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The Paradox of Participation. The Power of Domination and the Power of Change[*]

Abstract: My paper focuses on the effects of participatory practices in the contemporary process of democratization. On the one hand, these practices were created in order to compensate for the shortcomings of the representative model (paradigm), giving more power to the people and setting a basis for real social change. On the other hand, it is not so difficult to notice that these practices could be turned, at any moment, into a useful tool for the political establishment, a tool that can extend the existing dominating structures and reinforce the messages of the well-known political propaganda. This paradox made a lot of people (political scientists, analysts, philosophers, communication scholars, media researchers) come back to the „drawing board", in a creative quest for innovations, design modifications or type selection that would best meet the initial goals of participatory democracy.

Keywords: political participation, domination, change, citizen perspective, administrative perspective, political innovation

1. The paradox

The question that was assumed as a basis for this research is this: is citizen participation a useful way to redistribute the power (Arnstein, 1969) towards the citizens (and their communities)? Who makes a profit out of citizen participation? Do we fulfill actual inclusion by means of participatory practices or do we extend the existing exclusion inside the democratic societies? The quantity of literature on the theme of participatory democracy is a proof for two issues: 1) the subject was and is perceived as being one of great importance; 2) like any important subject, it gives birth to a lot of controversies. After some initial high hopes, we find ourselves in a more realistic stance right now. The optimism of the first decades has given way to a form of prudentialism, that consists of both careful theoretical examination of the matter and practical search for best alternatives that would be free of unwanted consequences. The cause for this is probably the outcome of participatory experiments: many times, both the planners and the general public realized that the results were either too

small or contrary to the initial intention of the participatory design. The paradox of citizen participation, briefly stated, is this: at first glance, citizen participation is an efficient way of fighting for civil and democratic rights, an efficient way for trying to dismantle the rigid structures of power and of the elite, and in the same time for gaining ground for social change. But facts have proved that many forms of participation actually increase the level of elite or establishment domination or do nothing else than meet the administrative goals set by the politicians. In this case, the participation can be transformed into a „normalized” process, that would only reproduce the „old” structures. This process of normalization includes numerous consequences, such as the agenda-setting type of consequence.

This paradox, I think, has multiple sources. Three of them are more prominent than others. First, as stated by Norberto Bobbio, participatory democracy seems to be an intermediate stage between representative democracy and direct democracy. This fact creates a continuous tension and is reflected in the status of the participatory practices. Second, as many authors noticed, what we have tried so far in terms of participatory practices looks like a complement rather than a full alternative to the representative paradigm. This is normal, many scholars say, because we just cannot give up the representative model, and, for the moment, it is a childish illusion that we could replace it with a complete participatory design. That is because the representative model covers, in a convenient and legitimate way, a lot of fundamental areas of political decision. Its main consequence, professional or expert politics, cannot be ruled out also, because a lot of political problems require detailed knowledge, experience and expertise, and not just opinion. Third, it is a well-known fact that narrow interests are more coherent and efficient than diverse or diffuse ones, and usually they are the ones that get to influence the government. This translates into the fact that whenever you want to support a form of social change or improvement, you cannot be efficient in doing that without the help of some important interest groups that are active on the political scene. Thus, the participatory initiatives either remain just abstract projects and they simply vanish, or they get the attention of powerful groups, but then things may happen in a totally different manner than they had been designed to. This happens, for example, when local politicians participate in neighborhood meetings. There always have been complaints about politicians who try to „steal the show” for themselves, leaving aside the matters that are a real subject for the „simple people” who attend those meetings (Sălăvăstru 2010, 41-45 offers a few examples of fallacies used by local politicians).

In this case, what is to be done with the participatory narrative? We cannot abandon it just because these paradoxical situations occur. But what is the relationship between information and decision-making, between actual and fake power, between the search for social change and the search for elite preservation? Which are now the links between liberalism and democracy (Bobbio 2007)?

