Social Movements in an Age of Participation

Francesca Polletta, University of California, Irvine

ABSTRACT:

How have social movements fared in an era marked by new enthusiasm for citizen participation? I identify features today's participatory landscape that make it different from earlier ones; notably, its scale and scope, its reliance on the Internet, and its relation to state power that is dispersed among multiple actors. Then I trace the mixed consequences of these features for social movement groups.

Social movement scholars typically have conceptualized social movements as bids for political influence by people excluded from routine processes of political bargaining (Tilly 1978; Tilly, McAdam, and Tarrow 2003). What happens, though, when mechanisms for citizen input proliferate? Movement groups today routinely are invited to participate in government-sponsored public forums (Hendriks 2011). The writing of Constitutions is crowd-sourced (Castells 2013). Fortune 500 corporations fund grassroots citizen organizations (Walker 2014).

No movements scholar would argue that the political system has become so open to the claims of people without power that social movements are no longer necessary. To the contrary, the leitmotif of movements around the globe in the last five years has been the demand for democracy—or for more genuinely participatory democracy (Polletta 2014). But we should also resist dismissing new mechanisms of citizen input as mere spectacle, launched to great fanfare as the real decision making takes place, as it always has done, behind closed doors. Rather than arguing that movements are either unnecessary or more necessary, I ask instead about the opportunities and challenges facing social movements in an era in which participatory initiatives have both multiplied and diffused across institutional spheres.

Based on a review of case studies of movements in Latin America, Australia, Europe, and the United States, along with my own research on contention and deliberation around the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan, I present a decidedly mixed assessment. New forms of participation have created both opportunities and dilemmas for movement groups. In short, the question of when movement groups should become involved in a citizen forum, whether as sponsors, organizers, participants, or endorsers, remains a vexed one. Movement groups are

probably best served by the kind of tactical flexibility that allows them move in and out of these "invited spaces" of democracy (Cornwall and Coelho 2007). But for reasons I describe, that flexibility is hard to sustain.

Participation 2.0

There have been waves of enthusiasm for public participation before. During the Progressive era, a movement of intellectuals and activists who eventually won support from Congress and the White House developed deliberative forums around the country. Ordinary people, many of them newly arrived immigrants, met evenings in public schools to discuss issues ranging from local budget decisions to national immigration policy, sometimes directly with local officials and candidates (Mattson 1998). In another participatory moment, when federal planners devised new antipoverty initiatives in the 1960s, the notion that the poor would not be involved in the initiatives' administration was unthinkable. As observers wrote at the time, "the days when poor people would passively accept what they were given were numbered everywhere" (quoted in Sirianni and Friedland 2001:37). By the end of the 1970s, there were 226 participation programs in federal agencies, sixty-one percent of them created in the previous decade (Roberts 2004).

So what is new this time around? One is the sheer scale and scope of today's participatory initiatives. In the last decade, the World Bank has funnelled close to $80 billion into local participatory development projects (Mansuri and Rao 2012). Participatory budgeting, once synonymous with the single city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, has spread to thousands of municipalities around the world (Baoicchi and Ganuza 2014). Crowd sourcing has become a popular strategy in business and science as well as policymaking (Brabham 2013). Briefs for

"collective intelligence" are made in education, video gaming, and financial investing (Bonabeau 2009).

Alongside the proliferation of participatory initiatives has been the growth of an organizational infrastructure for organizing, running, and interpreting the results of such initiatives. There are now many models for participation: in the United States, 21st century town meetings, Deliberative Polls, study circles, online dialogues, Citizen Choicework, visioning exercises, Appreciative Inquiry; in Europe, citizens juries, consensus conferences, planning cells; in Canada, citizen assemblies; in Brazil, participatory budgeting and municipal heath councils; in India, village panchayats. Each model has its own proponents and techniques, and increasingly, professionals credentialed in its use (Lee 2014). We can thus talk about an institutional field of citizen participation, something that did not exist in the 1960s.

