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Too Much Democracy in All the Wrong Places

Toward a Grammar of Participation

by Christopher M. Kelty

Participation is a concept and practice that governs many aspects of new media and new publics. There are a wide range of attempts to create more of it and a surprising lack of theorization. In this paper I attempt to present a “grammar” of participation by looking at three cases where participation has been central in the contemporary moment of new, social media and the Internet as well as in the past, stretching back to the 1930s: citizen participation in public administration, workplace participation, and participatory international development. Across these three cases I demonstrate that the grammar of participation shifts from a language of normative enthusiasm to one of critiques of co-optation and bureaucratization and back again. I suggest that this perpetually aspirational logic results in the problem of “too much democracy in all the wrong places.”

Participation troubles us. Over roughly the last decade, the trouble has been particularly tied to the spread of the Internet: from the turn of the millennium enthusiasm for remix culture and Web 2.0 to the rise of social media, when *Time* magazine enthusiastically named “You” the Person of the Year in 2005; from the eruption of “Revolution 2.0” across North Africa, when Twitter and Facebook triumphantly took up the task of liberating the world, to the revelations of Edward Snowden, when “we” suddenly realized just how much we participate without ever agreeing to. From free and open source software to crowdsourcing to Wikipedia, we have caught a glimpse of a bright, open, new world of voluntary, rhizomatic, mutual aid; from WikiLeaks to the NSA to the “sharing economy,” we have seen behind the curtain of surveillance and extraction and experienced involuntary participation at shocking scales.

Reckoning with participation, good and bad, is certainly bound up with the new media and communication technologies that saturate our lives: servers, clouds, mobile phones, tablets, cameras, passwords, and satellites that seem to waver constantly between providing personal freedom, expressiveness, and mobility and becoming insidious devices of surveillance and paranoia. Participation, as an object or concept, is usually an afterthought to this saturation: mobile devices and the Internet “enable” participation, whether that means unleashing the “cognitive surplus” to do good work (Shirky 2010) or causing us to be “alone together” (Turkle 2011) as a result of our device dependence or awakening some new “Goliath”

of data surveillance and privacy violation (Schneier 2015). In other cases, unwitting, involuntary participation by people is said to be an inevitable result of technological determinism, market fundamentalism, or the natural psychology of human behavior (Carr 2014; Ghonim 2012; Gladwell 2010; Howe 2008; Morozov 2013; Shirky 2008; Tapscott and Williams 2008). But the question of whether participation is enabled, caused, prevented, or promoted by technology is not so much a red herring as it is neither fish nor fowl—we do not really know what participation is that it could be caused or cured by technological development. On one day, participation is the solution to our most practical concerns or even an ethical calling; on the next day it is a containment strategy designed to keep us chillingly in place or to extract data and money from us at every turn.

Indeed, even the modest Wenner-Gren workshop in Portugal for which this paper was prepared exemplified this: two people forthrightly reported that they refused to own a mobile phone—to the awed gasps of the many others who were busy surreptitiously checking their own devices—because of surveillance concerns. But those checking their devices did so only under the table because of the repeated injunction of the Wenner-Gren staff to leave them turned off so as to enforce an ethic of scholarly attentiveness. Some refused to participate, others could not stop themselves from doing so; meanwhile our benefactors invoked ethics to promote maximum participation for our own good.

This mundane experience at our workshop (at the risk of making too much of it) exemplifies the unusual “grammar” of participation—sometimes it is posed as a route to liberation, sometimes as a route to co-optation, sometimes as a practical problem, and sometimes as an ethical injunction. Hanna Pitkin, in her discussion of the dispute between Socrates and Thrasymachus over the concept of justice in Plato’s *Republic*,

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points out a similar problem of grammar (Pitkin 1972). Thrasymachus argues that justice is whatever the ruling elite says it is—a realist, if cynical, view. Socrates counters with a normative claim about justice that neither contradicts nor extends Thrasymachus's claim but poses the problem of justice differently—grammatically differently—as “everyone having and doing what is appropriate to him” (Pitkin 1972:170). In one case, the grammar articulates justice as what people have done in the name of justice; in the other, the grammar articulates justice as what we should be trying to achieve. These are not incompatible, but there is something like a grammatical difference—the kind of thing that Wittgenstein pegged to “forms of life.” According to Pitkin's reading, the difference concerns a “tension between purpose and institutionalization” that points to the way certain terms can function both as normative guides to practice and as indexes of certain regular forms of action and reaction in social life. What justice is, therefore, might be both a normative guide and a set of expectations or experiences of what is called justice—very much depending on the speaker, the context, and the moment in history.

This kind of “grammatical” difference also attends participation—and not only talk about participation but the doing of participation as well. It is a difference that I demonstrate in three cases of participation present and past: in the workplace, in public administration, and in international development. In all three places it is possible to see how the grammar of participation works: the normative enthusiasm for it, the anxiety about co-optation, and an array of other “grammatical” features that are used to make sense of participation. The past cases demonstrate that there is no simple way in which new media or technology enable or cause participation in these domains, and technological determinism aside, they demonstrate that the participation we have had over the previous decade is not all that different from what we have had in the past. If anything, there is continuity between these past cases and contemporary “new media and new publics” that itself structures the grammatical case of participation today. Participation possesses a grammar we have yet to understand, and until we have a better understanding of that grammar, we will continue to produce “too much democracy in all the wrong places.”

* * *

Participation is both absent from scholarly literature and at the same time surprisingly abundant.¹ After the term “par-

1. Participation entails or networks a string of related concepts: democratization, engagement, collaboration, cooperation, or involvement. The terminology has obvious if subtle differences and relations. Democratization is almost exclusively the province of political science (indeed, an entire journal bears that name, but see esp. Collier and Levitsky 1997). On cooperation, e.g., see Benkler (2011) for a biosocial view or Sennett (2012) for a *homo faber*-esque one. Collaboration suggests a relation of preexisting equality that participation does not assume; and terms such as “engagement” and “involvement” are often watered-down

