arena. Both these traditions have been central in contemporary thinking about participatory governance, with the first spurring interest in 'institutional design' and the second sparking interest in grassroots empowerment.

Although current interests in participatory governance draw directly from these traditions, they also refer to other important currents in political and social theory. A number of writers have turned to pluralist thinking in making the case for participatory governance (Cohen and Rogers, 1992; 1995; Hirst, 1994; 2005). Echoing work early this century on both sides of the Atlantic on the dispersed and pluralist character of democracy, Cohen and Rogers, for instance, revisit arguments for associationism. As the institutional forms of traditional liberal democracy appear increasingly unable to cope with the complexities of governance, they offer an innovative scheme for revitalizing modern democracy in the West. By strengthening the role of secondary associations, a plethora of civil society organizations that intermediate between the individual and the state — such as unions, work councils, neighbourhood and community groups, and minority organizations — can engender a process of democratization by encouraging active participation of people from the grassroots in politics. Elaborating on these points, Hirst (1994; 2005) speaks of the need for empowerment of poor and excluded people at the base of urban society for reversal of their predicament and maintenance of social cohesion.

Complementing this variant of 'associational pluralism', Jürgen Habermas has developed a theory to assess the conditions under which plural actors can achieve a rational consensus in the governance process. At all times grounded in the Enlightenment ideal, Habermas' (1984; 1987) work developed the concept of an 'ideal speech situation' where all participants are involved, on an egalitarian basis, in a rational and constraint-free communication in the public sphere for a depth of understanding and reconciliation of hitherto conflicting value claims (*cf.* Healey, 1996; 2006 for collaborative planning). Combining philosophical anthropology, hermeneutics, pragmatism, psychoanalysis and linguistic analysis, Habermas from the 1960s onwards took critical theory to new ground, founded on insights into the 'linguistic intersubjectivity of social action'. In particular, his reformulation of hermeneutic philosophy and Wittgensteinian analysis of language led him to believe that human beings have always been bound to each other by the medium of reaching rational understanding through language — the much vaunted 'ideal speech act'. A participatory urban democracy, then, is at the same time the meaningful and egalitarian process of communication between all relevant political subjects and their rational reconciliation and integration.

In recent years, a number of scholars inspired by successful experiments across Latin America have combined these different strands of theory to evaluate new forms of participatory governance in the global South (Abers, 1998; 2000; Avritzer, 2002; Baiocchi, 2005). Leonardo Avritzer, for instance, takes a Habermasian perspective to claim that democracy can be far more radically inclusive when it mobilizes an autonomous and empowered public sphere (2002; *cf.* Wampler and Avritzer, 2004). Taken together, these commentators draw our attention to the more general phenomenon of leftist local governments seeking better ways of empowering people, particularly in the aftermath of democratizing militarist regimes at the national level (Chavez and Goldfrank, 2004).

Importing insights to the US, Archon Fung has been particularly active in analyzing how participatory institutions can be designed to create conditions that bring about 'ideal speech' situations that hold plural actors 'doubly accountable' (Fung, 2003; 2004; Fung and Wright, 2003a; Fagotto and Fung, 2006). What differentiates this new line of inquiry from previous explorations into participatory democracy is the focus on the process of *deliberation* (Melo and Baiocchi, 2006: 590). Deliberation is a particular decision-making process whereby plural actors are given equal opportunities to exchange views on a particular subject. The deliberative process not only improves the likelihood that different values are exchanged and interests included in decision-making areas, but it also provides greater legitimacy for decisions taken. While much of the work in this area has focused on how institutions can be designed to ensure equal opportunities for plural stakeholders, others have argued that well-designed institutions alone cannot empower communities (Fung and Wright, 2003b; Cohen and Rogers, 2003). No matter how well designed these institutions are, the empowerment of communities depends on their capacities to concentrate social powers *prior* to their engagement in deliberations. Well-designed participatory institutions serve to enhance fruitful deliberations and satisfactory consensuses *only* when there is a relative balance of power between the stakeholders. Studies of Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting process clearly illustrate that empowered militants plus well designed institutions enabled egalitarian deliberations between plural stakeholders (Baiocchi, 2005; Melo and Baiocchi, 2006; *cf.* Chavez and Goldfrank, 2004). Thus, these writings have integrated past theoretical strands concerning institutions and community power with Habermas' concern for communicative equality and rational consensus.