The relationship between citizen participation and the state is also new. Keane (2009) describes public forums as part of a larger apparatus of "monitory democracy," in which the exercise of power is subjected to citizens' scrutiny and judgement. Joining mechanisms like public inquiries, global watchdog organizations, and public interest litigation, public forums are yet another means by which citizens weigh in on the exercise of government outside of elections. Keane argues that monitory processes have been growing since WWII and they parallel the weakening of parties. From a different perspective, the growth of citizen participation reflects governments' adoption of neoliberal agendas. Public participation is a trade-off for cuts in services formerly provided by the state (Postero 2005). For example, in Britain, David Cameron's "Big Society" programs involved devolving power "from the élites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street," as Cameron put it (Collins 2010:38). But the emphasis on local initiatives was combined with deep cuts in social spending. In the United States, citizen

'visioning' exercises have been trumpeted as a way to attract private investment in financially strapped cities (McCann, 2001). In line with the state ceding power to the market, ethnographic accounts have documented the currency of business language in contemporary civic engagement efforts, with its emphasis on efficiency, flexibility, and the economic "bottom line" (Baoicchi et al. 2015; Eliasoph 2011; Lee 2014).

From yet another perspective, however, invitations to participate are compensation for the destructive effects of a neoliberal agenda. In international development, observers say that lenders' new dedication to participation reflects a "post-Washington consensus" that the burdens of structural adjustment fell mainly on the poor. The solution was to support the poverty-fighting capacities of decentralized states and civil society actors. At the same time, however, participatory development is still constrained by disciplinary financial policies (Craig and Porter 2006). What links these very different perspectives is their depiction of states whose power has been dispersed: across agencies, levels of government, and to actors outside government. Public engagement efforts, in this context, require coalitions of diverse actors, both for their organization and for their impact. This means that forums are often launched with no guarantee they will have any effect (Goodin and Dryzek 2006). But it also means that there are multiple points at which insider and outsider groups can shape the way in which a forum is perceived and, as a result, the impact it has.

 Another change: The Internet looms large in today's landscape of participatory initiatives. Certainly, new digital technologies dramatically lowered the costs of joining, forming, and coordinating groups (Shirky 2008). They made it possible to solicit public input at a vast scale. To be sure, visions of "e-democracies" involving huge swathes of the population, and capable of overcoming the inequalities and information deficits that are typically associated

with citizen participation, have not materialized. However, in addition to their practical affordances, digital media have also helped to create new modes of cooperation, as well as new ideas about what democratic cooperation is. Within the global justice movement, for example, democracy is modeled on the Internet, with autonomous groups linked along the lines of a virtual network. There is no political center, and any unity is self-consciously provisional (Juris 2008). Outside movements, the fact that people routinely post reviews on Amazon, revise Wikipedia entries, and sign online petitions may have made participation in an online consultation about downtown development or genetically modified food seem of a piece with these other forms of participation (Polletta 2014). Compared to the political party participation that is in such decline, participation today may be appealing insofar as it is issue-specific and not very time-consuming (Kreiss 2014). The currency of digital media surely contributes to these expectations.

In sum, the scale and scope of the new participatory landscape, its position simultaneously inside and outside government, and its reliance on digital technologies are decidedly new. My question is how movement groups fare in this new landscape. What new opportunities have been created? What new challenges?

Participation and Constraint

If ordinary people want to effect change in their communities or nations, they now have access to an array of instruments designed to elicit their preferences and priorities (Gastil and Levine 2005; Leighininger 2006; Hendriks 2011). Such forums are sometimes sponsored by governments and sometimes by coalitions of civic groups and foundations. They take a variety of forms: some are one-off events while others extend over months or are intended to be

permanent; some invite representatives of particular groups while others are open to the public; some are intended to produce policy recommendations while others are intended simply as discussion forums; some produce recommendations that are binding on decision makers, while others do not. The extraordinary proliferation of these forums raises important questions for social movement groups. Should activists support and participate in these forums, should they ignore them, or should they protest them? [1]

Activists generally have been critical of such forums (Levine and Nierras 2007; Shankland 2010; Young 2001; Baoicchi et al. 2015). Their concerns are two-fold. One is that they fear that forums' emphasis on "deliberative talk" disadvantages the people with whom they work. The kind of talk favored by deliberative democrats—rational, impassionate, abstract—is both more available to men, the middle class, whites, and native English speakers, and it is more likely to be perceived as characteristic of them no matter how they speak (Coelho, Pozzoni, and Cifuentes 2005 describe just this happening). Moreover, the universal values to which deliberators are supposed to appeal are not in fact universal: and those whose experiences are not encoded in the dominant values have little argumentative recourse. Once the agenda has been set for a participatory forum, participants find it difficult to push the discussion to encompass issues that are important but have been defined off the table.