“participatory democracy” was invented in 1962 by Tom Hayden and colleagues in the *Port Huron Statement*, there was a flurry of efforts to rethink participation, chief among them Pateman's classic *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Bachrach and Aryeh Botwinick 1992; Mansbridge 1980; Pateman 1976). Much of this enthusiasm was tempered by the conservative return to power in the United States and Britain in the 1980s, which entailed a number of restrictions on what were perceived to be institutions of participatory governance (expanded housing, welfare or antipoverty programs, as well as restrictions on suffrage and political expression). Subsequently, any political theory of participation was either assimilated or submerged beneath more assertively discursive ones: “deliberative democracy,” “critical-rational” discourse and the formation of political opinions in the public sphere, and “language ideologies,” to name a few. Participation is most commonly opposed to representation (as in participatory or direct vs. representative democracy) and often reduced to a debate about scale: participation (direct democracy) is accused of being suitable only at a small scale (face-to-face), on the model of Athenian democracy. Representative government, by contrast, is pitched as the only possible technical solution to the size and complexity of modern society. When invoked in political theory, participation generally refers either to the act of citizens electing representatives (as in “voter participation”) or as the act of speaking freely and expressing opinions—participation in the public sphere (Manin 1997; Urbinati 2006).² For many democratic theorists, participation is discussed only in the critical voice: as a problem to be on guard against. Excess participation can lead to the tyranny of the majority, while the demand for “direct” democracy is both impossible (on account of scale and inclusivity) and more dangerous than representative government—a tradition Carole Pateman referred to as “elite democracy” (Pateman 1976; see also Urbinati 2014). More recently, with the vogue of “new materialism,” a different approach to participation has zeroed in on the role of things

synonyms for participation that sometimes mean only consultation or informing, sometimes more. “Participation” is almost always the more common and encompassing term. Canonical political theory includes Bachrach and Aryeh Botwinick (1992), Fung and Wright (2003), Pateman (1976), as well as related work on representation (Pitkin 2004; Urbinati 2006) and deliberative democracy (Dryzek 2002; Elster 1998; Mutz 2006). Most scholarship on participation, however, is defined in very domain- or discipline-specific ways, as in the case of recent work by, e.g., media studies (Carpentier 2011), art and art history (Bishop 2012), genetics and medicine (Prainsack 2011), environmental planning (Beierle and Cayford 2002), development (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Cornwall 2011), user-generated innovations (von Hippel 2005), fan cultures and youth media (Jenkins 1992; Jenkins et al. 2007, 2016), collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash 2007), architecture (Cupers 2013; Jones, Petrescu, and Till 2013), or participatory budgeting (Wampler 2012).

2. See especially the debates about the bourgeois versus proletarian public sphere or the gendering of the public sphere (Calhoun 1992; Cody 2011; Fraser 1990; Negt and Kluge 1993).

(Barry 2001; Bennett 2010; Hawkins 2011; Hinchliffe et al. 2007), directing our attention to how infrastructures and material practices encode or transmit political practices. As Marres and Lezaun (2011) point out, when political theory fails to consider objects, things, and concrete material arrangements as part of the political and restricts it instead only to the discursive (deliberation) or to the “will” (elections and delegations), then certain forms of action are rendered subpolitical—hence, the need constantly to assert that “technology is political” in science and technology studies, for instance, or the discovery by Bennett and others of the messy entanglement of politics with the things of this world. Absent these approaches, there is little theoretical attention to participation.

However, participation is also surprisingly abundant in the scholarly literature. But it is present primarily in the literature of what might be called the “minor disciplines”—not mainstream or elite disciplines, such as anthropology, political theory, economics, or philosophy, but rather applied anthropology, development studies, public administration, “action research,” or organizational behavior. The bulk of such work spans the period from 1930 to the present, and I will turn to some of it in the stories that follow.³ What this reveals is that participation is a kind of “midlevel” concept that mediates between high and low, between theory and practice, between the real and the ideal. This is entirely appropriate, given the very long, metaphysically rich history of the concept in its ancient Greek form as *methexis*. The historical usage of the concept was primarily confined to the work of philosophers and theologians up until roughly the age of Rousseau, when the question of general and particular wills became not just a theological or ethical one but a newly pressing procedural and practical one in the design of institutions and the organization of collectives. But the works of Rousseau, de Tocqueville, J. S. Mill, and others central to the liberal tradition of democratic political theory do not discuss things in terms of participation but in terms of democracy, representation, the general will, and liberty. Meanwhile, the practical problem of implementing participation has been the subject of a much less royal tradition of thought—starting perhaps with the early socialist engineers such as Fourier and Saint-Simon (Tresch 2012) and even more concretely in a case such as the Rochdale Pioneers of 1844, who invented such practical techniques of participation as the workers’ cooperative and the dividend (Cole 1944). As a mid-level concept, participation has traveled through the turmoil of everything from Lincolnian democracy (of, by, and for the people) to the expansion of democracy into labor under the label of “industrial democracy” to the embrace of participation as a critique of scientific management in the 1950s and 1960s

3. The first is Philip Selznick’s book *TVA and the Grass Roots*, about the Tennessee Valley Authority, which exemplifies the grammar of participation clearly by arguing that the purposive language of participation and “democracy on the march” was actually an organizational process of co-opting the farmers, extension workers, and local elites in the valley to the Authority’s projects and goals (Selznick 1949).

to the invention of the concept of “participatory democracy” in 1962 to the spread of “community development” around the world to the participatory art movements and “relational aesthetics” of the 1990s to fan fiction and user innovation today.

Participation in the Present Tense

Consider, for instance, Open Government Data (OGD; Goldstein 2013; Lathrop 2010; Noveck 2015; Schrock 2016; Tkacz 2012). At the outset of Obama’s presidency, ideas of openness and transparency in government combined with entrepreneurial enthusiasm from Silicon Valley to usher in a strangely familiar dream: that citizens would finally be empowered to participate in, and ultimately improve, the administration of government.

Whether streamlining government service delivery or resolving complex global issues, governments are either actively seeking—or can no longer resist—broader participation from citizens and a diverse array of other stakeholders. Just as the modern multinational corporation sources ideas, parts, and materials from a vast external network of customers, researchers, and suppliers, governments must hone their capacity to integrate skills and knowledge from multiple participants to meet expectations for a more responsive, resourceful, efficient, and accountable form of governance. (Lathrop 2010:xv–xvi)

The quotation is from a book published by the O’Reilly Press, which is best known as a prolific publisher of software and hardware handbooks—more likely to produce a “Recipes in Java for Software Engineers” than a book on public administration (Lathrop 2010). And indeed, the book is chockablock with the promise of applying the perceived success of social media, Web 2.0, crowdsourcing, user-generated content, and so forth, to the process of administration. By making government data open, it argued, government could become a “platform”—like an operating system or a technical “stack” on which to program new solutions and new services. With chapters such as “A Peace Corps for Programmers,” “Government as a Platform,” and “Engineering Good Government,” the movement wears its technophilia proudly on its sleeve. It has direct antecedents in the Silicon Valley embrace of open source and open data and sees government administration as something suffering from an old mentality of hierarchy, bureaucratic complexity, and overengineered, inflexible design. At the end of the book, reprinted as Appendix A, is President Obama’s 2009 memo “Transparency and Government,” succinctly laying out the demands that animate this ostensibly new movement: “Government should be transparent; Government should be participatory; Government should be collaborative.” For many adherents, the project seems genuinely new and exciting because of the (mundane) role of new technologies, such as citizens using cell-phone cameras to document and report infrastructure needs such as unfilled potholes in the road. It is also widely expressed in the creation of “civic hackers” and

“civic hackathons” and in organizations such as Code for America (Goldstein 2013). Much of its enthusiasm is proleptic: looking forward to a world where citizens produce information and knowledge for governance (of the people, by the people, for the people) both consciously, as newly empowered citizen data scientists, and unconsciously, as their devices leave trails of data that, so far, only marketers and the NSA has had access to but that virtuous citizens will no doubt use wisely and justly. Participation is thus both solution and destiny in these projects—even if it fails, and sometimes especially if it fails—because the participation of the people is often presented as an autochthonous force that current bureaucratic and institutional designs work to suppress, and by making government “simpler” (Sunstein 2013) or more transparent or more open, this burbling force from below will be unleashed to do good in the world.