The Habermasian underpinnings of deliberation have generated a great deal of critical response. Notable examples included the post-Marxist political theory of Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 1995; 1996; 2000) and Foucault-inspired poststructural accounts of decentred power, self-government and governmentality under neoliberalism (Foucault, 1991; Rose, 1996; 1999; Dean, 1999; *cf.* Raco and Imrie, 2000; Raco, 2003). From an irrationalist and antiessentialist perspective that is sceptical of the Enlightenment, Mouffe argues that Habermasian radical democracy is universalistic and rationalistic and grounded on an evolutionary conception of moral development. Against the view that dialogue rather than agreement is sufficient, she claims Habermas requires an 'undistorted communication' for a final reconciliation of values. Mouffe argues that the Habermasian position amounts to an unrequited belief in the possibility for rational consensus, with dangerous authoritarian implications. Radical democracy, moreover, is impossible without the capacity for diverse political subjects to freely exert their multiple identities, above all in an 'agonistic' and conflictive polity.

Mouffe's concerns are most prescient in a context of neoliberal hegemony, the context where other observers, often British, are motivated by Foucault's 'governmentality'. Institutions of deliberative democracy are embedded in 'broader transformations in the rationalities and techniques of government', which directly shape their practices and functions (Raco and Imrie, 2000: 2187). Those new instruments for eliciting citizen engagement have been rolled out in a society where the neoliberal agenda has been pushed the most aggressively (Rose, 1996; 1999; Dean, 1999; Raco and Imrie, 2000; Raco, 2003). In this context, new institutions have been used to infuse a new 'rationality' in the ways under-privileged communities articulate their interests in politics. New antipoverty initiatives under the Blair government, for example, marked a fundamental shift from collective and corporatist negotiations between class blocks to individual deliberations between individualized stakeholders. These schemes also indicate a swing from structural concerns over distribution of wealth to disciplinary concerns over the management of the behaviour, morality and bodies of the impoverished and marginalized.

In this way, deliberative institutions in the area of poverty management have become strategic instruments to transmit, or more accurately download or impose, new rationalities (i.e. ideas of political actors, ideas of what *should* be done) to working-class communities. While these deliberative institutions were well designed, they have

nevertheless legitimated the basic norms of the system at large, ultimately reinforcing the power of new elites rather than redistributing power to subordinate groups. These neo-Foucauldian critics further argue that the goals of participatory democracy are certainly valid but, considering the problems with existing formulations, the focus should not be on designing particular institutions to ensure rational consensus but on developing modes of politics where real diversity and conflicts are respected. In spite of their powerful critiques of deliberation and consensus, these commentators have not been as successful in outlining a model of how such a radical democratic politics would appear in practice.

The political contexts in which new deliberative and participatory institutions are deployed play a crucial role in determining their abilities to either empower disenfranchised communities (Brazilian case) or contribute to their further marginalization and disempowerment (British case). This observation has important implications for how we can study participatory democracy in the global age. First, while it is certainly worthwhile to think of comparing participatory institutions (Melo and Baiocchi, 2006), such comparisons are fruitful when the socio-political contexts of different societies are taken fully into account. Without doing so we may gloss over important differences in the ways these institutions redistribute power to historically disenfranchised groups. Second, as the gap between optimists and pessimists is fuelled partly by their diverse points of reference, their theoretical differences may not be as insurmountable as one might expect on first sight. We believe that a robust conceptual framework of participatory governance needs to weave together some of the theoretical strands described above. Mouffe's more recent work moves in this direction by advancing the notion of a radical and plural democracy, or agonistic pluralism, which is said to steer a middle ground between Habermasian rationalism and universalism and postmodern advocacy of absolute heterogeneity. More can be done to geographically contextualize these concerns.

The first article of this symposium by Beaumont and Loopmans (pp. 92–110) tackles directly the tensions between Habermas and Mouffe, assessing the theoretical tools at our disposal for explaining participatory processes in socially and ethically diverse urban contexts. These authors draw upon detailed case material on participation in the Delfshaven district of Rotterdam (The Netherlands) and in the Antwerp-North district (Belgium) to argue that while sympathetic with the ideals of Habermas, given the highly fragmented, individualized and conflictive politics observed in Antwerp, they equally do not see the alternative in the bureaucratic form of rationality apparent in Rotterdam. The authors therefore argue for a radicalized communicate rationality, combining a Habermas-inspired ideal speech situation with more organic, grassroots and bottom-up processes in line with Mouffe. Their 'hybridized' conception of participation transcends the pervasive tendency to treat Habermas and Mouffe as epistemologically distinct and concerned with incommensurable conceptions of social power. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the argument for theorizing governance and participation in cities.

The article by Uitermark and Duyvendak (pp. 111–31) analyses participation with respect to the twin developments of fragmentation and the mediatization of politics in The Netherlands. For these authors governmental organizations are compelled to engage in symbolic competition with others. These new circumstances also drastically change the relationship of government to clients, target groups and the citizenry as a whole. Uitermark and Duyvendak investigate these changes through an empirical study of the Neighbourhood Alliance, a privately funded community development agency. The authors show that it is no longer the citizenry that articulates a public discourse but a public discourse mediated by the institutional entrepreneurialism of the Neighbourhood Alliance that stipulates the type of participation that is appropriate. On the one hand, the idea that all (neighbourhood) citizens are represented is undermined because no institution can be held accountable if their interests are not served. On the other, the social interventions of various governance agents that are exposed to fragmentation and mediatization resonate with the concerns expressed in the (national) public sphere. The



article suggests that these and other such initiatives create positive experiences but reflect the concerns of governmental organizations more than needs of residents.