The other concern is that by signing onto a deliberative forum, activists give up the opportunity to challenge the agency sponsoring the forum (Young 2001; Hendriks 2011). As I noted, few deliberative forums are binding on decision makers. Activists fear a situation in which

---

[1] I do distinguish between deliberative forums that are restricted to stakeholders in an ongoing dispute and those that seek to involve laypeople. I focus on the latter (see Hendriks, Dryzek, and Hunold. 2007 for a comparison of the deliberative quality and impact of these two kinds of forums).

decision makers ignore the recommendations that come out of the forum, if they run counter to their interests, or embrace them if they do not. Either way, activists implicitly legitimate a process that diminishes their leverage.

Notwithstanding these concerns, activists increasingly have come to see benefits to participation in such forums. For example, in citizens' forums on a proposed waste recycling policy, on gene technology in the food chain, on consumer protection policies, and on controversial diagnostic technologies (the first two in Australia and the latter two in Germany), representatives of activist and public interest groups, along with representatives of commercial groups, government agencies, and professional organizations were invited to address the randomly selected groups of citizens (Hendriks 2006). Activists and public interest organizations were the most likely to actively engage in the process; commercial representatives were the only ones who actively refused to participate. Activists' decision to participate, like that of the other groups, was thoroughly strategic. No one participated mainly to contribute to the common good. Rather they saw an opportunity to press their case: for example, to correct what they saw as industry-promoted misinformation about the safety of genetically modified food. Citizen forums were a "platform for advocacy," Hendriks argues (581).

In Durban, South African, local environmentalists partnered with a Danish environmentalist group to develop expertise around the environmental impacts of development projects. That expertise then became the basis for their role in deliberative environmental impact processes (Barnett and Scott 2007). Activist groups in Brazil sent leaders into government sponsored forums when they wanted to get a hearing for their position but sent younger group members when they wanted them to learn the arts of negotiation (Cornwall 2007). Environmental justice activists in New Mexico managed to convince officials planning a public

forum to allow only people working on environmental justice issues to address participants—not industry representatives (Dodge 2010).

Indeed, observers have argued that in many cases, participatory forums' capacity to effect real change *depends* on the involvement of activists (Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Cornwall and Leach 2010; Baiocchi, Heller and Silva 2011; Mansuri and Rao 2012). This is both in the sense that mobilization often precedes the establishment of participatory mechanisms and that activists play important roles in the operation of such mechanisms. Thus with respect to the first, Hetland (2014) found that populist mobilization preceded the introduction of robust citizen participation in municipalities in Venezuala. The relationship was not direct; rather, populist mobilization fostered citizens' expectations of involvement, which were frustrated by municipal populist regimes. That, in turn, led to the election of "post-populist" regimes that were more genuinely committed to citizens' engagement. In Bolivia, indigenous activists made use of a neoliberal multicultural discourse, and the opportunities for participation that came with it, to press for more substantive participation (Postero 2005).

With respect to activists' role in the operation of participatory mechanisms, in Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting process, Baiocchi (2005) shows, activists recruited people to forums, negotiated among parties before, after, and during meetings, and gathered the information that residents needed to deliberate effectively. In neighborhoods where activists were not involved, the process was both less deliberative and less effective in getting residents what they wanted. For activists, the forums were a place to demand government concessions, but also to promote political learning, build grassroots leadership, and recruit members. This was more broadly true: In a later comparative study, Baiocchi, Heller, and Silva (2011) found again that participatory budgeting was more successful in municipalities with well-organized social

9

movements. In Sao Paulo, some neighbourhood health councils were located in areas with a history of mobilization around health. These councils were characterized by more diverse participants as well as the kinds of political connections that made them influential (Coelho et al. 2010).