* * *

Participation is also hot at work these days and especially at work in the high tech industry. Whether on Google and Apple’s campuses or those of hundreds of start-ups, the techniques associated with openness, collaboration, and participation are almost uniformly promoted as a domain of liberty and autonomy for employees. Open source and related styles of managing innovation (open innovation, user-led innovation) depend on a logic of local expertise (most frequently styled as a bottom-up “bazaar” style of engineering or creativity) vested in the workers and fundamentally opposed to “top-down, hierarchical” design and management. “Holocracy,” for instance, is “a new way of running an organization that removes power from a management hierarchy and distributes it across clear roles, which can then be executed autonomously, without a micromanaging boss.”⁴ “Participatory design” that includes the client in the design process is also a common variant. Open source methodologies promote a style of autonomous task choice (choose to work on the projects that most interest you) but also a promise, and in some cases the reality, of being directly involved in goal setting and the direction of a project or firm—to be able to more clearly exercise voice and to influence the direction of work. In many cases, such participation is said to lead to the responsive, evolutionary development of technologies, services, or products. People come together according to individual skills and desires and through the magic of participation and collaboration organize into collectives that can build complex, expertise-driven technologies pieced together by people who voluntarily choose to do so (even if they are now more often than not paid to do so)—the Linux operating system being a paradigm case. In the process, individuals learn and develop new skills, becoming better experts and thereby better participants.

4. <http://www.holacracy.org/how-it-works/>.

Development methodologies such as “Agile development” famously promote “Individuals and interactions over Processes and tools; Working software over Comprehensive documentation; Customer collaboration over Contract negotiation; Responding to change over Following a plan.”⁵ In an Agile project, it is the team that succeeds or fails and is the object of management and reward; participation is essential, but individuals are not rewarded (or punished) unless the team succeeds—everyone has a say, and team members are expected to switch roles, “self-organize,” and adapt to changing needs or circumstances autonomously (i.e., without executive direction from managers). One of the darlings of Silicon Valley venture capitalists in 2015–2016 has been the start-up Slack, which provides a new suite of tools to enable such horizontal team-based work. Darker visions almost unanimously point to Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) as the new model for exploitation through (very low paid) participation, but even here autonomous task choice, flexible working hours, and a certain kind of educative benefit—knowing how to work the AMT system—accrue. AMT has since been eclipsed by the rise of the so-called sharing economy—Uber, Lyft, AirBnB, and a hundred apps to redistribute labor to the underemployed. Such examples are not “participatory” but they carry the label of “sharing” and exemplify the apparent virtues of participating in the economy—if not quite the workplace per se. As such, they are frequently critiqued for co-opting the power of participation as much as they are discussed as a mode of liberation from hierarchy and control—“think outside the boss.”⁶

* * *

International development today also is saturated with opportunities for novel forms of participation. For instance, consider the apparently failed “One Laptop per Child” (OLPC) project, which, aside from gifting laptops to children around the world in order to connect them, is built on principles of software programming and education that argue that creativity and knowledge emerge from participatory play and exploration and so might either enhance education or somehow autonomously educate a new generation of citizens in Africa, India, or Latin America. The tradition of Seymour Papert’s Logo programming language (based among other things on the educational psychology of Piaget and Vygotsky, with nods to Paolo Freire and Ivan Illich) was strong in the design of the OLPC’s Sugar operating system and is meant to scaffold learning about concepts and relations by drawing users into the practice of programming and potentially the guts of the very software running on those laptops. OLPC wanted to produce

5. See <http://www.agilemanifesto.org/>.

6. This is the tag line from a series of conferences by the Sustainable Economies Law Center (see <http://www.theselc.org/totb4>). The “platform cooperativism” project of Nate Schneider and Trebor Scholz also exemplifies this gestalt; see, e.g., <http://platformcoop.net/> (accessed April 13, 2016).

creative experts in developing nations not through formal education but through directly enabled participation—a kind of bottom-up autodidacticism using technology as midwife or scaffold. Despite grand plans, OLPC has become just another large aid organization with poor evidence of success and accusations of corruption, but the dream of solving the problems of development through technology has not disappeared.

Today, it is arguably M-Pesa, the massive “mobile-to-mobile” money transfer system owned by Vodafone and used primarily in West Africa, that garners the lion’s share of attention and claims of “bottom-up” community-based innovation and problem solving (Maurer 2012). Similar initiatives have been even more focused on aspects of participatory development, such as Kiva.org, which allows donors in the global north to give microloans in the global south. Using a Kickstarter-like system, intermediaries recruit poor people to tell a story about what they would do with \$25, and then a user of the website can select an appropriate story, send the money via the website, and track the success of the project and see both the return on the money and the increased participation of people in the economy. Kiva channels a sense of autonomous task choice (recipients define the work they want to do and the money they need to do it) into a system that connects them to lenders directly—and lenders get to benefit from the direct experience of participating in development rather than seeing their money disappear into the development machines (Jhaveri 2012; Karim 2011; Moodie 2013). At the opposite end of the spectrum is something like GiveDirectly.org, which participates in what Ferguson calls the “new politics of distribution” by organizing cash transfers to the very poor (Ferguson 2015). Such an approach returns the donor to the status of mere source of money (not a participant in the lives of the poor), but the organization nonetheless relies on new technologies, crowdsourcing, GPS and satellite imagery, and local networks of volunteers to “target, audit, transfer and monitor” the very poor who will receive the money. At stake is a clear attempt to deal with problems of corruption, bribery, and gaming that seem to inevitably emerge in the context of development aid—but also a sense that identifying the “worthy poor” has become easier than ever through widespread participation using new technologies of tracking and surveillance. Participation is at once a liberating experience for those in poverty and a tool of informatic domination through monitoring

All three of the above examples exemplify aspects of the grammar of participation: it is both problem and solution; it can emphasize a sense of autonomy and equality among a citizenry or an individual sense of duty and virtue in doing one’s part; it can be a way of challenging authority and the reign of expertise as power by emphasizing bottom-up instead of top-down knowledge and planning; or it can be about participating in expert goal setting or direction. It is about becoming a better person—more skilled and knowledgeable as a

result of participating, possessed of either civic virtue or economic independence. It is also about making organizations better through the use of local participating communities, which can also be seen as the co-optation of communities into projects not their own. It is a solution to the size and complexity of modern society through dynamics of self-organization or evolutionary interaction—but also something small scale, face-to-face, and “direct.” It is apparently about inclusion—in the economy, in development, at work; it is about being involved in one’s own governance. Perhaps not quite as obviously, it is also about experiencing the collective—about seeing evidence that it works through the production of stories and metrics of participation, about the experience of seeing participation from above (objectively or via surveillance) and from below (subjectively as a team, a community, a collective). It is the feeling of “making the world better” through voluntary and sometimes involuntary participation.

