THEORIZING PARTICIPATION: FROM TYRANNY TO EMANCIPATION

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Abstract

Throughout the world, participation has become a buzz-word in the contemporary development lexicon, used synonymously with deliberative democracy, good governance and citizenship, with much optimism and fervor. New forms of participatory institutions and interactive spaces are emerging, as sites within which state and society can interact and engage in mutually reinforcing ways to address development challenges at the local level. The primary raison d’être for the practice of participation and public deliberation being heralded as indispensable to democratic nations is its role in legitimizing government actions and strengthening the political system. Extant discourse indicates mounting disillusionment with the nature and outcome of local state-society synergies. Numerous scholars are of the view that the very notion of participation is ambiguous and value-laden, surrounded by much conceptual confusion and inadequate grounding in development theory. Both practitioners and theorists are increasingly highlighting its marginalizing and divisive powers through its mechanistic use as a tool to validate pre-conceived policy initiatives. Despite this critique, however, the practice and acceptance of participatory approaches as the definitive solution for the challenges facing developing countries continues unabated. Within the bounds of this framework, this paper seeks firstly to conceptualize and locate participation within a more radical and politicized participatory discourse. Thereafter, the focus will shift to an analysis of participation as a spatial practice and an investigation into the dynamics of power relations which infuse spaces of public engagement. The final section will explore the different levels of intensity and dimensions of participation in order to develop a framework that facilitates reflection of current institutionalized practices and the need to reshape spaces of interaction to enable empowered and meaningful participation.

Key words: People centered development, Participation, Institutionalization, Neo-liberal agenda.
Evolution of people-centered development approaches and participatory discourse

Disillusionment with orthodox development theories during the late 1960s and their failure to address poverty and bring about transformation in the developing world led to a systematic search for alternative conceptual analyses and a shift in focus from economic growth to the social dimensions of development. Between the 1970s and 1980s, participatory approaches were considered the sine qua non of development practice and development efforts increasingly promoted ‘people-centered development’, ‘state society synergies’, ‘participatory democracy’ and ‘grassroots development’ (Rahman, 1993; World Bank, 1996; Hemson, 2007).

People-centered development discourse emphasizes that people should be the architects of their own future (Burkey, 1993; Chambers, 1997), focusing on the role of social capital, capabilities, freedom and the ability of ordinary people to manage development themselves (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). Within this view, participatory development would enable the poor to influence, implement and control activities which are essential to their development through interaction with agencies, officials and technical consultants (Burkey, 1993). New participatory rhetoric such as self-reliance, capacity building, equality and empowerment gained rapid currency during the 1970s and 1980s and were used as constant reminders of the core benefits of a participatory public.

The rationale behind the emergence of participatory development is that grassroots support provides valuable insights into local conditions, facilitates the implementation of the planning process and improves development outcomes (Gupta, Grandvoinnet & Romani, 2004). Mainstream or ‘populist’ participatory approaches during the 1980s acknowledged the value of tapping into local knowledge and enabling beneficiaries of development efforts to participate in all stages of the process (Hickey & Mohan, 2004). During this decade it was virtually impossible to attempt implementing any type of development initiative without following participatory procedures. The euphoria over the use of participation as the ‘magic bullet’ for dealing with inequality and social change even resulted in Chambers (1977) declaring participation a ‘new paradigm’ of development.
However, more radical thinking and new insights in the 1990s forged a ‘critical backlash’ against the mainstream participatory practices of the 1980s (Hickey & Mohan, 2004). Palliative participatory approaches and ‘appropriation of participatory discourse’, particularly by organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, evinced strong criticism from a number of quarters (Cooke & Kothari, 2004). During this era, many major international institutions were charged with depoliticizing development due to its use as a legitimizing device and the narrow technicist focus on improving project effectiveness and reducing costs, rather than addressing structural inequality and issues of social justice (Leal, 2007; Gaventa, 2006). Mohan and Hickey (2004:59) ascribe such depoliticizing and limitations of participatory praxis to “an absence of a coherent theory of participation that seeks to explain and articulate the role of agency within development processes” and inability to “theorize the potential contribution of participation to a transformatory political process”. For these authors, participation should be aligned to the notion of citizenship, social justice and development as social change, rather than its use as a ‘technical fix’ for problems of poverty and inequality. Emerging participatory discourse during this period thus considered the vital importance of the relationship between participation and transformation in existing economic, social and political structures and strategies that encompassed ‘organizational change’ (Hoff & Stiglitz, 2001).

However, despite this radical shift and reappraisal of mainstream participatory practices since the 1990s and first decade of the 21st century, and an invigorated focus on the potential of participatory methods, research reveals that rising poverty and inequality continues to plague the majority of developing nations, with their citizens facing increasing marginalization, exclusion and immiseration. Scholars such as Heller and Evans (2010: 433) confirm this sentiment by asserting that “these massive urban concatenations showcase the most durable and disturbing forms of contemporary inequality”.

**Understanding participation**

A review of diverse bodies of literature from varying interdisciplinary quarters reveals the multidimensional and complex nature of the concept of participation and its shifting role and focus over time. Moreover, divergent contexts of participation and differing ideological stances further complicate an understanding of the concept.
Drawing on conceptions of Burkey (1993) and Oakley (1991), Penderis (1996:127) distinguishes between participation as a means to achieve the objectives of development programs, as opposed to participation as an end “which lays emphasis on participation as a process which awakens levels of consciousness, constitutes self transformation and develops and strengthens the capacity of beneficiary groups in development initiatives”. Following Nelson and Wright (1995:1), both distinctions imply very different state-society power relationships and the first approach, focusing on efficiency and better project outcomes, is far less empowering to citizens. Rahnema (1992:117) concurs with these viewpoints, drawing attention to the continued use of participation as a coercive and manipulative tool used by governments and institutions for their own purposes to increase productivity. Although such practices “are commonly cloaked in the rhetoric of empowerment” (Cleaver, 2001: 27), they provide modest opportunity for empowerment and transformation.

