Discussion

Too Little Democracy in All the Right Places

A Comment on Kelty 2017

Joan Roura-Expósito and Pablo Alonso González

Instituto de Ciencias del Patrimonio–Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC), Avenida de Vigo s/n, 15705, Santiago de Compostela, A Coruña, Spain (joan.roura-exposito@incipit.csic.es)/Instituto de Productos Naturales y Agrobiología–CSIC, Avenida Astrofísico Francisco Sánchez 3, 38206 San Cristóbal de La Laguna, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Spain. This paper was submitted 27 VI 17 and accepted 28 VI 17.

Kelty's "Too much democracy in all the wrong places: toward a grammar of participation" (2017) makes a significant and very welcomed contribution to the discussion of the politics of participation, hitherto largely neglected in the anthropological literature due to its conceptual elusiveness and practical ambiguity. Kelty's skeptical and critical tone presents us with an accurate interpretation of participation as a form of governance, a mechanism of domination, and an antipolitical machine. We also concur with one of his two main conclusions: his caveat about the risks of cooptation and bureaucratization taking place when participatory processes are institutionalized. However, in our view, it is necessary to add complexity to Kelty's reflection through a more empirical and ethnographic perspective if we are to bring forward a detailed and vivid depiction of participation today. Rather than an ethnography-rich deployment of situated contexts of participation, his style is almost essayistic and tackles participation in an idealist fashion, as a Platonic notion or ideal type, that only reveals traces of the influence that power has on truth.

Kelty seems more concerned with making a transhistorical digression on the continuities and discontinuities of participation in recent decades than with understanding the uses, instrumentalizations, and interbreeding of participation with contemporary sociopolitical contexts. Almost paradoxically, his discussion of participation overlaps the metaphysical and ontological planes (see the digression on participation as a product of a *longue durée* ideal debate that has been carried on since ancient Greece), while his historicization without genealogical pretensions neglects any radical questioning of the ideological underpinnings of participation. Kelty examines participation from a metacultural dimension. He thus overlooks its deep connection with central features of Western modern liberalism, such as "democracy," "citizenship," or "republicanism," but also its current appropriations as a discursive regime of

neoliberalism, which serves to contain growing citizen disaffection and demands for greater democracy throughout the world.

Kelty looks for the origins of participation in the academic literature or in political manifestos, referring us to classics like Arnstein (1969) or declarations like the Port Huron Statement from 1962. His nominalist perspective leads Kelty to dissociate the historical emergence and evolution of participation as an ideal type, in a Weberian sense, from its current reality as a complex assemblage or global form with multiple instantiations in different locations (as defined by Collier and Lakoff 2005). Instead of seeing participation as a totalizing concept, we prefer to put forward an ethnographic engagement with participation, addressing it as a splinter, with its multiple "instances, differences, variations, particulars—piecemeal, case by case" (Geertz 2012:221). This involves seeing participation not only as a discourse, representation, or regime of truth but as an assemblage of theory and practice, juridical formulations, and management regimes, taking grip in reality with varying effects for subjects. Participation is not only a new feature mediating the relationships between the state and "civil society" but also a governmentality device that produces its own subjects and consolidates the very notion of civil society, tempering the growing contradictions of liberal democracies afflicted by growing institutional discredit, social disaffection, and the upsurge of populism.

Kelty (2017:S77) regrets the ambiguity of participation: "On one day, participation is the solution to our most practical concerns or even an ethical calling; on the next day it is a containment strategy designed to keep us chillingly in place or to extract data and money from us at every turn." For us, however, ambivalence is far from being one of the constitutive characteristics of participation; rather, this ambivalence derives from the fact that Kelty's approach is philosophical and abstract as opposed to ethnographic and empirical. Although we are broadly sympathetic toward Kelty's hermeneutic take on participation and its meanings and interpretations, we do think that participation is far from being a cryptic or ambivalent reality. Rather, it is a privileged setting for the ethnographic exploration of the transformation of governance structures, power shifts, and forms of political domination. In other words, we do not aim to reveal or uncover the hidden "grammar" of participation but to examine its "syntactic" constitution, that is, how it takes grip in particular contexts and what social effects it produces. This we try to do in our ethnographic research project in Spain, called ParticiPat: Heritage and Social Participation, which investigates participation as a cultural form and a state attempt to engender legal regulation, normalize the citizenship, and diffuse power and governance throughout extended networks