2. Participation: a cost or a benefit?

According to Arnstein, the fundamental idea of power redistribution is the criterion to have in mind. This goes down to the citizens who want to (constantly) redefine the field of power relationships and to amplify or increase their deliberative and decisional options. The elites want to redefine something themselves. In their case, this effort applies to procedures (Glass 1979), institutional limitations and framing that might have an influence on what they consider to be a „stake” (political projects, redistribution of power, elections, public funds etc.). The right to participate at the elections, the right to vote has been described for decades as a major breakthrough in the process of democratization, even as a major breakthrough in civilization. Of course, this is true up to a certain point. The possibility of taking part in the political process (inside the representative model) is the end of a long fight for human rights. It is also the „dream come true” of a plethora of social movements that go back a few centuries. But, as we now know, the sixties brought us what has since been called „the credibility gap”. People lost their faith in the honesty, efficiency and agency of the political process, and began to question the relevance of their political implication, including the act of voting, as Barber put it in a famous fragment from his *Strong democracy*. The alleged power of the people seemed then and seems now just a phrase of propaganda. The lack of actual power made a lot of scholars (Arnstein included) talk about redistribution of power and layed the foundation for the participatory experiments. With this new focus on participatory and direct democracy, the seventies and the following decades brought some of the old hope back to the people. But it didn't take too much time to notice two effects of this change: a) it takes a lot of work, a lot of resources, a lot of smart individuals and a lot of creative and imaginative thinking in order to come down to earth with useful practices from the heavens of joyful abstractions; b) the establishment and the elite will not just stay put and wait to see what happens. On the contrary, the elite reacted quickly, perceiving this change as an opportunity. First, this was an opportunity to win the internal fights: those who adapted fastest to the participatory trend would win the competition inside their groups. Second, there was an opportunity to re-design the networks of power and influence inside the political parties. Third, planners and politicians could take advantage of the opportunity to create new forms of *populism* (for a rhetorical analysis of the new forms of populism in contemporary Romania, see Sălăvăstru 2004)*, a political option and philosophy that may be considered cynical and risky, but nevertheless efficient. The elite proved once again prepared: integration, appropriation and convenient modification of participatory practices was the answer, and not rejection.

Against this background, the last two decades are thus dominated by the multiplication of participatory practices, on the one hand, and by the elite's strive to play the „be a part of – make some profit of” game, on the other hand. These practices are, indeed, legion (Fung 2005, 4). This can be an advantage – perhaps

we must try a lot of things if we want to discover what works – , but also a disadvantage, as long as people perceive the participatory process or parts of it as being tiresome and useless. If the latter is to be the case, then participation becomes a cost, and not a benefit. If people perceive their political implication and participation as a cost rather than a gain, then, in spite of all the creative work, we go back to the „credibility gap". So, to avoid that trap, we have to follow some steps: we have to clarify the main goals, discover and criticize the situations in which the participation is disciplined (in Foucault's terms) so much so it serves no more citizen objectives, but only the ones set by the establishment, sort out the most suitable participatory practices for our goals, offer support to the democratic innovations that seem valuable. Only in this case will we see participation as being a benefit rather than a cost.

As for our general goal, Sartori, and many others give useful instructions. Sartori insists on autonomy and self-agency, while R. Dahl (*apud* Gastil 2008, 5) offers three basic criteria for democracy (degrees of democratization, to be precise): inclusion, effective participation and enlightened understanding. As Gastil (2008, 5-8) explains, effective participation includes strategic issues like voting equally on the decisive stage or control of the agenda. But it has to be more than that; not only the equal vote has to be insured, but also an *adequate vote,* adds Gastil (2008, 5-6):

> „Moreover, many systems offer a mix of direct democracy with the elections of representatives. If you live in a city or state that puts questions on ballots in the form of referenda, initiatives or ballot measures, for instance, you are participating directly in the lawmaking process. A democratic process requires that in such elections, you have an equal chance to put issues on the ballot (by gathering signatures or by other means), discuss and debate the issues with fellow citizens, and vote yea or nay on each issue. Note that your opportunities to participate – directly and through the elections of representatives – must not only be equal to that of your neighbors but also must be adequate. This means that a system fails to be democratic if it divides up the opportunity pie evenly but fails to make enough pie to satisfy. Nobody likes getting shortchanged on pie, even it's known that everybody else also got half a teaspoon. Thus democracy requires that all people have sufficient opportunities to set the agenda, speak their minds, and complete their ballots".