Participation is ideally a transformation process and proactive ‘learning by doing’ exercise, with people at the center of the development process (Nelson & Wright, 1995; Oakley, 1991; Burkey, 1993) and essential in an accountable and democratic society that enables the exercise of agency and citizenship (Ayiiar, 2010). Participation moves beyond representation in electoral processes and its ideology is “driven by a belief in the importance of entrusting citizens with the responsibility to shape their own future” (Jennings, 2000:1). The view of participation as ‘popular agency’ recognizes “existing capacities of people as active claims-making agents” (Hickey & Mohan, 2004: 3) and citizens are acknowledged as able participants in the development process. This notion of participation not only enhances development practice and improves service delivery, but contributes to deepening the democratic process and promoting more responsive governance by enabling citizens to participate in local level decision-making (Harbers, 2007).

At the most simple level, public participation refers to the engagement and decision-making process that occurs between civil society stakeholders and various democratic structures and institutions of the state, particularly at the local level (Brodie, Cowling and Nissan, 2009). Similarly, for Rowe and Frewer (2004: 512), public participation is viewed as “consulting and involving members of the public in the agenda-setting, decision-making and policy-forming activities of organizations or institutions responsible for policy development”. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that engaging, consulting and involving local people rarely results in the anticipated goals of empowerment and transformation of the status quo, unless there is existing popular agency and true representation of the most marginalized
sector and ordinary citizens have equal power and control over participatory processes. According to all accounts this is a rare occurrence in the development arena.

**Institutionalizing and politicizing participation**

New participatory institutional landscapes have emerged as a reflection of more radical and politicized participatory discourse and as part of the ‘good’ governance agenda and neo-institutional perspective. The notion of participation fits very snugly into the ambit of the new rhetoric surrounding good governance, institution-building and capability expansion. Features of good governance include sound financial regulation, institutional reform, transparency and an active role of the state in fostering the expansion of human capital (Rodrik, 2002), incorporating core factors such as participation, consensus orientation, equity and accountability (Stiglitz, 1998). The institutionalist perspective is premised on the view that the state must take center stage and focus on increasing the well-being of broader society through transformation and redistribution of the fruits of development. This perspective is increasingly supported by development economists (Rodrik, 1999; Hoff & Stiglitz, 2001), who contest the view of development as primarily a process of capital accumulation.

Drawing participation and the notion of citizenship into the political arena has institutionalized participation, which necessitates a rethinking of the nature of state-society relations and refurbishing of participatory institutions. In this regard, Gaventa (2004a: 25) emphasizes that “a first key challenge for the 21st century is the construction of new relationships between ordinary people and the institutions – especially those of government – which affect their lives”. However, he stresses that it is the nature of new institutional arrangements and power relationships that emerges within and around these spaces that will determine the level of inclusiveness and participatory democracy. Williams (2004: 100) presents the view that the institutionalization of participation could potentially develop ‘a new political imagery’ of empowerment by considering current practices and new ways of interacting in development processes. Within this context, supportive state officials can potentially ‘open up spaces of empowerment’ at the local level in order to build political capacity of citizens and provide opportunities for political learning. This, in turn, will enable citizens to demand accountability and responsiveness to expressed claims and influence key decisions, thereby depoliticizing participation (Ibid). Such depoliticized, inclusive participation at the local level will enable citizens as agents to claim their rightful place as

The expansion of the participatory agenda from a fairly narrow focus on beneficiaries as subjects, self-help initiatives and project efficiency to broader issues surrounding democratic governance, human rights and engaged citizenship has succeeded in politicizing participation through the promotion of a radical and transformatory citizenship, embedded within human rights principles and consideration of power structures and political systems (Hickey & Mohan, 2004). The rationale behind embedding civil society participation within human rights principles is to elevate the status of participants from mere beneficiaries of projects to ‘legitimate claimants’ of development initiatives (Gaventa, 2002).

Despite much institutional support for a more radical participatory approach and increasing emphasis on the transformative, emancipatory goals of participative development, there is far less debate and understanding on the processes that formal institutions need to develop to achieve socio-economic structural change and build the political agency of citizens on a broader level. This theme is addressed by Sneddon and Fox (2007: 216), who argue for the broadening of state-initiated forums of participation “to more overtly political actions” and connecting geographically specific local state-society engagement practices to wider political-economic processes at the national and transnational level. The geographical broadening of participatory development, followed by sustainable reforms, will enable the institutionalization of participation at multiple levels of government and “normalized as a central component of development policy”, thus extending participation efforts at the local level to participatory governance (Ibid). Gaventa (2004a: 33), drawing on the work of Heller (2001), elaborates on the necessary pre-conditions of such a transformative style of participatory governance, which include “a strong central state capacity; a well developed civil society; and an organized political force, such as a party, with strong social movement characteristics”.