In a meta-analysis of 100 case studies of citizen engagement in twenty countries, Gaventa and Barnett (2010) concluded that the presence either of social movements or local associations was more likely to be associated with the creation of accountable governmental policies than was the presence of government-sponsored participatory forums. But cases in which multiple strategies of engagement operated proved to be most successful. Indeed, numerous studies suggest that activists have been successful in securing government responsiveness when they have joined participation in "invited spaces" with mobilization outside them (Cornwall and Leach 2010). In Brazil, to give one example, indigenous leaders both participated in state-sponsored health councils and occupied the Ministry of Health to protest a lack of financial accountability (Shankland 2010). As an environmental activist in Durban, South Africa, put it, far from at odds with participation in deliberative forums, activism "means having regular public forums, it means writing regular letters to these government officials and politicians, it means when people don't respond and are afraid to deliver it means taking to the streets and doing a protest and, you know, constantly being in the media and showing them for what they are" (Barnett and Scott 2007: 15-16).

In the United States, the picture is complicated by the fact that participatory forums have often been sold as an antidote to contention. "Stakeholder" forums were developed as a way to get past the paralyzing conflicts that pitted environmental activists against developers. And a variety of instruments for the involvement of ordinary citizens in local governance are promoted

as a way to avoid the "usual suspects" in favor of residents who are less mobilized.[2] In addition, the American field of public deliberation was launched in the 1990s by people with backgrounds in federal government, academia, and public opinion polling (Polletta and Chen 2013). Deliberation was conceived primarily as a means of civic education.

However, as public deliberation developed into an institutionalized practice, it merged with other institutionalized idioms and practices, among them, dispute resolution, intercultural dialogue, and community organizing (Polletta and Chen 2013; Lee 2014). Indeed, in a recent conference bringing together deliberation practitioners and community organizers, participants spent a lot of time arguing that the divide between the two that existed at the national level was nonexistent at the local level. Deliberation, a participant said, was a "subset of community organizing" (quoted in Leighninger 2009; see also Leighninger 2006:18; McCoy and Scully 2002; and Sirianni and Friedland 2001 on the involvement of activists in deliberative forums).

While that characterization may be overstating the case, there are commonalities of interest between activists and the sponsors of public forums. For one thing, activists need access to decision makers, whether directly or by way of third parties. They need a public stage from which they can draw attention to their issue, make their claims, and rebut the claims of authorities and other influential actors. Favorable media coverage, research shows, is important to movements' success. But movement groups are less likely to gain favourable coverage when they launch their own events than when they can be interviewed in conjunction with the kinds of political events that are usually covered, such as the passage of legislation, a politician's speech, or—possibly—a public deliberative forum (Amenta et al. 2012). Movement groups also need to

---

[2] Cornwall and Leach argue that, where the concern in the global North has been with ensuring more broad-based participation, in the South, it has been more with securing the participation of groups, such as women, who have been marginalized from mainstream politics.

be seen as representing not just themselves but a much larger group of people who can be mobilized to act on behalf of the movement. Activists' claims to accurately represent that larger group's views must be believed. The sponsors of deliberative forums, for their part, also strive to claim representativeness. If they do not seem to have some demographic representativeness, or are seen as marginalizing not certain people but certain points of view, they can be discredited (Goodin and Dryzek 2006; Hendriks 2002). When these two sets of needs are considered in tandem, one can see rationales for collaboration.

Only a few deliberative forums rely on random sampling. Instead, the groups sponsoring forums often depend on members of their advisory boards to recruit through their organizations. For that reason, advisory boards often include advocacy organizations representing people of color, working class people, immigrants, and home-renters. Organizers and activists often find themselves asked to serve as recruiters for deliberative forums (McGrath 2009; Dodge 2010). This can give them input not only into the composition of the forum but also into its agenda.

Public Involvement in the Rebuilding of the World Trade Center

I saw this dynamic at work when I studied a series of forums designed to involve the public in decision making about what to build at Ground Zero following the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001 (I describe this case more fully in Polletta 2015). In a move that was surprising to many, given the power of New York City's real estate interests, the authorities in charge of rebuilding set out to elicit public opinion about how to develop the site in dozens of forums, workshops, online polls, and visioning exercises. I have described the enterprise elsewhere (Polletta and Wood 2005). Here, I want to focus only on one set of participatory

forums, convened by the Civic Alliance, a coalition of regional planning organizations, civic groups, and advocacy organizations. The largest and best publicized forum, "Listening to the City," brought 4500 people to a downtown convention center to deliberate about what to build at the site as well as to discuss transportation and economic development options. The forum was credited with the decision by the main development agency to scrap the original plans for the site and commission new ones.

