

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND ECOLOGICAL VALUATION:
INCLUSIVE = RADICAL

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the gender and class implications of “public participation” processes, which are increasingly used in Europe, North America, and elsewhere as a basic component of environmental and public policy decision-making. While they are grounded in strong political and ecological rationales, public participation processes can potentially exacerbate gender, ethnic, class, and other inequities. The paper focuses on the complexities of conceptualizing and designing public participation processes which are gender- and diversity-sensitive and take into account the different kinds of relationships with the environment held by different members of society. The more inclusive and diversity-sensitive these processes are, the more radical their implications.

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I. Introduction: Co-optation and Power

“Public participation” and “democratization” have become the new buzzwords of globalized capitalism, used to disguise the violence of World Bank – imposed conditionality and to justify imperialism and resource wars like the war on Iraq (which, we are now told, was necessary to bring democracy to Iraq).

Nowhere is this cynical use of the term “public participation” clearer than in relation to water, the ultimate resource, fundamental for life.

For example, a recent paper on watershed management in Nicaragua and the proposed institution of water charges notes that ecosystem degradation due to “development” has necessitated new efforts to put a value on ecosystem services and charge users for them in order to remediate the damage. Citing a 2002 World Bank study, the authors note, “It has been recognized that if implementing systems of payments for environmental services involves transfer payments from rich urban to poor rural households, they may also serve rural development objectives. This has clearly contributed to the popularity of the concept among development organizations” (Johnson and Baltodano, p. 58). In other words, water charges to raise money for fixing the ecosystem deprivations of earlier “development” projects are being justified on the grounds that this will help redistribute welfare to the poor. But later in the paper, the authors recommend community-level mediation of rights to water through, for example, water committees and participatory water management (p. 71). In Nicaragua, they report, these committees are a legacy of previous projects undertaken in conjunction with NGOs – the previous fad in development conditionality requirements – where households provided free labour in return for connection to the spring-fed potable water systems. The community water committees were formed to manage the potable water projects, and some now handle broader water management issues (p. 60). But if fundamental redistribution is the goal, be it of water access or income, how can a participatory local group realistically be expected to bring about this redistribution? Put bluntly, what is to force those better off to do anything that is not in their own interests? Like the earlier emphasis on NGOs as a solution to rent-taking by elites, this current emphasis on public participation is doomed to failure without some mechanism to acknowledge and rectify previous power and money grabs by elites.

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, and Agenda 21, institutionalized and formalized public participation expectations in relation to resource and environmental management (Kapoor, 2001). International, bilateral, and NGO development agencies have jumped on the bandwagon – attracted by the emphasis on democratizing environmental decision-making, education, decentralization and transparency – to the point that “participation” is now generally specified as a

requirement for funding (Gujit and Shah, p. 4). Political theory, community development theory, and ecological economics theory all add rationales and justifications for public participation as an essential component of sustainable governance, ecological modernization, and the management of risky, uncertain, rapid change (Devine, 2003; Perkins, 2004b; Kapoor, 2001; Fung and Wright, 2003; Walter, 1995; Dryzek, 1990, 1996; Habermas, 1996). However, it is almost certainly not by chance that a groundswell of critiques of these ideas is being led by women and people of colour.

Nancy Fraser (1993) has outlined the exclusionary political struggles behind the constitution of the “public sphere”, and the ways in which Habermasian deliberation can mask ongoing domination (1993, pp. 119-120). This is echoed by Gujit and Shah (1998, pp. 7-8). Kothari also concludes that public participation can encourage dominant groups to reassert control and power if people are brought into the process in a way that “disempowers them to challenge the prevailing hierarchies and inequalities in society” (2001, pp. 142-143).

Fraser, Kothari, Gujit and Shah, and Kapoor, as well as additional commentators Mouffe (1996) and Mosse (2001), all conclude however that a way forward lies in political organizing and participation by what Fraser calls “subaltern counterpublics” (1993, p. 126) who are able to set the terms of debate within spheres they control. Mouffe speaks of “radical and plural democracy” (1996, p. 248); Kapoor of “coordinated yet plural and flexible” institutions to “represent changing and diverse audiences” (2001, p. 275); Kothari points out that participation allows participants to subvert the process by resisting inclusion and choosing when not to participate (2001, p. 149). So participation *per se* is not either bad or good, from a socio-political equity perspective; it’s how it’s done that matters.