The depoliticization of participation within a neoliberal agenda

For many scholars, the ‘explosion’ of participatory discourse by international organizations is representative of the ‘de-politicization’ of development in the interest of neoliberalism. Its swift ascendancy camouflages its degeneration into a de-politicizing, tactical
mechanism to suit the interests of a neoliberal agenda and satisfy policy prescriptions of
governments and major international organizations (Williams, 2004: 92). In this regard,
Foucault (1979: 101-102) reminds us that:

There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power and, opposite it, another discourse
that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field
of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within
the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form
from one strategy to another, opposing strategy.

Rahnema (1992:120) concurs, noting that participation belongs within this category of
discourse and thus ‘ideal for manipulative purposes’. He is of the view that its co-option by
international development organizations has disembedded participation “from the socio-
cultural roots that kept it alive”. Furthermore, its appropriation in the name of democracy,
poverty reduction and giving ‘voice’ to the marginalized by international organizations,
conceals the competing and refracted use as “a means of maintaining relations of rule, for
neutralizing political opposition and for taxing the poorest” (Cornwall & Brock, 2005: 1046).

Leal (2007: 539) ascribes the manipulation and co-option of participation to serve the
interests of a neo-liberalism policy agenda as ‘participation’s political decapitation’ due to its
dislocation from its radical Freirean roots. Leal (2007: 540) draws on Chossudovsky (2002:
37) to emphasize how international agencies reinvent discourse to suit neoliberal economic
policies, as follows:

The ‘official’ neoliberal dogma also creates its own ‘counter-paradigm’ embodying a
highly moral and ethical discourse. The latter focuses on ‘sustainable development’
while distorting and stylizing the policy issues pertaining to poverty, the protection of
the environment and the social rights of women. This ‘counter-ideology’ rarely
challenges neoliberal policy prescriptions. It develops alongside and in harmony,
rather than in opposition, to the official neoliberal dogma.

Leaving political and social decisions to the vagaries of the market is bordering on insanity
for Giroux (2005), who asserts how neoliberalism not only threatens democracy by ‘shutting
down’ any form of dissent, but ‘militarizes’ public spaces of civic engagement as ideological
and political arenas to further the interests of finance and markets. Similarly, Brenner and
Theodore (2002, pp.342-343) draw attention to the increasing use of local spaces as key
arenas for policy experiments and query the ambiguities that result from neoliberalism and its politics and institutional dynamics by questioning the following:

- Does the local really serve as a site of empowerment or do contemporary discourses of globalization conceal a harsher reality of institutional deregulation and the intensification of interspatial competition?
- Have localities really acquired new institutional capacities to shape their own developmental pathways, or are their fates now being determined by political-economic forces that lie beyond their control?
- Are local regulatory experiments actually improving local social conditions, or are they rendering local and regional economies still more vulnerable to global financial fluctuations?

Brenner and Theodore (2002) raise concern that such ambiguities emanating from current neoliberal policy strategies are profoundly impacting on democratization, participation and the empowerment of local people. Harvey’s (2003: 941) response to counteract neoliberal agendas and create democratic public spaces entails rolling back privatization “that has been the mantra of a destructive neoliberalism” and creating public spheres that are “more inclusive … and based on different political-economic practices”. For Harvey (2007), neoliberalism as a ‘political project’ has a dismal record in terms of the stimulation of economic growth, but has succeeded dramatically in terms of justifying, legitimizing and restoring class power to ruling elites of the ‘upper strata’ such as the IMF, the WTO and the World Bank.

**Broadening the participatory agenda: Agency and citizenship**

One of the stark limitations of participatory theory is the lack of consideration and articulation of the role and potency of agency (Mohan & Hickey, 2004), which is viewed as essential in order to move participation from a technical device or ‘tyranny’ to participation as structural change and transformation (Cornwall, 2004). The work of theorists such as Bourdieu, Giddens and Archer add substantial depth to an analysis of participation in terms of understanding the complex relationship between human agency and social structures.

Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990) examination of the dynamics of power relations, the influence of external structures on social action and the role of social capital in producing and reproducing inequality provides a fresh analytical lens through which to view and understand
the complex dynamics of state society relations. Bourdieu (1989: 16), reflecting on the
dynamics within structures, notes that the ‘visible’ often masks the ‘invisible’ and ‘hides the
invisible which determines it’ and thus the ‘truth’ of the interaction that is observed is never
fully availed to the observer. In addition, the construction of social reality by agents is
determined by their perceived position in social space and this hierarchical position or
‘habitus’ is, in turn, shaped by the economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital they
possess and the multiplicity of interactions in their personal life (Ibid, 1979). The hierarchical
status, conferred on them by their perceived position, influences their ability to engage with
authorities. Thus the possession of different forms of capital determines the form of social
reality that agents construct and it this perceived form that enables the (re)production of

Within Giddens’s (1984: 131) theory of structuration, his discussion on the ‘duality of
structure’ implies a dialectical relationship between actors and structures, rather than the
deterministic one suggested by Marxist doctrine. This ‘duality’ refers to the repetition of
social action which creates structures, while the structures enable interaction within the social
system. He explains the ‘duality of structure’ as follows:

Human social activities, like some self-reproducing items in nature, are recursive.
That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually
recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors. In
and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities
possible (Giddens, 1984: 2).