Enlightened understanding is also crucial, says Gastil, because it creates a separation between deliberative and unreflective political systems. A system that does not allow nor encourage people to think and talk about what is important for them will just be one „full of empty speeches and reckless voting" (Gastil 2008, 7). In order to have a reflective system, we need to get people to speak their minds, get clarification on important issues, participate in group discussions, make good decisions after previous information exchange and assessment and finally try to influence the law makers and the policy makers. Even participation to referenda requires a minimum standard of understanding.

Moreover, as we have known since Aristotle, a good city or country is one that has its citizens deliberate on the strategic problems. The experience of the past, the wisdom of the experts, the free exchange of opinions help the citizens make the right choices for their city or their country. A deliberative community is reflective, creative and most of all civicminded. As Fishkin put it, we have to elaborate on our „raw preferences" in order to give better answers to our problems.

3. The power of domination and the disciplination of participation

Simply put, the disciplination of participation is the fact that the political elite can use the participatory practices in order to attain its own goals, the main being the increase of domination. While the participatory practices were created in order to compensate for the shortcomings of the representative democracy, nowadays we witness the fact that these practices are often used in favor of the dominant agents. So, the social instruments that were thought to be alternatives for dominant structures are, themselves, tools that serve those structures. This way, what used to be seen as a solution now seems to be a part of the problem. This is a very serious matter, because the people's hopes in „something different" represent a very appealing manipulation target. In the case of the representative paradigm, people generally know what to expect and what the choices are. That happens because they gathered many experiences and they formed an opinion about the representative process (they may criticize it as a whole, but nevertheless go and vote at the elections, they may choose where and when to take part, they may totally dismiss it etc.). But, on the participatory side, things are new, and in the case of many countries, brandnew. Erich Fromm (1998, 203-204) observed that we have just a conventional belief if we think that by „freeing the individual of all the external constraints, moderned democracy fulfilled the true individualism. We are proud that we are not subordinated to some external authority, that we are free to express our own thoughts and feelings and we take for granted the idea that this liberty is an automatical guarantee for our individuality. The right to express our thoughts means something only if we are capable of having our own thoughts".

Gastil (2008, 43-45) discusses an interesting fragment from a TV show in USA called *Crossfire,* where comedian Jon Stewart was invited. That fragment is relevant for the neverending debate on media responsibility. On the one hand, we have a very strong competition in media, and the ratings tell which station wins and which station loses money. So, the economical aspect is not optional, but decisive. On the other hand, as Jon Stewart tried to argue, we must have substantial political debates in media if we want to have a functional form of democracy. When substantial debates give way to theatrical ones, true politics gives way to fake politics.

If we think of Foucault (1998), we could talk about the disciplination of the discourse of participatory democracy. The elite is not interested only in

„stealing the show" and in converting the participatory practices into something that fits its own goals, but also in selecting, controlling (if possible), organizing and redistributing the participatory discourses that float in the „free market of ideas". Let us think of selection, for instance. When citizen initiatives have to pass some kind of administrative test (or have to be authorized etc.), there is a big chance that a lot of issues – maybe some of central importance for the people – get no attention or are thrown directly to the garbage container. This happens both with initiatives that are judged as „unimportant" or „secondary" and with initiatives that are perceived as dangerous for the status-quo. This leads not only into a *spiral of silence*, but also into a *spiral of cynicism* (term coined by J. Cappella and K. Hall). Thus, through initial selection, some discourses are not only discriminated, but also stopped from the very beginning. More, if we take the case of redistribution, we realize that in this case, also, the initial stakes and goals are transformed into establishment goals. The elite can incorporate participatory talks and debates on its thematic agenda, and after strategic transformation, re-send it to the people in a design that meets the administrative goals.