Over this complicated socio-political picture, we must also layer additional complexities related to ecological and spatial issues. Bioregional boundaries that are different from political ones create a strong *a priori* impetus for the creation of new institutional frames for public participation and discourse regarding trans-jurisdictional environmental decision-making. Solving problems in airsheds and watersheds is a strong reason for people to talk with each other across political boundaries (Perkins, 2001). This lies behind the framing of the European Water Framework Directive (EWFD), and other water laws which use it as a model, such as the 1997 Brazilian water law: They establish trans-jurisdictional water basin committees with government and “civil society” representation to discuss and decide nearly all issues concerning water management in each watershed, including issues related to the collection of water fees and the use of the revenues collected for water-related infrastructure improvements and management.

To the extent that these institutional frameworks make possible more bioregionally-based governance, they represent an improvement in an ecological sense (Perkins, 2004a). But the same equity caveats as noted above for any public participation process also apply. Moreover, the structure of many watershed management schemes has been set up to facilitate charging users for water use and infrastructure, because (at least in the EWFD and the Brazilian case) the water basin committees depend for revenues and expenditure-

power on collecting fees from water users. How they collect and disburse these funds is up to them. Thus, governments have transferred the political responsibility for and fallout from instituting unpopular water charges to a separate agency, composed not of politicians but of “stakeholder representatives”. The neoliberal impetus behind this clever rejigging is clear: an incentive structure has been created to, in effect, assemble a stakeholder body for instituting water fees, under the guise of ecological/bioregional management. These water committees have power to capture rents and spend them, but only if they are willing to face public ire about the implementation of water charges -- thus protecting politicians from having to deal with this thorny issue through the normal state channels.

From an ecological viewpoint, SHOULD users pay for water? I believe the only sophisticated answer, from a political ecology viewpoint, is “it depends”. Again, it’s how it’s handled that matters.

II. Deconstructing “Public Participation”

Like all words and concepts which get co-opted, the power of “public participation” lies in its basic attractiveness as an idea. OF COURSE people should have a say in public decisions which affect them; of course this is a vital component of sustainability; of course the more democracy the better. It is only when we delve into what “public participation” actually means in specific cases that certain difficulties and political contradictions become apparent. They include the following:

1 – Is public participation meant to undermine or create parallel structures to the state? Why not just democratize the existing government more fully? Or when we say “public participation”, do we really mean “enhanced voice and access in policy-making for a certain segment of ‘the public’”? Such special processes have significant costs; early studies on the expenditures necessary to comply with EWFD public participation guidelines indicate they may require hundreds of thousands of dollars annually (ESEE, 2002; EU, 2001; EC, 2003). These costs, because they suck up general government revenues, arguably can represent inefficiencies, in light of the pressing needs everywhere for better public information and more broad-based democracy.

2 – The difficulties of getting people to actually become involved in public processes (see Abers, 2003) are seldom acknowledged. Why should they? Who has the time to attend community meetings, when it’s not clear what difference it makes and there’s no stipend or child care provided to assist citizens to attend? When participation implies an open, voluntary process, it is almost guaranteed to attract special interests which are not reflective of overall public opinion.

3 -- To the extent that attendance and participation are encouraged through guarantees that the outcome will have an effect on public policy (e.g. the requirements of the WFD or some Environmental Assessment processes), elected officials are, in effect, devolving responsibilities for policy decisions onto arm’s-length or independent agencies. This raises legitimacy issues – are such bodies in fact more democratic or less?

4 – The many equity concerns discussed above, related to who comes to the meetings, who speaks and is listened to, gender, ethnicity, and exclusion of particular viewpoints, are very problematic. For women and for the poor in particular, water access is closely linked to quality of life, yet water committees do not reserve seats based such subsistence concerns.