Participation is almost always a normative good—only ruthless dictators and Bartleby are truly and openly opposed to it. But it is also aspirational because many things can go wrong, leading to phony participation or to the co-optation of participants in the goals and plans of others. Involuntary participation is not true participation (so extraction of data is worse than freely given data, *ceteris paribus*); voluntary participation without control can also be phony (freely given data or labor are only as valuable as the individual’s ultimate control of the resources produced thereby).

Participation in the Past Tense

The three cases introduced above have direct antecedents, often not recognized by the current proponents of new media-enriched participatoriness. There are differences—and chief among them is the question of the role of new media and communication technologies—but there are also some surprising continuities suggesting that the grammar of participation has a consistent core.

The most widely cited paper having to do directly with participation—often reprinted in readers and routinely referenced across many domains—is Sherry Arnstein’s (1969) “A Ladder of Citizen Participation.” The ladder is reprinted yet again as figure 1.

When she wrote this piece, Arnstein was an advisor to H. Ralph Taylor in the newly created Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), charged with implementing core aspects of the War on Poverty, in particular the Model Cities program. Arnstein’s article complained, “The heated controversy over ‘citizen participation,’ ‘citizen control,’ and ‘maximum feasible participation’ has been waged largely in terms of exacerbated rhetoric and misleading euphemisms” (Arnstein 1969:216). The “heated controversy” in this context referred to a set of programs related to urban renewal and antipoverty in which citizen participation had been legally mandated. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the locus of much of this activity, required “maximum feasible partici-

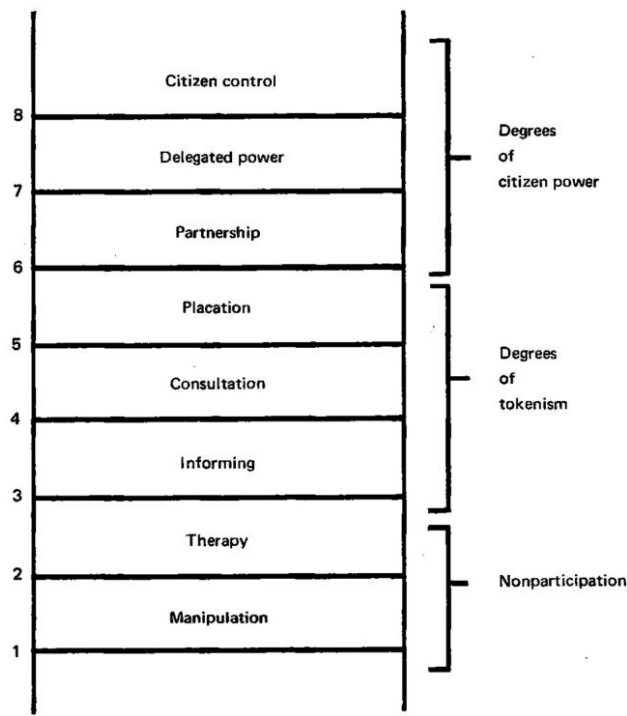


Figure 1. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation." Reprinted from Arnstein (1969, fig. 2).

pation" (Sec. 202, Public Law 8-452, 8-20-1964) in economic opportunity programs. Around the country, hundreds of "City Demonstration Agencies" applied for funds, created planning documents, and attempted to engage local citizens in "maximum feasible participation"—some successfully, some disastrously. Daniel Moynihan published a widely read analysis of the War on Poverty called *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, and the Model Cities Program, along with the Office of Economic Opportunity, did not survive the transition from the Johnson to the Nixon administration. By the mid 1970s, Model Cities was judged a failure, and a substantial part of that failure was linked to the demand for and failure of citizen participation (Burke 1970; Haar 1975; Moynihan 1969; Weber and Wallace 2012).

Citizen participation (also sometimes called "community involvement" or "community development" at the time) had many functions: educating new leaders (civic virtue); improving administrative governance (involvement by residents in agenda setting); granting better local control over design of housing, infrastructure, and government-funded or provisioned services; and providing citizens access to decision making about the allocation of funds or in some cases the design and execution of the projects. These projects did not transform the structure or operation of national or local government by extending the franchise (which was occurring at the same time in the Voting Rights Act) or changing the legal structure of the administrative state in some permanent way, but they did mandate participation without defining it. Participation had been "legalized" where before it had been a vague normative

demand. In our grammatical terms, it had switched suddenly from a language of purpose to one of institutionalization.

In the Model Cities programs, however, this institutionalization was not pursued as part of the legislative process of deliberation and voting but as part of the administration of the government's practical affairs. This is the real origin of the contemporary Open Government movement—even if they are only just (re)discovering it. It is a case where participation came to mean something technocratic and bureaucratic—ironically in the service of fighting the injustices of technocracy and bureaucracy. In the interim, in the field of public administration, there have been several waves of innovation, study, and legislation. Participation has been central to the work of the Environmental Protection Agency, for instance; it has been established as a right within the arcane rulemaking systems of government agencies; and it has been enshrined in legislation, including the Paperwork Reduction Act, the Sunlight Act, and the various Freedom of Information acts and public access laws that promote transparency in government information (now called data).

Arnstein's article appears to many people to be the closest thing to a "theory" of participation in the literature. But it is less theory than a distillation of a critique, and in particular a critique of the implementation of participation. The fact that "maximum feasible participation" was mandated statutorily in the law was a recognition that the long-standing tradition of planning and administration—especially in the domains of urban housing and poverty—were steeped in theories of scientific management and efficiency and were failing to deliver in programs such as Urban Renewal. The racial and class politics of Urban Renewal from the Housing Act of 1949 to the 1960s included massive relocation, destruction of homes, a net loss of housing stock, and targeted redevelopment designed to move some people out (the poor, blacks, migrants) and others in. Such programs failed, according to many people at the time, because they lacked participation from the affected citizens and instead concentrated it in city halls, state governments, and federal agencies. The relative consensus on the need for participation was at the heart of the various Great Society programs and explicit in the case of Model Cities.