In planning the forum, Civic Alliance staffers were sometimes frustrated by members of the Labor Community Action Network (LCAN), an advocacy group representing workers and low-income residents, who were relentless in their press to get jobs and housing on the redevelopment agenda. But LCAN was valuable to the Alliance for its ability to recruit people of color and low-income workers to participate in Listening to the City (Todorovich [Civic Alliance staffer], interview with author, 17 June 2003). LCAN, in exchange, was able to get some of its issues included on the forum's agenda (Goldberg 2005: 124). In addition, signing on as one of the sponsors of Listening to the City gave LCAN legitimacy with decision makers, with the press, with the other civic groups engaged in the rebuilding coalition, and with potential recruits and supporters (Kallick [LCAN organizer] interview with author, 19 October 2002). For a new organization, this was important.

In the Lower Manhattan forum, I also saw some of the tactical flexibility that observers have seen as providing the best guarantee that a forum will deliver benefits to non-elites. LCAN organizer David Kallick said that his group had seen its role in Listening to the City as simultaneously "inside and outside; to help shape the agenda of the day, to give our input into that agenda, and to protest from outside the fact that a lot was being left off that agenda." So as forum participants followed a program that LCAN had helped to craft, LCAN activists

demonstrated outside the forum with a giant papier mache ear asking Governor George Pataki, "Can You Hear Us Now?" (Kallick email to author, 14 November 2011).

However, if activists are served by a tactical flexibility that allows them to act both within public forums and outside them, that flexibility is sometimes difficult, for several reasons. One is that the point at which it makes sense to move from participating in the forum to challenging its legitimacy is often unclear. Again, it is rare that the recommendations that come out of such forums are binding on decision makers. Instead, decision makers must be convinced that they have more to lose by ignoring the forum's recommendations than by embracing them. Whether adversarial protest or a more consultative strategy is likely to be most effective depends in part on political pressures coming from elsewhere.

In the Lower Manhattan case, Listening to the City was initially influential for three reasons. One was that New York's governor was up for reelection. Since he was firmly allied with real estate interests and formally controlled the agency in charge of rebuilding, he ordinarily would have shut down the idea of a public forum. But, in campaigning mode, he was reluctant to intervene in the development process in a way that might turn public opinion against him. Second, authority for rebuilding decisions was shared by agencies with conflicting agendas. The Port Authority of New York/New Jersey, which owned the land, was determined to replace the commercial space that had been lost in the attack. The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, although controlled by the Governor, was staffed by people with ties to New York's city planning and design networks. Many within LMDC saw an opportunity to better integrate the site into Lower Manhattan and they used Listening to the City to press for that agenda. As the head of planning told me, "the public, in a funny way, became my personal ally all through this

process" (Garvin interview with author, 3 March 2003; see also Goldberg 2005; Goldberger 2004: 101).

Third, Listening to the City was covered by more than two hundred media outlets, including the major television networks, dailies from around the country, and international media (Lukensmeyer and Brigham 2002). Importantly, the opinions that were voiced there were cast in the press as the people's voice. As New York Daily News columnist Pete Hamill wrote, "We have a word for what they were doing. The word is democracy" (Hamill 2002). The media coverage gave the Civic Alliance a role in the decision making process that it had not enjoyed before (Civic Alliance staffer interview with author, 17 June 2003).

I suspect that either separately or together, these factors—an electoral context in which political decision makers have a special stake in being associated with the will of the people; cleavages among decision makers that give some a competitive interest in supporting a public participatory process; and successful framing of a forum as reflecting the people's will— are probably important conditions for the impact of participatory forums in other cases. But the window of opportunity that they create is short-lived. Although rebuilding officials responded to Listening to the City by commissioning new designs for the World Trade Center site, they made no move on other issues that participants had raised, such as replacing the lost commercial space with mixed-use development and building affordable housing. The Civic Alliance initially refused to criticize rebuilding officials publicly, presumably still seeing its role as "not to be directly part of the public process but to be a resource to people who make decisions," as the organization's head put it (quoted in Pedersen 2002).