The collective elaboration of city development strategies (CDSs) in Johannesburg, South Africa is addressed in the third article by Lipietz (pp. 132–60) who shows how they have become a leitmotiv in urban development planning, promising to deliver on both democracy-deepening and pro-poor concerns. She argues that much depends on the broader political opportunity structures within which CDSs are attempted. Using Johannesburg's recent experiment with city-wide strategic planning as a case study, the article explores the complex interplay between participatory processes and the broader political machinery of governance. In the messy terrain of late 1990s transition politics, Johannesburg's CDSs proved to be rather more an instrument of the ruling ANC party's consolidation of power over the city than a genuine attempt at collective strategic planning. This usurpation of participatory ideals, however, did not entail the demise of equitable or even pro-poor concerns: more formal processes of participation, such as electoral representation and bureaucratic power, ensured the continued meshing of developmental concerns alongside growth imperatives at the heart of the CDSs. The ambiguous relationship between newly entrenched routine participatory processes and the most recent — and arguably more equitable — review of the CDSs, meanwhile, raises further questions about the actual function of participatory processes in urban governance, thus alerting us to how formal institutions often curtail more direct and participative forms of governance.

The final article by Sintomer *et al.* (pp. 164–78) deals directly with the phenomenon of participatory budgeting and its diffusion outside the Latin American and specifically Brazilian core. Starting from the premise that a number of traditional forms of participation in urban policies have been criticized for being unable to promote a real integration of the various actors and groups at the city level, the authors show that a growing interest in participatory budgets is to be explained by the following: its supposed efficiency in moving participants beyond their micro-local interest; to avoid the 'NIMBY effect'; and to foster an integrative vision of the city. The article demonstrates that the methodology has developed quickly in the past few years and has been adopted by hundreds of cities in Latin America and by around 50 in Europe. Drawing upon findings from a number of international comparative projects (one conducted in Latin America in the frame of the URBAL program, the other in Europe with funding from the Foundation Böckler in Germany and the Ministry for Research in France), the authors describe the development of participatory budgets in the world, proposing a typology of the methodologies used and dynamics produced. The article provides precise definitions of the main notions of participatory democracy, integration and deliberative politics. As a consequence, the authors address various issues pertaining to the practice of participatory budgeting in diverse cities and contribute to the debate on participatory governance both in Latin American and European contexts.

The articles that comprise the symposium present detailed contemporary analyses of relations between governance, participation and democracy in cities. The articles deploy various theoretical tools and diverse case material to make their claims, spanning the global North–South divide. New perspectives on participatory governance and democracy from low-income countries will shape the research agenda in the West, and vice versa, in the years to come. More specifically, we argue that approaches to urban participatory governance have undergone a gradual transition from direct and deliberative decision-making, to more recent approaches stressing inherent political conflict and 'normalization' of institutions of social life under neoliberal power relations. Themes for new research include the following:

- 1 tensions between voluntarism and institutional and structural imperatives;
- 2 frictions between representative and participative engagement;
- 3 distinctions and overlap between participation, democratization and social movements in cities;

- 4 relations and tensions between the state, the media and entrepreneurial participation;
- 5 weaving together of radical religion and participatory politics for social justice; and
- 6 tools for deepening democratic engagement with impoverished and marginalized communities in cities of the global North and South.

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## Résumé

*Dernièrement, les nouvelles formes participatives de gouvernance urbaine ont fait l'objet d'un intérêt accru. Ce texte introductif présente un bilan rapide des débats qui animent la littérature actuelle, ainsi qu'une synthèse des articles proposés pour le symposium. On trouve deux lignes d'opposition principales dans les publications. En premier lieu, de nombreux chercheurs partent du principe qu'une pluralité d'acteurs peut atteindre un consensus durable et rationnel sur certains sujets. D'autres sont convaincus que s'il y a consensus, une minorité est également réduite au silence ; selon eux, au lieu de se consacrer à bâtir un consensus dans un rapport de force, il vaut mieux admettre et respecter conflit et différence comme des composantes normales du processus de gouvernance. En second lieu, cette introduction envisage certaines possibilités de comparaisons transnationales de systèmes de gouvernance participative; les spécialistes ne devraient pas limiter leurs analyses aux concepts institutionnels internationaux, mais évaluer plutôt l'importance des contextes sociopolitiques particuliers lorsqu'il s'agit de donner aux institutions formelles leur sens et fonctions réels.*