But Arnstein's article is not a call for more participation: it is a critique of the failed implementation of "maximum feasible participation." Mandating participation created a possible transfer of resources from city halls around the country to neighborhood groups aiming to be recognized as the locus of "participation." "Technical Assistance Bulletins"—distributed by HUD to local community organizations seeking to officially participate in the process of planning or rebuilding their "Model Cities"—attempted to provide some information on what effective participation should look like: it should entail an organizational structure; it should be representative of the neighborhood or community; it should give participants all necessary information, technical assistance, and even funding; and it should employ residents of the neighborhood. Technical assistance here, however, does not mean technology (save for the mimeograph and telephone, perhaps) but rather assistance in

creating organizations, managing them, understanding federal law and administrative procedure, and knowledge about housing, planning, development, and urban infrastructure.

Today, OGD initiatives around the country do not mandate participation but rather seek to make data available to a corps of participants presumed to be waiting for it. Such projects implement participation in a much weaker sense than the Economic Opportunity Act did by taking an “open it and they will come” approach that involves no technical assistance, no funds, and no rewards other than the pride of being a citizen coder or citizen user of data. In this sense, OGD reverts to a grammar of participation that emphasizes the normative and the purposive—not the (critique of the) institutions. As a result, OGD does not so much suffer from the hubris of thinking that technology can save everything as it does the hubris of assuming no one has ever tried to implement participation before.

Arnstein’s critique—the top of her ladder—implied direct, even paid, involvement in the operation of the agencies of government; it imagined the participation of organized collectives—neighborhoods, communities, racial and ethnic groups—in the operation of administration. The OGD movement also advocates direct involvement in administration, but only by individuals and their devices, and without any sense of entitlement or responsibility—it is a kind of vigilante administration, normatively propped up by the appeal of “citizen participation.”

It would be impossible to imagine the Model Cities program today: urban development has been decentralized and subjected to all manner of “new public management” theories and schemes in the interim, resulting in a network of public and private actors routinely, often haphazardly, involved in urban development. What was once seen as a shift of power has now become a problem of mixed economic and administrative authority. Thus, OGD, in a somewhat nostalgic way, assumes the existence of a noneconomic type of citizen—unpaid, virtuous, and abundant—who is not included in the operation of government. The reality, however, is that the operation of government today includes an array of citizens operating as economic actors in order to carry out certain forms of administration—and often paid to do so, whether as employees of nonprofits and corporations or recipients of loans, loan guarantees, grants, or other government funds. What OGD imagines is a world where individuals who are not part of any collective (whether community organization or corporation) autonomously (and without remuneration) carry out the tasks of administration. What Arnstein would have diagnosed as successful participation (“citizen control,” “delegated power”) we might see today as a version of neoliberal “responsibilization” that is not so much insidious as it is superfluous to the actual success of a very different form of “direct citizen participation” that may no longer easily go by that name.

A very different kind of diagram was published about a decade later in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, one that rep-

resented close to three decades of research into the problem of participation at work. Whereas Arnstein’s diagram was a one-dimensional ladder, this one represents multiple dimensions (fig. 2). Peter Dachler and Bernhard Wilpert outlined their theory in an article titled “Conceptual Dimensions and Boundaries of Participation in Organizations: A Critical Evaluation” (Dachler and Wilpert 1978). It is a “complex systems” analysis of participation at a theoretically enthusiastic moment in organizational studies when cybernetics, evolutionary theory, and systems theory were finding their way into the study of organizations. They outline four dimensions—theories and values, properties and structures, context, and outcomes—that create a particular arrangement or “potential” for participation in any given case. The point of this diagram, Dachler and Wilpert hope, will be to give empirical researchers a standard within which they can compare across the multiple cases studies and examples from the vast literature analyzing participation at work. That literature, they claimed, had made little progress, could find no concrete empirical proof of success, and tended to emphasize a range of different values and goals without ever explicitly stating them. It too is critical, but it is also one of a series of attempts to be methodical and constructive about the meaning of participation.

Past research in participation in the workplace descends primarily from a key set of experiments conducted at the Harwood Manufacturing Plant in the mid 1940s (Burnes 2007; Coch and French 1948; Lewin 1946). There are important antecedents—the Hawthorne experiments of Mayo and Roethlisberger and the work of Mary Parker Follett, for example (Follett 1940; Mayo 1933; Roethlisberger and Mayo 1941), but these experiments, conducted by a team of social psychologists in the orbit of Kurt Lewin (Lezaun 2011; Lezaun and Calvillo 2014), set the stage for two decades of discourse about “participative management.” The key experiments involved workers—in this case, women working in a pajama factory—in the identification of problems and the design of their own jobs. Factory piecework provided the opportunity to test which groups (those who participated vs. those who did not) produced more work after a change in a job. The experiments have been widely discussed, critiqued, and repeated in many different conditions. For some the results became gospel—scholars such as Douglas MacGregor, Rensis Likert, Chris Argyris, and the owner of the Harwood Manufacturing plant (who was also a student of Kurt Lewin’s), Alfred Marrow. These thinkers created a management discourse—a fad we would say today—around the techniques of participative management, the need to study and understand its effects, and the need to transform both organizational structures and even more importantly the attitudes of the manager himself toward those he manages (Alden 2012; Argyris 1957; Kaufman 2001; Likert 1961; MacGregor 1960; Marrow, Bowers, and Seashore 1967).

The experiments in worker participation emphasized a particular aspect: that participation is dyadic. It functions both to remake the subject of participation but also to remake the practices of business and economic activity—to make it more efficient, to manage quality, or to improve productivity. This