5 – Instead, seats are generally reserved for government officials at various levels, water users, and/or “civil society”, which usually means selected NGOs – so the committees institutionalize a form of “stakeholder” politics, which is next door to “shareholder” politics. These are much less attractive words than “public participation”, and indicate its potential, fundamentally anti-democratic tendencies.

6 – Requiring public participation processes (e.g. in conditionality, aid projects, research grant proposals etc.) reveals the extent to which this is an agenda item of globalized capitalism and a project which needs critical unpacking. Power is rarely on the side of broad-based democracy.

For all these reasons, once again we see that it’s how public participation is done that matters.

III. Questioning Specific Meanings

It would be nice if there were a way of separating rhetoric from reality and assessing how deep the democratic process actually is in any given situation where “public participation” is part of the discourse. In this spirit (and building on work by my colleagues Ilan Kapoor, Andrea Moraes, Marcia Chandra, Caitlyn Vernon, others involved with the Sister Watersheds project in Brazil, and my own experiences with local Toronto community environmental groups), I’d like to offer for discussion some thoughts on ways to assess whether a given public participation process contributes to enhancing deep democracy or not. By this I mean, does it give a useful long-term voice in policy decisions to people who would not otherwise have had that voice, and who bring useful new information and diverse perspectives, without undermining the state’s responsibilities for sustainable policy-making, legitimacy and representation? These ideas, meant to relate to specific public participation processes and situations, are put in the form of questions.

1 – Genesis. Is the public participation process imposed, or did it emerge organically from a locally-felt particular need? How is it set up and / or constrained? Who is seen as “the public” and who is allowed to participate?

2 – Diversity. Who does participate? Do participants match or echo the gender, ethnic, and other diversities of the general population? Is there a formal selection process? If so, on what basis of information or knowledge are participants chosen? What are the channels of communication, representation and political legitimacy between participants and the general population? Is anything done to encourage attendance from traditionally

under-represented groups or to counter pre-existing power disparities among participants? Do organizations and “counterpublics” exist in relation to the process which are constituted of subordinated social groups?

3 – Depth. Is the process a long-term one or a single-decision, time-limited process? Does any sort of “social learning” result? Do representatives and leaders of civil society groups have ongoing ways of expressing views and being heard?

4 – Impact. What guarantees or indications exist regarding how the outcome of the public participation process will be taken into account in decision-making? How is this justified in relation to the regular governmental process and political legitimacy? Is the regular governmental process nominally democratic? What reasons are cited to explain the need for an additional public participation process? (e.g. interjurisdictional / ecosystem / bioregional scope, etc.)

5 – Ecology. Does the process actually span political jurisdictions in an attempt to accommodate bioregional or ecosystem-related spatial scales? What attempts are made to recognize and account for complexity, uncertainty, non-human constituents, etc.?

6 – How is the public participation process funded? How much does it cost in comparison with regular governmental decision-making processes? Are revenues from ecosystem service charges (e.g. water fees) used to pay for these management expenses?

I believe that formalizing these kinds of questions could help to generate a checklist for assessing how public participation is being done in particular instances, and hopefully for improving its deep democracy impact. At the very least, asking questions like these is the basis of a thought experiment on the strengths and limitations of any particular public participation process.

IV. Conclusion: Inclusivity and Radicalism

While this paper has largely focused on critiques of “public participation” in theory and in practice, I think it is also very important not to lose sight of its potential impact as a radical tool for education, empowerment and voice for previously-marginalized people. Whether it is via new organizations of “subaltern counterpublics” or through selective non-participation, or whether education and organizing related to public participation processes bring new social groups into the broader political process in some way, I believe it’s possible for public participation processes to serve as a vehicle for deepening democracy in particular cases.

The more inclusive is the welcoming of new voices within public participation processes, the more radical is this potential. This is not because popularly-driven decisions and outcomes must be or always are radical, but rather because including a broad spectrum of public viewpoints in political and environmental decision-making is itself inherently and fundamentally radical. As activists, we must continually seek out the best, fairest, most effective and widest-ranging ways in which this can be done.

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