Giddens’s (1984) notion of recursivity implies that structures both enable and
constrain action which, in turn, produces and reproduces structures. Social reality is
consequently the result of “social practices ordered across space and time” which are
continually repeated, or recursive, reproducing “the conditions that make these activities
possible” (1984: 2). Within the recursive ordering of social practices, the knowledge of
actors plays a decisive role. This knowledge enables reflexivity of social practices as agents
continually reflect, rationalize and monitor social and physical aspects of the specific context
in which they find themselves, which impacts on their action. Thus, continual inputs of
knowledge enable “reflexive ordering and reordering of social relations”, which impacts on
actions and behavior of individuals and groups (Giddens, 1984: 16).
However, the actions of agents imply power as agency is a reflection of capability, not intentions and it is the exertion of power that creates an effect and impact (Ibid, 1990). Thus, for Giddens, knowledge, power and capability play a critical role in both the actions of agents and the structures that are created over space and time. While authoritative and locative resources and sets of formulated rules are properties within such structures that enable actors to reproduce social systems, these properties also function as a mode of control (Ibid, 1984). There is much similarity in the work of Giddens and Bourdieu in terms of the relations between structure and agency. Both theorists place a sharp focus on the conscious intentions of social agents, with an emphasis on the habitus of individual actors for Bourdieu, which limits or enables interaction, and the reflexivity of actors for Giddens, which enables actors to transform social reality through reflection and rationalization.

Margaret Archer’s (1995) approach of analytical dualism draws on Gidden’s structuration theory and posits that while structures and agency are interlinked and function interdependently, their initial form, over time, is constrained and recreated to produce new forms under changing cultural and historical conditions. This she refers to as morphogenetic sequencing, which enables one to analyze the internal micro-dynamics of structures of a particular period and investigate their inter-linkages over time. Her concept of central conflation views structure and agency as co-constitutive; structures are reproduced by the exercise of agency of actors, but their actions and choices are both constrained and enabled by existing structures.

In line with Giddens, Cerny (1990: 4) clarifies that neither the structures nor the agents ‘determines’ the other. While agreeing that they are ‘inextricably intertwined’ and choices and alternatives are constrained, he remarks that “the actual pattern of constraint (and opportunity), is itself in dynamic flux, filtering and transforming the choices and actions of agents in ways that can either reinforce or modify existing structures (or both at the same time) in complex ways”. Cerny draws attention to an additional dynamic, noting that actions are limited in such settings due to tension over accessing scarce resources, particular rules of the ‘game’ and uncertainties over the role of actors within the ‘games’ that are being played out. Even within wider structures, ‘clusters’ of games emerge and opposing groups, with different stakes in the ‘game’, compete against each other, which could result in ‘dynamic tension’ between groups (Ibid, 6).
Furthermore, actions and choices of citizens are shaped and influenced by broader political transnational structures and forces which not only constrain choices, but reduce and limit the leverage and decision-making powers of civil society. As agency is imbedded within participatory institutional structures, which, in turn, is situated within larger formations, decision-making and input occurs within predetermined parameters which restrict and constrain options and preferences (Heller & Evans, 2010). Such constraints constitute control and domination and are a reflection of the different power hierarchies and supremacy of the instituting agents over society.

Formulations of place and space

Drawing on the work of authors such as Walmsley (1988) and Krupat (1985), Penderis (1996: 4) depicts the concept of place as conjuring up notions of “belonging, shared values and common concerns … imbued with strikingly different meaning and significance”, which confers both an identity on its occupants and ‘implies an integration of nature and culture’. Closely linked and within place, space exists as a three-dimensional bounded territory where “the various spatial dimensions articulate with one another and over time exert a powerful influence on place” (Ibid, 5). Spaces are thus centers of meaning, expressions of intentions and aspirations constructed by human experience (Buttimer, 1979; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1975), where groups and individuals interact either at the micro space personal level, mesospace neighborhood level or macro space city level (Penderis, 1996; Weightman, 1985). Conversely, exclusion from space alienates and undermines feelings of identity, belonging and self-worth, manifesting powerlessness, lack of control, vulnerability and emotional deprivation (Knox, 1987; Ley, 1983). The foregoing discussion sets the context for the following sections, which focus more specifically on the form, content and purpose of participatory spaces and the dynamics of power which imbue and surround such spaces.

Participatory spaces

Participation takes place in a variety of spaces created for different reasons, by different stakeholders, with different terms of engagement and different sets of dynamics. Whilst some institutional forms are transient events, others are more resilient and regularized. In the participatory political sphere, spaces are constructed by ‘enablers’ and inhabited by ‘engagers’, to borrow Escobar’s (2011) terms, where enablers delineate and define the spaces
according to predetermined specific goals and either summon or invite engagers to participate in deliberations in order to adhere to the prerequisites of participatory democracy.

A rich profusion of literature on the construction of participatory spaces and a growing number of terms, buzzwords and catchphrases have been employed to describe these spaces, often reflecting power tussles that frequently inhabit such spaces. Institutionalized spaces are depicted as ‘closed’, ‘well-behaved’, ‘patronizing’, ‘summoned’, ‘invited’ and ‘provided’, in contrast to popular spaces, which are portrayed as ‘contested’, ‘claimed’, ‘captured’ ‘invented’, ‘resisted’ and ‘conquered’ sites of interaction (see Aiyar, 2010, Escobar, 2011, Gaventa 2004, Cornwall, 2002a, 2002b). Cornwall and Gaventa are particularly prolific and elaborative within this context, providing profound insights into the intricate dynamics occurring within such spaces. Gaventa (2004a: 35) provides a continuum of different types of participatory spaces in terms of how they were created and in whose interests. He differentiates between three different types of spaces. Firstly, ‘closed’ spaces are the exclusive domain of a group of decision-makers ‘behind closed doors’ and entry into these spaces are denied to outsiders. Secondly, ‘invited’ spaces are those shaped by state authorities or organizations in order to create a forum for citizens and beneficiaries who are requested to participate in development initiatives. Third on the continuum are ‘claimed’ spaces, formed by less powerful citizens, either to challenge the more powerful or to raise common concerns that are not being adequately addressed by authoritative figures. We are reminded that each of these spaces interact dynamically with each other, “constantly opening and closing through struggles for legitimacy and resistance, co-optation and confrontation” and are thus never static or void of social relations (Ibid).