Following an anthropology-of-policy approach (Shore and Wright 1997), we aim to explore how this emerging governmental technique transforms the field of heritage management in Spain and elsewhere and how, in turn, this shift reorganizes the bureaucratic and political spectrum as a whole. We focus on

a rural, depopulated area of Asturias, in northwestern Spain, through an ethnographic approach to the changing governance structures of the natural park Fuentes del Narcea e Ibias and the rural development group Alto Narcea Muniellos, funded by the European Union development program LEADER (Links between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy). Inscribed in a lineage of studies on political participation (Talpin 2012) and its cooptation and instrumentalization by patronage networks (Alonso González and Macías Vázquez 2014; Torsello and Venard 2016), our ethnography seeks to map the situational meanings of participation in practice. In doing so, we respond to Kelty's call to explore forms of political and economic involvement among a subalternized group of peasants in a peripheral region. For Kelty (2017:S86), "subjects of development, indigenous peoples, the poor, and rural farmers are object of and conduit for participation—and it is perhaps from their perspective that the weird grammar of participation becomes most evident." Indeed, our research so far reveals the complex instantiation of participation among different actors in the territory, calling into question some dichotomies put forward by Kelty, such as his distinctions between individual and group participation and between top-down and bottom-up governance. A single quotation from a key agent within Alto Narcea Muniellos reveals the multifaceted character of participation, both as a management culture and belief and as a bureaucratic and governmental strategy with differential appropriations and limits:

The issue of participation is very complicated. We should have tools, analysis skills, culture of negotiation. . . . Here we had to implement participation in a month. . . . There are budgetary limitations, there are guidelines made by others and . . . logically, the administration is a bureaucratic machine and always wants a top-down approach to budget management. Thus [participation] is a very pretty fairy tale, but in the end the prince turns once again into a frog. There is a roof. And this roof is the Counsel [the regional government administration]. The Counsel acts as a brake, wielding technical arguments that emanate from regulations. . . . So I think that we lack a culture of participation, because neither citizens, politicians, nor technicians believe in it.

This form of "internal" criticism of participatory processes is not uncommon, and it shows how traditional political parties supported by patronage and clientelistic networks retain a great ability to shape participation and modulate the "real" involvement of citizens in public life. Far from an ideal type, participation appears as a complex assemblage of global and local

tropes and connections. We therefore call for an analytical framework that takes account of its multiple instantiations: in Spain, at least, participation is a novel governance strategy that reproduces preexisting power relations while channeling new economic investment under a technocratic management. In spite of its decentralizing rhetoric, "actually existing" participatory processes actually tend to have recentralizing effects. Far from being paradoxical, this shows that neoliberal governance is not opposed to democratic participation and rhetoric (Rose 1996). Rather, participation is one more manifestation of a perverse confluence between the deconstruction of the public sector and the requirement for citizens to become autonomous and self-responsible subjects. Certainly, as a concept or ideal type, participation may appear as a floating signifier susceptible of receiving any meaning. However, the discursive contradictions inherent in it fade when examining its material and power effects. Instead of creating "too much democracy in all the wrong places," participation conceals and legitimizes the growing lack of democracy under neoliberalism.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad, Spain, through the project ParticiPat: Heritage and Social Participation for methodological proposal and critical review (HAR 2014-54869-R).

References Cited

- Alonso González, Pablo, and Alfredo Macías Vázquez. 2014. Corporatist neoliberalism in Spain: ethnography of the European funding to rural development in the case of unsuccessful project. *AIBR Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 9(3):223–250.
- Arnstein, Sherry. 1969. A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35(4):216–224.
- Collier, S. J., and Andrew Lakoff. 2005. On regimes of living. In *Global assemblages*. S. J. Collier and Andrew Lakoff, eds. Pp. 22–39. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Geertz, Clifford. 2012. *Available light: anthropological reflections on philosophical topics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kelty, Christopher. 2017. Too much democracy in all the wrong places: toward a grammar of participation. *Current Anthropology* 58(suppl. 15):S77–S90.
- Rose, N. 1996. Governing "advanced" liberal democracies. In *The anthropology of the state: a reader*. A. Sharma and A. Gupta, eds. Pp. 144–162. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Shore, Cris, and Susan Wright. 1997. A new field of anthropology: towards an anthropology of policy. In *Anthropology of policy: perspectives on governance and power*. C. Shore and S. Wright, eds. Pp. 3–33. New York: Routledge.
- Talpin, Julien. 2012. *Schools of democracy: how ordinary citizens (sometimes) become competent in participatory budgeting institutions*. Colchester, UK: European Consortium for Political Research.
- Torsello, Davide, and Bertrand Venard. 2016. The anthropology of corruption. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 25(1):34–54.