Max Weber (2011, 82-83) talked about three sources of legitimate domination: *tradition*, *charisma* and *legality*. In reality, we always have a mix of them. But the truth is that in order to reproduce the relations of power and to extend the domination, the elite is actually using all of them. The establishment can invoke local or national traditions to rule out uncomfortable speeches or initiatives, can use charismatic leaders in order to conveniently modify participatory patterns and can make things slow, difficult or even impossible by legal means. Efficient domination and hegemony in democratic regimes are not established by brute force, but by the means of symbolism. Tradition, charisma and legality are not just instruments of power, but also powerful symbols that are active in our minds. That's why Gastil is right when he thinks that critique has to be our first and constant work in terms of participatory innovation. Critical argumentation is a major technique if we desire to become aware of what happens with our participatory practices, when and how they are used as pure symbols that confirm establishment policies. Thus, we can distinguish the situations in which the participatory practices reach their objectives from the situations in which the participatory practices constitute a form of camouflage for the political will of domination and system reproduction.

The critical attitude helps us understand what we are really doing when we decide to participate. As A. Giddens said, it is one thing to get involved in a practice and another thing to be aware of the presuppositions underlying that practice. I think that the road to fulfilling the individualistic ideal (mentioned above by Fromm) passes through this gate of *awareness of pressupositions*. Of course, critique and awareness of pressupositions will not sufice. We need a positive approach, that translates into creativity and innovations. In sections 4 and 5 I will discuss a few aspects of innovation, but concentrating on type rather

than on examples, because I partially took care of that task in another paper (Grădinaru 2010).

4. The power of change: innovations as answers to immediate issues

As Isabelle Berthelier, Alexandre Dorna, Patrice Georget and Joëlle Lebreuilly observed (Berthelier, Dorna, Georget and Lebreuilly 2004, 178) we are not witnessing only a crisis of the representative democracy, but also a crisis of our representation of democracy. This is probably also linked with the fact that in order to understand what is happening with democracy, we have to cope with a lot changes and evolutions. Fung (2005, 3) believes that

> „This diversity of participatory innovations – though theoretically challenging – is unsurprising in light of the complexity of contemporary democratic governance. As an empirical matter, mechanisms of direct political participation do not typically emanate from some ideal (Athenian or other) of democracy, but rather emerge in response to more or less urgently felt problems. The forms of participation that we see serve a variety of proximate purposes that include providing information and feedback to officials, rendering public judgement, easing the implementation of policy, co-producing various kinds of public goods, solving public problems, and increasing official accountability. These forms, furthermore, occur in very different institutional locations that include the informal public sphere, public agencies, judicial mandates, and even as part of legislative processes. This diversity of participatory phenomena defies attempts to deduce particular institutions from general democratic principles or to induce general insights from particular experiences."

So, many times innovations emerge as answers or solutions to problems that are more or less urgent, but nevertheless are present on the public agenda. This practical character has to be kept in mind, because I think it insures a natural move from status-quo to real social change. In fact, we continue - in the field of politics – to use the old strategy of focusing on finding a solution when a problem arises: if we fail to properly identify a problem, then we will not look for solutions. On the contrary, if we perceive something as being unsatisfactory or unsuitable, we will start thinking (with or without help) about the possible answers. This also applies to shocking events, especially in the first phase, when we move from lack of interest and self-sufficiency to awareness. As Patrick Schmoll showed (2004, 239-244), the elections held in France in 2004 made a lot people think again about the rational model of *homo politicus*, about the role of voting in democracy and about our responsibilities as citizens. Such an event, such a shock may prompt us to look for ideas and practices to overcome the difficulties that we are now aware of. Schmoll also briefly discusses the paradox of participation: is non-participation to the voting sessions something good or something bad? It is hard to say, because the non-participation from the first tour