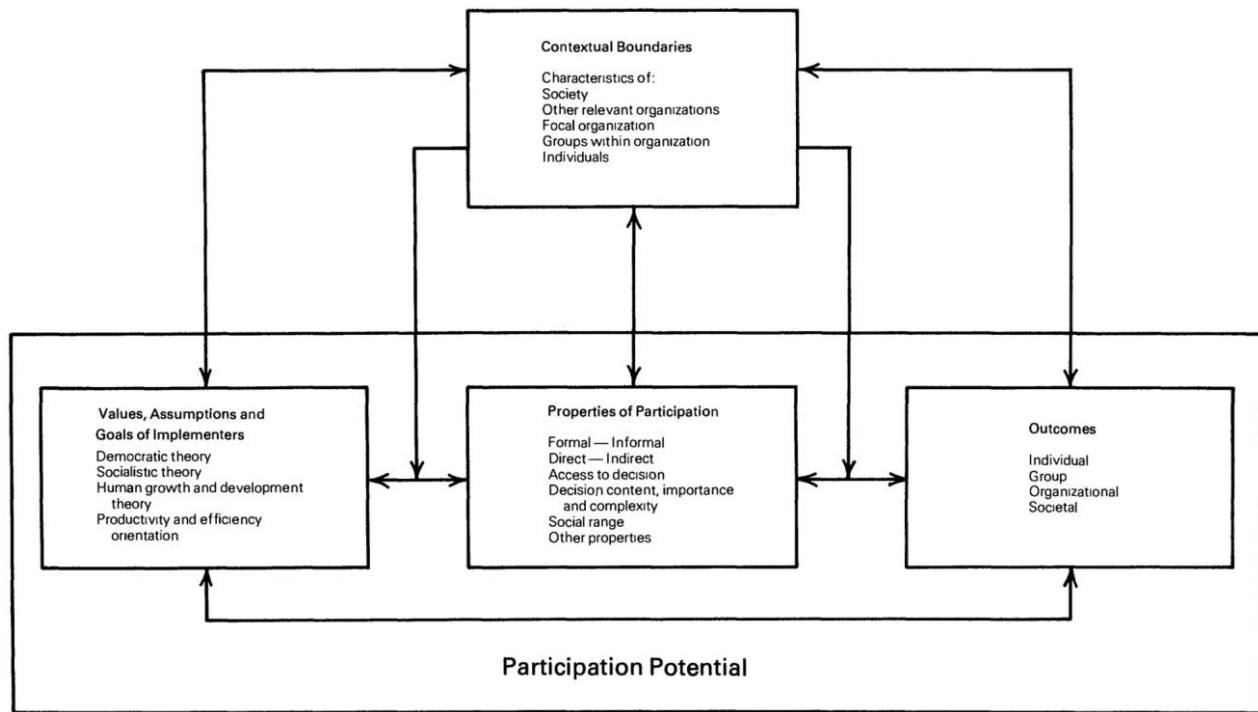


Figure 2. "Dimensions of Participation." Reprinted from Dachler and Wilpert (1978, fig. 1).

dual function of participation was pursued instrumentally and critiqued politically by many who studied and implemented it from as early as the 1930s to the 1990s and beyond. Thus, for instance, the key focus for Dachler and Wilpert (1978) is always on outcomes from different participatory arrangements for more than one party. For their approach, unlike Arnstein's, this is never about a one-dimensional shift of power but an evaluative frame that tries to measure which shifts of power are best for everyone involved.

The function of "dyadic" participation was multiple: to address "alienation" and improve worker satisfaction, to increase quality by devolving responsibility for quality control onto workers closest to the line, or to identify new sources of innovation that top-down management and engineering design hubris obscured. It took different forms in different places but was global—including experiments in India, Israel, Korea, and especially in Scandinavia, where it took an explicitly political form under the label of "participatory design" (Asaro 2000). Some experiments contrasted top-down democracy with top-down autocracy; others assumed democracy was always bottom-up. In all cases participation became not just a solution but a normative demand leveled against both the solitary (alienated) worker and the autocratic manager.

Such experiments were perversely technocratic—applying the ethos of scientific management to exactly that problem (participation) that is often figured as being in opposition to the dominance of top-down scientific management. Out of this came job reorganization, "quality of work life," ad-hocracy, qual-

ity management, autonomous and semiautonomous teams, or "quality circles." These attempts to engineer participation created a contradiction of sorts in which the goal of resisting top-down expertise itself became the province of a set of organization experts and management consultants and could turn participation from means into goal, and so participation at work very easily came to look like a new form of domination—so much so that we now forget that "participative management" is just the old name for "human resource management." This is the critique leveled by critics such as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), who identify participation as part of an internal critique of capitalism born of the problems of "alienation" in the 1960s and the desire for a capitalism that produces communities, not just workers and profits. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) play the part of Thrasymachus, arguing that participation is only what management (or capitalism) says it is. The work of Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller (Rose and Miller 2008) also points to the way participation is turned into a tool of governance—governing through freedom—and not a liberating or normative form. However, for every critique of corporate schemes to enhance "involvement" as exploitative or palliative, there emerge, hydra-headed, 10 more attempts to implement participation at work because it carries with it a normative power to achieve a range of goals associated with human potential, equality, and the ideals of democracy.

Today's management fads—like Holocracy and Agile—remain saturated with the language of involvement, teamwork, quality management, autonomy, flexibility, voice, and satis-

faction. Human resources is today a practice focused not so much on finding and acquiring skilled employees as it is on retaining them through a variety of efforts to make work less like work. The field has been saturated from the 1980s forward with titles such as *Second to None: How Our Smartest Companies Put People First* (Garfield 1992), *The Ultimate Advantage: Creating the High-Involvement Organization* (Lawler 1992), or *The End of Management and the Rise of Organizational Democracy* (Cloke and Goldsmith 2002), which are filled with the success stories of firms who involve employees in creating “learning organizations,” enhance “employee involvement,” build “self-managing teams” and “linking leadership” in “high performance workplaces” using “total quality management,” “business process reengineering,” and “continuous quality improvement.”

It is in this context that contemporary examples such as open source software and the Agile development methodology are rendered in a different light. Rather than seeing open source primarily as a critique of a restrictive intellectual property system or an innovative “wisdom of crowds” approach to finding the best solution to a problem, these practices stand in line with a demand for more participation as a solution to efficiency and productivity and the expansion of civic virtue. Agile’s focus on teams and self-organization could fit easily into a 1970s worker participation experiment—but today it is not an academic research project so much as it is an evangelical software development methodology whose value—if not its truth—rests on the normative promise of participation.

* * *

Finally, consider the *Participatory Development Tool Kit* (PDT) designed by Deepa Narayan and Lyra Srinivasan (see fig. 3). The kit, funded by the World Bank, is a leather-bound briefcase filled with folders that correspond to a range of different activities designed to promote participatory development. Some use simple games, some use images, some use “flexi-flan” figures (see fig. 4) that allow participants to engage in development projects in structured ways designed to bring their voices into the world of development, identify stakeholders, create a “Learning Mood,” share expertise, work with intermediary NGOs, etc. It contains tools that harken back to the social psychology of Kurt Lewin (force-field analysis) and to other research approaches such as transect walks and SARAR (self-esteem, associative strengths, resourcefulness, action planning, and responsibility) techniques contained in other tool kits and source books, such as the *World Bank Participation Sourcebook* (1996), designed for “enabling local people to make their own appraisals” and “emphasizing local knowledge” through “systematic listening” that “gives voice to poor and other hard to reach beneficiaries.”

Along with a range of other handbooks, tool kits, and structured systems for introducing participation, this tool kit can be read as both a legitimation of the faith in participation—the World Bank’s endorsement—and as a co-optation of par-

ticipation in order to better control and extend the bank’s power—a classic “anti-politics machine” (Ferguson 1990). On the one hand, the tool kit represents a tradition of participatory engagement, action, research, and critique whose most radical emblem is probably Paulo Freire and includes others such as Bud Hall, Orlando Fals-Borda, and Ivan Illich and the various research programs that get lumped together under “participatory action research” (Reason and Bradbury 2001). On the other hand, it is precisely the target of those who have come to critique participation as a “New Tyranny” (Cooke and Kothari 2001). For these critics, participation created pathologies such as the “professional participant” expert in responding to and manipulating this new bureaucratized virtue for self-enrichment. It was a tyranny that had reversed end and means, creating a rigid structure of organizational and documentary demands on projects but that could not demonstrate that participation led to better outcomes.