By the time that the Civic Alliance did begin to publicly criticize rebuilding authorities, the Governor had been reelected and had moved decisively to take control of the redevelopment process. After vetoing the design for the site that had been chosen, the Governor worked to close the rest of the process to public input. With considerable time having elapsed since Listening to the City, the Civic Alliance was unable to get much media coverage for its declaration that the public had been ignored by rebuilding authorities. Might things have been different if, immediately after Listening to the City, at a time when the public was widely seen as having virtuously forced narrow-minded rebuilding authorities to change course, Listening to the City's organizers had pressed hard for more of the recommendations that came out of the forum, had reminded authorities that "the people" wanted not only an iconic tower but affordable housing at the site, not only the restoration of the street grid but a reduction of the amount of planned office space? Perhaps. But one can also understand why the Civic Alliance was reluctant to risk its position in the consultative loop.

Obstacles to Flexibility

In addition to the difficulty of accurately gauging the political forces that make decision makers likely to be responsive to consultation or protest, another barrier to flexibility lies in norms against adversarialism. In the Lower Manhattan case, activists' reluctance to pull out of the coalition that had sponsored the participatory forum reflected in part the fact that the decision making process took place in the shadow of a national tragedy, and in part a desire to prove that New York City's customarily contentious development processes could be changed (Kallick email to author, 14 November 2011). In other cases, the reluctance to challenge a participatory process may have less to do with a local history of contention and more with institutional norms of interaction. Certainly, the deliberation specialists profiled by Lee (2014) see part of their work

16

as ensuring that there is minimal contention throughout the deliberative process. Norms of contention or its avoidance may also be part of the policymaking process. In this vein, Hendriks (2006) describes pressures against adversarialism that operated in Germany but not in Australia; and Bevington (2009) shows how such norms operated in the case of environmental activists who had gained access to powerful Congressional representatives.

In her study of the efforts of an environmental justice coalition to work with state government officials in organizing public forums, Dodge describes coalition staffers self-consciously defying norms of collegiality in their work with officials. An ally of the coalition thus gave his explanation for the coalition's success in getting issues of racial discrimination onto the agenda, "From what I see, a lot of the success [the coalition is having] is because you're challenging people who may be your friend" (2010: 392). Challenging people who have become one's friends is hard work.

Barriers to flexibility operate the other way too. The South African environmental advocates I mentioned earlier who effectively partnered with a Danish group to present themselves as experts in the deliberative process came under fire from activists in local townships (Barnett and Scott 2007). Local activists equated the group's abandonment of the disruptive protest tactics inherited from the apartheid era with an abandonment of their radical commitments. Hendriks (2006) describes marginalized groups' wariness of participating in a deliberative process when they were used to being locked out of the politics that mattered. In both cases, the risks of moving away from a familiar protest repertoire were better known than the potential gains.

Yet another obstacle to tactical flexibility has to do with the risks that activism poses for the sponsors of deliberative forums. Sponsors are probably ill-served by a situation in which activists who have participated in a forum then attack it when it produces recommendations they disagree with. Beyond that, however, the very association of activists with a forum may compromise its status as the voice of "the people." To be sure, that is not always the case. Policymakers in Germany credited more the recommendations that came out of a partisan forum on genetic diagnostics, made up of representatives of interest groups and nonprofits, than the non-partisan forum made up of lay citizens. Policymakers viewed partisans as expert and capable; citizens, they saw not only as largely uninformed about the topic but also as likely to be swayed by charismatic experts or group dynamics (Hendriks, Dryzek, and Hunold 2007). In this case, expertise was more important to policymakers than neutrality. But for the most part, deliberation sponsors put a premium on communicating the non-partisan character of citizen deliberation. As AmericaSpeaks put it, "any organization attempting to involve the public must position itself so that citizens have confidence that the forums they are participating in are unbiased and meaningful" (AmericaSpeaks 2002: 2). It is important not only that citizens have that confidence, but also that the decision makers targeted by the forum do. When Nabatchi and Farrar (2011) asked state legislators what would make a deliberative forum worth paying attention to, legislators agreed that the organizers of the forum should be seen as absolutely neutral and unbiased.