seems to be the decisive factor that drove a lot of young people in France to go and vote in the second. Also, I might add, it drove people to think about the meaning (or the lack of) of the entire process. More, if it is possible, we should check with valid statistical research what is the percentage of non-participation that is equivalent to „I'm not interested in this" and what is the percentage that spells „I'm not satisfied with the way in which representative institutions work in my country. I want something else".

The innovations can come from the people, but experts, professional politicians have to be the exemplary model. But Weber (2011, 90) warned us that politicians fall in two categories: those who live *for* politics and those who live *from* politics. We have to wait and see if the ones in the first category will prove to be more innovative than the ones in the second category, as was predicted. Weber (2011, 137) also warns us about the dangers brought by vanity. For him, vanity is a sin in politics (and maybe everywhere) because it makes us incapable of being objective. I think that even if he is right, we have to stick to a more humble option: let's *use* the fact that politicians are vanitous. If they connect vanity with will (namely, the will to change things), they can produce policies that bring extra-value to the public sphere. There are multiple sources for democratic innovation, starting with media (see Horga and La Brosse, 2002, for instance) and ending with financial issues (participatory budget, for instance). Thus, we can collect ideas from many domains and, more importantly, we can improve the status-quo of many domains.

Why do we have to believe in innovations? Alter (2010, 39) gives us a few reasons. First, the innovations usually work against an already established social order. They produce a fracture (ideologically and symbolically) in the „order of things" and they make people think and reposition themselves in a system of representations and power relations. The experiment of Porto Alegre was the equivalent of a massive earthquake in the community of political scientists; it remains for us to see if in the next decades this earthquake will hit the community of planners and policy makers with the same magnitude. For now, the results are divided. Second, the activity of innovation, Alter says, is neither predictable nor mandatory. On the one hand, this means that generally the establishment does not have the power to prevent innovations (at least, not all of them), and on the other hand there is no pressure for the innovators: they can act freely, at their own will. Third, the economical rationality does not provide a full explanation of the innovative action. Alter thinks that the innovative action is linked rather to social issues, such as social recognition, self esteem and merit; this means that we have to understand the logic of the innovative process against the background of social beliefs. Fourth, these social beliefs are shared in the form of a social code, and this allows „individuals and groups to engage in the process of diffusion of innovation" (Alter 2010, 39).

Finally, the paradigm of innovations as answers to immediate issues aplies to the whole range of participatory problems: from simple matters (neighborhood meetings, neighborhood press) to more complex cases (referenda, citizen juries, deliberative polls, local autonomy).

5. The power of change: innovations in design

Sometimes, the main issue is not how we provide a solution to an urgent problem, but how we re-design our participatory practices in order to get better results. One strategy (Glass 1979) would be to focus on the relation between techniques and objectives. Glass starts with the fact that there are a lot of situations in which both planners and citizens are not satisfied with the outcome of the practices. Glass thinks that this happens when not enough attention is given to their design. He identifies five main objectives of citizen participation: *information exchange*, *education*, *support building*, *supplemental decision making* and *representational input*. Not all the existing techniques fit every objective, he argues. We have to look for a good match between techniques and objectives if we want to succeed. Thus, if the objective is information exchange, Glass thinks (1979, 183) that we should use unstructured techniques like drop-in centers, neighborhood meetings, agency information meetings or public hearings. If the objective is education or support building, then we should switch to structured techniques, such as citizen advisory committees, citizen review boards or citizen task forces. If we choose supplemental decision making as our objective, then we have to turn to nominal group process, analysis of judgement, value analysis. When the objective is representational input, then we may use citizen survey or delphi process. This is a good example of „fine tuning” in the case of participatory practices.