In between these two extremes is the curious figure of Robert Chambers, whose “Participatory Rural Appraisal” is often cited as the key engine of evangelical enthusiasm. Chambers represents the “double-voiced” version of participation, at once an irrepressible enthusiast for participatory methods and at the same time a harsh critic of the failures of development, regardless of methodology. Chambers repeatedly warned against “empty” participation and the dangers of embracing one tool or method over others but also never gave up on participation as a normative guide (Chambers 2011; Cornwall 2011). Participation remains aspirational—not yet true participation because it has been defined incorrectly, or its outcomes have been improperly tested, or it has simply become a demand that must be met: end rather than means (Green 2010, 2014).

A key difference in the domain of international development was that proper participation should include not just participation in tasks but participation in the production of knowledge and the evaluation of outcomes. In Chambers’s work it is a participatory appraisal—drawing maps, taking accounts, visualizing plans for change or improvement—that is the heart of the method, not digging wells or planting seed. In Participatory Action Research, it is research, not necessarily action, that comes first and that must be wrested from the hands of bureaucrats, scientists, and computers in order to achieve liberation, conscientization, or consciousness raising. Such a focus is the necessary obverse of a modernist demand for a “knowledge economy” that emerged at the same time from the 1960s to the present and that presumed a rich-poor gap in knowledge that many participation advocates could therefore rebel against to demonstrate the prior possession of “indigenous technology” or local knowledge or appropriate technology or later “fluid technologies” (de Laet and Mol 2000; Redfield 2015) that demanded attention.

Perhaps even more starkly, participation includes an experience of “becoming collective” by virtue of participation. On the one hand, targets of development are always presumed to be in possession of more authentic, natural, traditional, non-modern, undeveloped, and so forth, collectivities that are the



Figure 3. *Participatory Development Tool Kit*. Created by Deepa Narayan, Lyra Srinivasan, and others, funded by the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program, produced in India by Whisper Design of New Delhi, and coordinated by Sunita Chakravarty of the Regional Water and Sanitation Group in New Delhi in 1994. This copy owned by the Getty Research Library, Los Angeles. Photos by the author. A color version of this figure is available online.

source of participatory action and knowledge: they know the forest, they understand the flora and fauna, they know where the water is located. On the other hand, the demand for subjects to form a new kind of collective is at least as old as the demand to modernize and represents an alternative tradition of development and modernization that is only sometimes dependent on a concept of participation (Immerwahr 2015). In Matthew Hull's analysis of community development projects in Delhi in the 1950s, for instance, he demonstrates the transfer of Kurt Lewin's experimental findings and methods in the attempt to create "planned change" and to produce newly democratic subjects—a process at work in similar ways in the cases described by Miller and Rose at the Tavistock institute in Britain in the postwar period and by Fred Turner in the case of multimedia art and culture projects (Hull 2010; Rose and Miller 2008; Turner 2013). Subjects of development, indigenous peoples, the poor, and rural farmers are object of and conduit for participation—and it is perhaps from their perspective that the weird grammar of participation becomes most evident.

Contemporary enthusiasms for bringing technology to bear on development—OLPC, Kiva, MPesa, ICT4D—often implicitly suggest that technology enables or brings into being the capacity for participation. But even more so, this capacity is exemplified by the "tool kit"—not only the leather binder full of folders, but the apps, software, start-ups, Kickstarters, and schemes of all sorts whose institutionalization takes the form of material bits and pieces intended to invoke and channel participation outside of formal legal or institutional modes of the past. Often these projects assume that some technological

change accounts for this rather than recognizing a continuity across the late twentieth century. So before the OLPC, it is implied, students could not learn from each other or the Internet (but the PDT is filled with learning activities); before MPesa, villagers could not transact with each other (but the PDT focuses on questions of poverty and its meaning and how transactions take place in a local environment). Rather than providing a window onto the practice of participation, technology obscures that practice by suggesting that there previously was none (or not enough), but with technology participation will be properly enabled and unleashed. Following on this is the parallel assumption that such widespread participation will bring bottom-up innovation—whether it is figured as "appropriate technologies," distributed wisdom of crowds, or enabling a "Silicon savannah" of untapped entrepreneurialism. All this is, in turn, read by critics of participatory development as neocolonial expansion of state power co-opting the (unpaid) voices and actions of the poor. Again, the grammar of participation wavers between unleashing participation (a purpose) and the inequitable institutionalization of it.

Conclusion

The three examples above demonstrate aspects of the grammar of participation: the structure of claims and statements that can be made in its name and the ways that attempting to make participation "doable" respond to these statements. Far from indicating a clear progression—whether one of technological determinism or an expansion of governmental or capitalist power—it indicates instead a recurrence. Participation is al-