Cornwall (2004b:76), in her discussion of participation as a spatial practice, highlights the situated, bounded nature of participatory spaces and potential permeable arenas for participatory opportunities. She elaborates eloquently on the form of such spaces which could represent informal opportunities for local people to gather, or more complex, multi-stakeholder gatherings comprising government, civil society, the private sector and donors as follows:

A space can be emptied or filled, permeable or sealed; it can be an opening, an invitation to speak or act. Spaces can also be clamped shut, voided of meaning, or depopulated as people turn their attention elsewhere (Cornwall, 2004a:1).
Examining participation as a spatial practice enables an analysis of configurations of power relations within spaces and the exercise of citizenship within public arenas of engagement (Cornwall, 2002a). Cornwall’s (2002c) categorization of participatory spaces differentiates between institutional and non-institutional spaces. Government-induced participatory arenas, or ‘invited spaces’, although offering potential for meaningful collaboration and the exercise of citizen voice, are frequently reduced to hierarchical sites of inequitable relations, thereby reproducing dependency and undermining the potential for meaningful participation and deliberation. Such spaces often reflect particular contexts and traces of ‘histories of governance’ and ‘cultures of politics’ which shape relations and rules of engagement and limit opportunities for the enactment of citizenship (Cornwall, 2004a: 2). New institutional spaces will thus reflect previous social relations and the interplay of relations of power of earlier times, thus “simply creating a new institution is not enough to purge it of older associations” (Cornwall, 2002a: 3). ‘Popular’ spaces, on the other hand, are spaces of “radical possibility, a space of resistance” (2002b: 78), which are places where people congregate voluntarily as “expressions of public dissent” (2002a: 2) or to secure rights which are denied to them. These are ‘organic’ public spaces, created by ordinary ‘like-minded’ people, who come together to influence decision-making and policy ‘from below’, or to take an ‘oppositional stance’, expose corruption, air grievances and hold institutions accountable (2002a: 25).

Both Lefebvre and Foucault offer insightful contributions to understanding the production of space and the interplay of social relations within such spaces. For Lefebvre (1991: 14), there are different types and modes of space and, besides physical space, mental space and social space, “involves, underpins and presupposes the other”. Past experiences and social relations leave their footprint on new spaces, thus animating new social relations and practices. As social products, spaces are never vacant or neutral, but function as a medium of ongoing production of social relations, fashioned and reshaped differently by different sectors of society. Similarly, Foucault (1967: 1-2) describes the production of space, not as a “homogenous and empty space”, but as a site of clusters of social relations, as follows:

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space … We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates
sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not super imposable on one another.

Like Lefebvre, Foucault (1967) draws attention to the many types of spaces such as private space, public space, family space, social space and even useful space, which can be appropriated, delimited, formalized and contested. Some sites are inclusionary and penetrable, while others are exclusionary and entry is restricted. Gaventa (2002, 2004b), building on the theme of exclusionary spaces, notes that those who shape the spaces have power over the spaces, although this power shifts continuously and a powerful group in one space could have considerably less power in another space.

Other scholars comment on the political motivations behind the construction of contemporary, ‘invited’ spaces. Many have evolved over time in tandem with government reforms and democratic decentralization and created as a means to legitimize decision-making, enhance efficiency and strengthen accountability by ‘inviting’ citizens to participate in government-induced deliberative processes (Ayiar, 2010). Although such sites have the potential to enhance state accountability, responsiveness and public scrutiny and improve the quality and intensity of state-society interactions, in reality, these ‘invited’ structures as arenas for state and civil society interactions are frequently, following Gramsci (1971), places of hegemony and platforms for control and repression to preserve the status quo rather than an opportunity for citizenship and exercise of agency.

**Contested participation: issues of power**

Participatory ideology and its praxis was radically conceived as a mechanism of emancipation of the poor and transformation of underlying socio-political structures, practices and power relations that reproduce inequality, injustice and social exclusion. Such ideology is embedded in Marxist political economy and Freirean philosophy, rationalized as the pursuit of social justice through radical transformation. During the 1960s and 1970s, scholars such as Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals Borda and Mohammed Anisur Rahman advocated an emancipatory form of participation and the creation of a critical consciousness and fundamental change in power relationships. Such drastic, transformative participation would challenge oppressive structures that reproduced inequalities, marginalization and ‘dehumanizing’ circumstances and produce ‘self-conscious people’ (Rahman, 1993: 13), who would be ‘beings for themselves’ in their “struggle to be more fully human” (Freire,
While such freedom would enable ordinary people to determine their own destinies through a process of conscientization, transformation of the status quo would “require a radical critique and reorientation of social theory and practice” (Fals Borda, 2001: 27). Despite overwhelming consensus that participation is a ‘good thing’, with positive connotations, its praxis has failed to bring about its intention of significant social change and empowerment. The divide between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ is growing unabatedly, translating into deepening poverty and inequality.