Fung tackles the „approach problem”. He believes (2005, 1) that the fundamental question is „how much, and what kind, of direct citizen participation should there be in contemporary democratic government?”. This question was approached differently by scholars, and the type of approach usually influences the rest of the analysis. Fung reduces the approaches to three categories: deductive, inductive and experimentalist. For him (2005, 1-2),

> „One familiar approach in political theory attempts to develop the answer deductively, beginning from democratic first principles such as political equality, individual autonomy, and the importance of reason in collective decisions. Another approach begins inductively, by examining the operations of specific mechanisms – such as worker controlled enterprises, the New England town meeting, deliberative polls, citizen assemblies and juries, public hearings, and neighborhood associations and councils – in order to gain more general insight regarding the contributions and limitations of citizen participation in democratic governance.”

Fung argues that a third approach – that he calls *experimentalist* – overcomes the difficulties of both the deductive and the inductive approach. Experiments, he thinks, are natural in the field of participatory democracy. What we have to do is make the right design in accordance with the values that we seek. Again, there cannot be one single design or just one practice that would fit all the democratic values that we embrace. Fung's explanatory model assumes

three core values (*legitimacy*, *justice* and *effectiveness*) and three directions of research (*influence*, *participants*, *communication and decision modes*). Injustice, for example, results often from political inequality, so we have to work on this variable in order to set the records straight. Also, Fung argues, we have to pay attention to the democratic and the non-democratic ways in which different groups are organized. Sometimes, the most powerful groups that are interested in participatory practices are organized in a non-democratic structure. Thus, we must always have a firm grasp on the evolution of the relationship between planners and citizens, trusted and not trusted officials, partisan or objective experts.

Conclusions

My first conclusion is similar to that of A. Fung, namely the participatory practices are a *complement*, not an *alternative* to the representative design. As long as this is going to be the status-quo (and this may be forever, for that matter), the paradoxical tension I talked about will always be present. Second, the multiplication of participatory practices is not, by itself, a guarantee for the ideal of power redistribution. Multiplication seems necessary, and the same goes for experimentation. But it is up to us to make the right choices by linking techniques to objectives (Glass) or by sorting out the most promising designs through experiments (Fung), or by giving a form of orientation to our theoretical discussions towards the deliberative field (Gastil). Third, at the international level, there are big differences between countries in terms of integration and development of the participatory practices. These differences are to be found when we compare countries from different continents (Brazil and Germany, for instance), or from the same continent (Germany and France). Things developed at different rates, some practices were privileged, while others were not. Fourth, the move towards deliberation and decision (in the sense that people get more power to make decisions) can be thought as an indicator of democratization along the three criteria proposed by Dahl. Of course, efficiency does not necessarily follow, since we can have both useful deliberations and meaningless debates inside our participatory designs. But we need not worry, because this is proof that liberty is still around. Fifth, I think we should focus on what I call the *subjective* and the *objective causal power of participation*. When the individual feels that his implication in a participatory practice produced some effect (even if we think in small scale terms), we can call it a success. Of course, this is a success in terms of self realization, edification and self fulfillment. This is not something unimportant, even if subjective success could turn out to be an objective illusion. When the participatory processes produce observable consequences (the construction of a bridge by means of referendum and participatory budget, growth of knowledge by means of neighborhood meetings, increase of political participation and simplification of democratic procedures through New Media etc.), we can talk about objective causal power. This is the

moment when people's implication has reached its target. It is not reckless vote, but strong implication that produced a real change. The power of domination and the narrow interests are counterbalanced now by people's ingenuity, stubbornness and will to participate. The people have switched from spectators to agents and from simple followers to critics.

Every scholar has his own „examples of hope" and „examples of misery". If we are on the side of the survival of democracy (Dorna and Georget 2004) and democratization, we have to use our innovative capacities and, most of all, we must not avoid the unconvenient questions. As Weber testified (2011, 62), this is the first and probably the most important task of a scholar.

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