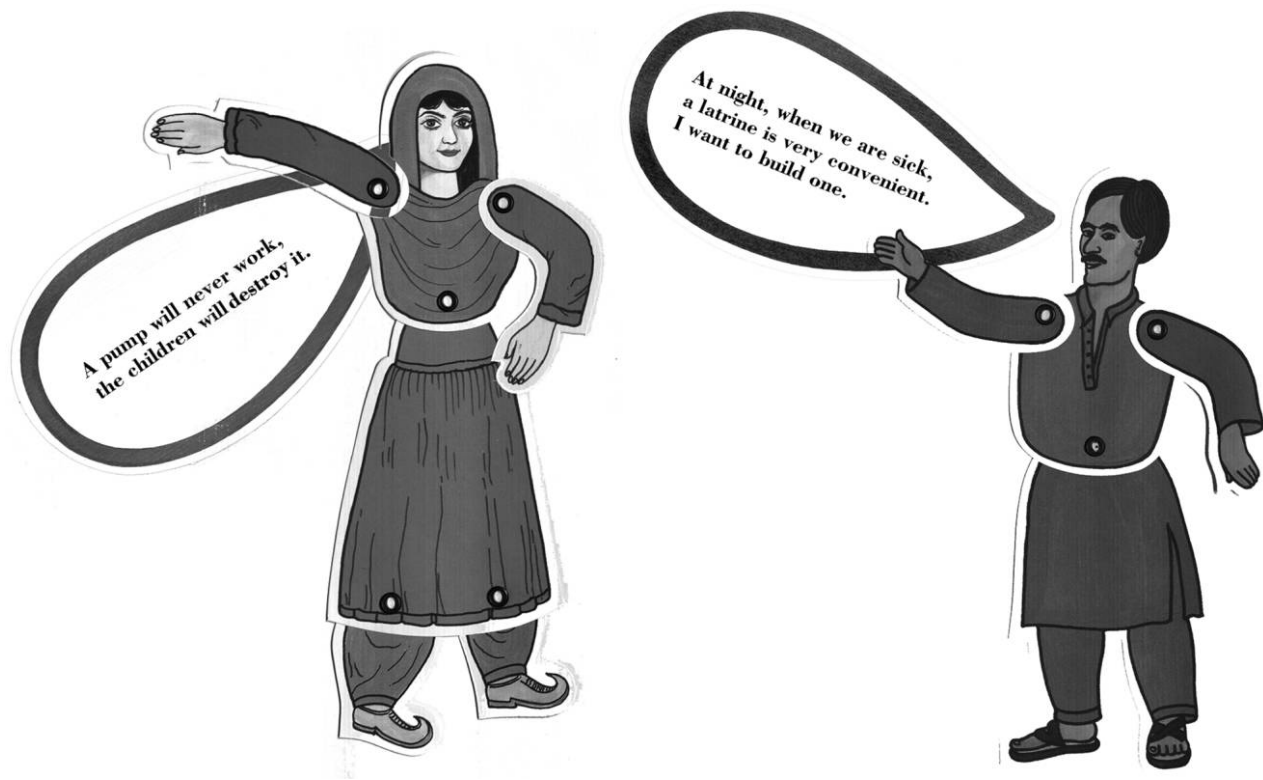


Figure 4. Flexi-flan figures from the *Participatory Development Tool Kit*, Activity 3, “SARAR Resistance to Change Continuum.” A color version of this figure is available online.

ways aspirational. One might say it wavers back and forth between two moods: optative and critical. In the optative mood, it signals an enthusiasm, a normativity, a happy hypothesis of change through the involvement of more people rather than fewer, poorer rather than richer, rural rather than urban, indigenous rather than colonial, or everyday experience rather than rarefied expertise. But in a critical mood, what is called participation becomes a false claimant: phony participation. By accusing participation of being false, phony, exploitative, or disappointed, it allows the optative mood in the next turn of phrase—a better, more authentic participation yet to come. Demands for participation suddenly turn out to be critiques of participation—just as Wittgenstein’s famous duck-rabbit would predict. Or as Pitkin would put it, the grammar of participation, like that of justice, seems to waver between purpose and institutionalization, between a normative end that would describe participation as a good to be achieved and a corrupted means that perverts its very own ends by becoming overbureaucratized, extractive, or exploitative.

The rise of the Internet and new media thus appear different when one considers this grammar of participation. Rather than a sudden unleashing of some set of capacities unknown before, it appears to repeat aspects of this grammar—first a purpose-driven enthusiasm for massive participation and then a critique of institutionalized or co-optative forms; first Wikipedia

and then WikiLeaks and Snowden; first crowdsourcing and then the sharing economy, and so on.

But there is a subtle shift that has taken place primarily around the continuing creation of ever more self-contained and individualized “tools” and “tool kits” for participation. From the institutionalization of “maximum feasible participation” in the Model Cities program to the creation of apps such as SeeClickFix; from the experimental “participative management” of the mid-twentieth century to the organization of “Agile” team-based work and the fugitive infrastructure of a coordination tool such as Slack; or from the PDT of the 1990s to the data crunching and surveillance of Kickstarter-like projects such as Kiva—there has been a demonstrable shift away from large-scale, infrastructural intervention and maintenance to a world of tool kits, frameworks, small tools, “little development devices,” or “humanitarian goods” (Redfield 2012).⁷

Viewed through the grammar of participation, two differences emerge in the present. The first is simply that past attempts at participation took groups and collectives as their objects (neighborhoods, ethnic groups, villages, workers in a factory), all of which were presumed to share a set of interests and an experience of collectivity that participation would en-

7. The phrase “little development devices” comes from Stephen Collier.

able, enhance, or take advantage of. Contemporary participation is resolutely focused on the individual participant; the “wisdom of crowds” presumes an emergent collectivity but no necessary sense of belonging. Even the focus on “teams” is simply a way to make individual characteristics complementary with each other rather than some attempt at solidarity of a cointerested collective. Today participation is no longer about the participation of groups but rather about the participation of individuals.

The second is that the “institutional” aspect of the grammar of participation is becoming more temporary and fragile—with good and bad effects. The institutionalization imagined in the Model Cities Program—in which participation was inscribed in federal law—would have essentially created another branch of government with some mixture of legislative and executive functions had it succeeded. But today schemes to induce or appropriate participation tend to be much less permanent, more open to critique, possibly more open to revision and modification on the model of a “recursive public”—one in which it is possible to engage in normative critique from within an institution because of the relatively more flexible nature of a world built out of software, apps, temporary institutional structures, and so on (Kelty 2008). A “grammar” of participation might thus be extended to the “design principles,” “pattern languages,” or “schematics and source code” of participation. Too much emphasis on the discursive features of participation actually give too much weight to the normative claims—and not enough to the mechanics of institutionalization that seem to almost inevitably lead to an experience of co-optation.

These two subtle shifts, if they are in fact in evidence, lead to the problem of “too much democracy in all the wrong places.” The enthusiasm for participation has increasingly been matched by quicker, faster, more flexible implementations of participation. This can be good in some cases and bad in others because the grammar of participation remains unknown: we sometimes speak of participation as a purpose, an end that we assimilate to democratization or liberation; but it is just as often implemented as a means to achieve goals that turn out to be inconsistent with that purpose: too much surveillance, too much unpaid labor, too much devolution of responsibility, too much democracy in all the wrong places.

Coda

In the introduction to this special issue of *Current Anthropology*, the editors invoke Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (Hirschkind, de Abreu, and Caduff 2017). There is an aspect of participation made clear at the end of this novel, and it is one that is not commonly present in the discourses of participation that dominate the minor sciences or the theories of democracy—but an aspect that perhaps should be. At the end of the story, the hero Montag *becomes a book*. Montag becomes one of the last instances of the Book of Ecclesiastes by memorizing it. He joins a “library” of others that includes, for instance, Profes-

sor Simmons from UCLA, who is Ortega y Gasset. These individuals become instances of the books they memorize, they *participate* in the books—a final deconstruction of the relation between medium and message. We forget too easily that this is also what participation means: to be an instance of something. The film and book stage bad participation as scripted, co-opted performances in the state television’s insipid soap operas. But the end of the book presents us with a different meaning of participation: not to read (a copy) of a book, but to be a book and a person at the same time.

In the context of Bradbury’s book, or Truffaut’s film, this participation is what makes the *public* persist. Because it is books that serve as a critique of and a threat to power (and not television, which is a clear tool of power, manipulation, and co-optation in the story), as long as this ragtag band of book people live, the public exists. This is an unmistakable nostalgia for the book (to which Truffaut assimilates film, as the editors point out)—to become book is more politically authentic than to become television. The seductions of television—or we might say today, the seductions of new or social media—must be resisted. Liberal politics and the success of democracy demand it. But to blame television, or social media, for the disfigurements of democracy is no different than to claim that the same technologies (or those of the book) will unleash democracy. What we miss in opposing the optative and critical aspects of participation is a third meaning, a question lurking beneath both of them: what does it mean for an individual to become not just a part of but an *instance* of a collective?

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