Since the 1990s, participatory discourse is increasingly focusing on the complexities surrounding power relations occurring within institutional spaces designed to function as arenas of interaction between state and civil society to enable the exercise of citizenship and the fostering of social justice (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2007). Scholars such as Harbers (2007: 43) contribute to the critical debate and challenge the ‘democratizing potential’ of participation and current practice that provides evidence of “undemocratic elements of deliberation”, while others highlight the continued practice of using participation as a mechanism of coercion and control (White, 1996). Cleaver (2001: 37) draws attention to the predominant development discourse, concerned with efficiency and enhancing the visibility of collective actions, noting that it is “commonly cloaked in the rhetoric of empowerment”. She advocates a far deeper consideration of radical empowerment discourse that calls for a more drastic “transformation of structures of subordination”.

Numerous scholars emphasize the importance of a more in-depth understanding of unequal power relations and contestations that occur within institutionalized participatory structures set up by the state to facilitate interaction with its citizens. Conceiving participatory sites as centers of resistance enables one to explore ‘the micro politics of encounters’ within such spaces (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007: 11). Hickey and Mohan (2005: 238), authors of the much acclaimed Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation?, attribute the inability of bringing about transformation to insufficient consideration of issues of power and politics and the need for “a conceptual relocation of participation within a radical politics of development … and radicalized understanding of citizenship”, as opposed to mainstream participation, which is largely voluntaristic in nature. Such an approach, however, would require a ‘radical reconfiguration’ of state society interactions and responsibilities (Cornwall, 2004b).

Nelson and Wright’s (1995: 7-14) analysis of power dynamics provides a discerning account of the social relations between different actors in the participatory process and draw
our attention to three models of power which can be used to investigate different aspects of participation and empowerment. Their first model, referred to as ‘power to’, relates to human growth through the transformation of knowledge and growing of power of individuals or groups during every-day encounters which stimulate confidence and capacities. The second model, referred to as ‘power over’, relates to participation of state and civil society actors in political decision-making and their influence over development decisions and control of resources. The third ‘decent red’ power model views power as ‘subjectless’, contrary to the ‘power over’ model, interacting invisibly within and between discourse, institutions, actors and flows of events within the ambit of the state.

Gaventa (2006: 24) builds on Nelson and Wright’s (1995) analysis by adding two additional dimensions besides ‘power over’, which he refers to as the control of the powerful over the powerless and ‘power to’, which he relates to the capacity of actors to exercise agency. He describes ‘power within’ as the acquisition of self-confidence and awareness, which enables agents to participate meaningfully, while ‘power with’ refers to the highest level of power and occurs during collective action and synergies between all participating bodies. Gaventa’s categorization implies an increase in power, from an initial stage of no power or control to a stage where citizens have equal power and control of decision-making.

Other power analyses are provided by authors such as Chambers (1995), who describe the hierarchical power relations between ‘uppers’ and ‘lowers’, using the North-South analogy, whereby powerful ‘uppers’ control and determine the activities of powerless ‘lowers’. This distinction has particular relevance to deepening our understanding of state-society interactions at the local level, where power is institutionally centered and frequently used by authorities as a coercive measure. This theme is further addressed by Cooke and Kothari, (2001) in their much-quoted collection of articles in Participation: The New Tyranny? Their manuscript was inspired by the growing disillusionment of participatory practitioners and citizens with regards to the manipulative forms of participation that were being practiced and reproduced and dissatisfaction with “participatory decisions that reinforce the interest of the already powerful” (Ibid, 8).

Notions of power in participatory discourse are frequently dichotomized into state-society categorizations, with disproportionate allocations of power. Lefebvre (1991: 24) provides a perceptive explanation of state space, or l’espace étatique, where space is used as a ‘political instrument’ or strategy of control. In this context:
The space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action … in addition to being a means of production is a means of control, and hence of domination, of power. Forces act within space as a result of actions of the state and within spaces the violence of power is answered by the violence of subversion and these seething forces … can never be totally quieted. Though defeated, they live on, and from time to time begin fighting ferociously to reassert themselves and transform themselves through struggle.

Brenner and Elden (2009: 358), drawing on the work of Lefebvre, link space with territory and highlight the critical role of the state in the transformation of existing inherited political economic landscapes into new spaces:

As the product, the child, of a space, the so-called national territory, the State turns back toward its own historical conditions and antecedents, and transforms them. Subsequently, the State engenders social relations in space; it reaches still further as it unfurls; it produces a support, its own space, which is itself complex.

The resulting space for Lefebvre (1991) is ‘abstract space’, or homogenous space, which he refers to as ‘politically instrumental’ space, which is designed to be used as an instrument of repression for the purpose of sustaining the centralized power of the state.

Foucault’s theorization of relational power and its inextricable link to knowledge sheds additional light on our understanding of power dynamics within participatory spaces. Foucault (1978, pp.93) is of the view, contrary to Marxist dogma, that power is not concentrated in the hands of any one group, but exists in all social relations as “power is relations; power is not a thing … power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society”.

Within the context of the foregoing analyses and consideration of the performance of participatory approaches over the last five decades, it is understandable that the more critical texts are skeptical of the transformative potential of current participatory practices to enhance democracy, bring about meaningful empowerment of citizens and impact on public decision-making. A depoliticized form of participation that excludes the real voice of citizens, subverts meaningful grassroots agency and encourages passive approval of pre-designed procedures will fail to increase civic learning, develop the capabilities of the poor and build a responsive
and deliberative democracy. The necessary requisites of an empowered populace will require strengthening citizen engagement through the transformation of participatory institutions, fostering the expansion of social capital and building political awareness of civil society. In this regard, Gaventa and Valderrama (1990) propose a far more transformative model of participation and shift in emphasis from a mechanistic approach to a political model, where passive beneficiaries become active citizens and consultation with beneficiaries is expanded to enabling citizens to participate equally in decision-making and thereby influence policy outcomes.

Levels of participation

Moving the practice of participation from a position of ‘tyranny’ to one of transformation and empowerment and a shift in focus from participation as a means, to participation as an end, requires examination of the different dimensions of participation. The work of scholars such as Arnstein (1969), Pretty (1995), White (1996) and the International Association for Public Participation (2007) add to an understanding of the role of power and intensity levels of participation.

Arnstein (1969) developed a typology of eight levels of participation, indicating the type of participation, level of participation and the extent of citizen control that each level confers on citizens as participants. These levels, represented as a ‘ladder of participation’, range from non-participation at the bottom of the ladder to citizen power at the top of the ladder. The bottom two rungs of the ladder, comprising manipulation and therapy, respectively, constitute non-participation and are the weakest forms of participation. The third, fourth and fifth rungs, representing informing, consultation and placation, respectively, are categorized as tokenism. For Hildyard, Hegde, Wovekamp and Reddy (2001: 59), this category reflects ‘top-down planning’, as the involvement of local people is to “lend(s) credibility to decisions that have already been made”. Only rungs six, seven and eight, representing partnership, delegated power and citizen control, represent true participation whereby citizens have the power to negotiate and participate fully in the decision-making process. Arnstein (1995) has used this typology to elaborate on the role of power and powerlessness in participatory activities. She extends her discussion by drawing attention to additional obstacles facing participatory practices in the form of ‘roadblocks’, which on the side of the ‘power holders’ include “racism, paternalism, and resistance to power
redistribution” and on the side of the powerless include inadequacies such as limited “socioeconomic infrastructure and knowledge-base” (Ibid, 218).

Aligning Pretty’s (1995) classification to Arnstein’s (1969) typology of participation reveals very similar trends. The first two levels - manipulation and passive participation - represent non-participation and are merely used as ‘pretence’ as participants have no power over decision-making. The third, fourth and fifth levels - consultation, participation for material benefits and functional participation - fall into the category of tokenism, as citizens are dependent on external initiators and participate to fulfill predetermined project objectives. Pretty’s (1995) final two levels - interactive participation and self-mobilization - are the highest intensity levels of participation and represent citizen power where local people are involved in joint analysis of problems, act independently to solve problems and take initiatives independently of outsiders.

White’s (1996) typology of different forms, functions and interests of participation is illustrated in Table 1. Column one depicts the forms of participation which are arranged hierarchically, moving from nominal participation, which confers the least amount of power on participants as power is centered in the hands of the instigatory agent, to the transformative level, which confers the highest intensity of power on beneficiaries. White further distinguishes between the objectives of the implementing agency and the impact on participant beneficiaries, respectively, in columns two and three (Ibid).

Table 1: Form, function and interests in participation (Source: White, 1996, pp.7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Top-Down</th>
<th>Bottom-Up</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominal</td>
<td>Legitimization</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Display</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>Means</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative</td>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>Leverage</td>
<td>Voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformative</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Means/End</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is an important distinction, as it differentiates between the outcomes desired by the initiator of a particular project as the product, on the one hand, and the outcomes conferred on the actors as a process of transformation and empowerment, on the other. The
fourth column sets out the function of participation. Whilst the aims of nominal and instrumental participation are largely for display to legitimate actions and to achieve cost effectiveness of projects, respectively, representative participation is far more meaningful in terms of enabling citizens a ‘voice’ to influence their own development outcomes. The most sought-after and highest level is transformative participation, which occurs where citizens are equal partners in decision-making processes and are empowered through meaningful collaborative deliberations.

Finally, the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) (2007) devised a framework of increasing levels of intensity, ranging from informing, consulting, involving, and collaborating to empowering. Within this structure informing, consulting and involving represent little more than a cosmetic facade of participatory development and the actors stand to gain very little in terms of claiming power to affect any decision-making. Collaborating and empowering, on the other hand, signifies a far more equal participatory partnership, where agents have more control of the process and play a far more proactive role in setting priorities and influencing the decision-making process.

An analysis of the different interpretations of levels of intensity of participation by Arnstein (1969), Pretty (1995), White (19960 and IAP2 (2007), as set out in the foregoing discussion, enables one to categorize the intensity levels of participation according to participation as a means and participation as an end. This categorization is depicted in Table 2.

Table 2: Levels of participation as a means or an end (Source: Author, 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation as a Means</td>
<td>Manipulation</td>
<td>Manipulative participation</td>
<td>Nominal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Therapy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Instrumental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consultation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Placation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For all typologies, the vast majority of intensity levels fall within the category of participation as a means, which infers that participation is used to involve local people in decision-making for the purpose of credibility or as a palliative measure due to legislative requirements or to satisfies donors of development initiatives. A far smaller percentage of intensity levels fall within the category of participation as an end, which requires active participation, partnership, citizen control and empowerment and results in transformation. This is in line with research findings that reveal that, in the majority of cases, participatory practices are used as technical solutions, or for the purpose of legitimacy as a ‘pretence’ mechanism to comply with organizational requirements. Such practice has led to the motivation of authors such as Cook and Kothari (2001) to refer to ‘participation as tyranny’.

The above framework can be useful as an analytical device to enable one to reflect on the different mechanisms of participation and how participatory practice must be re-evaluated to enable transformation and empowerment. Clearly, the methodological frameworks and participatory practices currently employed will not achieve the theoretical promise of participatory rhetoric.

**From subject to citizen: an explanatory framework**

An assessment of the aforementioned analyses of space creation, levels of participation and power dynamics draws renewed attention to the centrality of the purpose of participation and the political nature of the participatory process. Consideration of current practices highlights the inability of governments to respond to the needs of the marginalized and importance of creating new spaces to enhance transformative participatory governance. Such
reflection is essential when considering strategies to move beyond currently accepted paternalistic practices that not only disempower, but have negligible impact on structural transformation and social change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non Participation</th>
<th>Tokenism</th>
<th>Citizen Power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Placation</td>
<td>Consultation</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manpulation</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>Self-mobilisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1:** From subject to citizen (Source: Author, 2011)

With this in mind, an explanatory framework has been devised that enables consideration of currently accepted methodologies and practices and an analysis of the intersection between forms of citizen engagement and contestations of power that pervade participatory spaces and restrict popular agency. In addition, it facilitates an analysis of how current institutionalized practices and participatory governance spaces need to be reshaped to enable empowered participation and synergistic state-society relations.

Figure 1 portrays the different levels of participation on a continuum, moving from manipulation, as least empowering participatory form of engagement, to self-mobilization and empowerment, as the most sought-after form of interaction. These levels can then be separated into sub-categories according to non-participation, tokenism and citizen power, using Arnstein’s (1969) categorization. Within each sub-category, the different types of spaces reflect how they are created and the opportunities that such space offers participants in terms of influencing decisions and controlling the development process. Closely linked to the nature of these participatory spaces is the interplay of power dynamic within each space.

The first sub-category depicts non-participation and, due to the closed nature of the participatory space, reduces the actor to the position of ‘subject’ of participation, where the mechanisms of manipulation, placation and provision of information exclude beneficiaries
from participating in the process and deny them their rights as citizens. Power is in the hands of the powerful and is used to control, subvert and exclude the powerless from any form of participation or impact on the development process.

The second sub-category represents tokenism. The site of participation has evolved to one of ‘invited’ space, where participatory mechanisms include consultation, involvement and information-sharing as a top-down method to legitimate decisions. Such tokenism constitutes mere ‘window dressing’, co-option and ‘pretence’ of inclusion of the marginalized. Participation at this level represents ‘depoliticized’ development, with no emphasis on fostering political learning, restructuring political networks or consideration of structural inequalities. Nominal power is transferred to local actors and limited opportunity is conferred on beneficiaries to exercise agency and influence the trajectory of the development process. While this is considered a higher level of intensity than non-participation, it amounts to little more than a cosmetic smokescreen to gain approval of pre-designed plans from passive beneficiaries, with the production of power in the hands of the implementing agency.

In the final stage, which comprises self-mobilization, transformation and empowerment, power is transferred to participants and enables them to participate meaningfully as equal partners and influence decisions that will impact on policy. These spaces have been transposed to an ‘inclusive’ space, where citizens have claimed their rightful place in the participatory process and have the power, political knowledge and capability to define their collective priorities and influence development choices. The beneficiary, as a powerless and passive subject of development, has achieved the status of empowered citizen, which opens up new possibilities for transformational change. It is only at this level that participation can achieve its stated purpose of transformation and emancipation aspired to by scholars such as Freire (1972), Rahman (1993) and Fals Borda (2001), more than four decades ago.

Conclusion

The shift of attention from government to governance and adherence to the prescriptions of the ‘good’ governance agenda and neo-institutionalism has resulted in state-induced institutional reforms throughout the world, buttressed by mandatory legislative decrees. This has produced a proliferation of new participatory institutions and the opening up of diverse spaces of engagement between state and society. Whilst this is a commendable
shift towards a more empowered and transformative form of participatory development by state authorities, these ‘invited’ spaces of engagement and mechanisms to include citizens and enable popular agency have produced disillusioning results.

Despite repetitive theoretical rhetoric surrounding the value of participatory practices in deepening democracy, enabling transformation and challenging the status quo, current practices continue to reproduce top-down practices reminiscent of previous eras and there is scant evidence of any significant improvement in transforming the conditions and lives of the poor and marginalized. Simply creating new participatory institutions, with insufficient consideration and analysis of existing power structures, will not enable the realization of participation as transformation and the exercise of popular agency, as required within a system of participatory governance in a deliberative democracy.

There is thus a large gap in our understanding of participation as transformation that needs to be filled and many questions surrounding the practice of participation that require answers. Clearly, more robust conceptual grounding and deepened theoretical reflection of the transformative and empowering potential of participation and the location of participation within radical political discourse will contribute to shifting the focus from participation as legitimization to one of participation as emancipation. Furthermore, the disparity between participatory theory and praxis within broader structural constraints requires more focused consideration in order to enable more meaningful state-society synergies and create more inclusive means of engagement that recognizes and responds to community voice. Such a shift in focus will require critical intervention and a reformulation of political relationships and a greater emphasis on institutional change and engaging citizens in meaningful ways. What is thus needed is a concerted commitment to challenging the status quo in order to, in the words of Paulo Freire (1972: 25), create a world that is “less ugly, more beautiful, less discriminatory, more democratic, less dehumanizing, and more humane”.

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