Again, what matters is that the forum be "seen as" neutral and unbiased. Maintaining that perception is not easy. A credible charge that the deliberative process has been manipulated by special interest groups may make the forum newsworthy for that fact alone. AmericaSpeaks encountered just this problem when it ran a nationwide series of forums on the budget deficit in

2010. The effort was widely criticized when it was reported that a conservative foundation was funding the forums and set the agenda (among others, see Baker 2010; Eskow 2010). Forum sponsors protested futilely that liberal foundations had also funded the forums, that left-of-center groups had participated in setting the agenda, and that the citizens who participated ended up staking a strong *liberal* position on the deficit, arguing that Social Security and other benefits should not be cut (Fung 2010). The claim that "the people" were being manipulated stuck.

A similar dynamic occurred in the UK after a series of public forums on the desirability of genetic modification of crops. Organizers took special pains to ensure that many participants in "GM Nation?" had not discussed the issue previously. Still, a parliamentary committee concluded after the forums that "far from being a 'public debate,' [they] instead became a dialogue mainly restricted to people of a particular social and academic background" (quoted in Irwin 2006: 311).

Given the liability of a public perception that a forum has been tainted by partisan interests, forum sponsors have a stake in ensuring that the involvement of activists in planning and running the forum is kept within clearly defined bounds. This, however, militates against the tactical flexibility that might serve activists well.

In sum, characterizations of contemporary instruments of participation as neoliberal strategies designed to give people voice in lieu of power overshoot the mark. Such characterizations miss the fact that, with power dispersed inside and outside the state, there are multiple points of leverage for influencing policy. Activists can use the symbolic power of the "people's voice" to challenge policies promoted by those in power rather than simply rubberstamp them. However, taking advantage of the opportunities created by participatory forums requires an ability to operate from both within and outside the participatory process. That

in turn, requires a tactical flexibility that is often unfamiliar to activists as well as unappealing to deliberation's sponsors.

Conclusion

The extraordinary enthusiasm for participation risks obscuring important differences among participatory projects. "Flat management" does not mean that workers choose whom to hire and fire. Commons-based peer production like Wikipedia, where an online community makes decisions, is different from crowdsourcing, where an organization solicits ideas for a product design or technical solution and then rewards a winner (Brabham 2013). When Obama campaign staffers declared that volunteers "owned" the campaign, they meant that volunteers were encouraged to come up with new ways to raise money, not that they had any input into the candidate's platform (Kreiss 2014). Internet forms of participation, which often involve input without power, so casually invoke the term "democracy" that they risk making participation synonymous with that term. So it is important to distinguish among participatory projects generally, and those convened as part of a local, state, or national policymaking process specifically, based on how much actual control over decisions participants are intended to have.

However, I have argued that the intentions with which participatory forums are launched may not always determine the impacts that such forums have. This is for several reasons. If the recommendations made by a forum can be successfully framed, and covered by the media, as reflecting the will of "the people," then decision makers will have a more difficult time ignoring those recommendations. If decision makers are in an electoral contest, they may advocate for a forum and promote its results as a way to gain public support. And if decision makers are

divided, some may see aligning with a public process as offering them leverage in internal political battles. Each of these conditions offer movement groups opportunities for impact by participating in and supporting public participatory projects—whether or not decision makers embrace the movement group's cause or not. This has surely always been the case. But such opportunities have probably expanded in the context of the diffusion of state power across agencies and to actors outside the state that I described at the beginning of the paper.

Taking advantage of these opportunities, though, requires a tactical flexibility that does not always come easy. Movement groups must be prepared to shift from an adversarial stance to a consultative one, and possibly back again, depending on how they can be most effective. They must also be prepared to shift from advocating for their cause to advocating for the forum. Neither of these is easy, and among my many remaining questions are about the conditions for this kind of flexibility, as well as whether it comes with liabilities as well as advantages.

More generally, a growing number of scholars have argued that rather than simply celebrating deliberation or, conversely, condemning it as one more way in which policymakers govern unaccountably, we should identify the routes by which and conditions under which public deliberation affects policy (Baoicchi, Heller, and Silva 2011; Goodin and Dryzek 2006; Hendriks, Dryzek, and Hunold 2007; Smilde 2011). As I noted earlier, research has suggested that, at least in some cases, the involvement of advocacy organizations has been key to the policy influence of public deliberation. We need to know much more, however, about the context of those successes. In what roles have movement actors been most effective: as experts, outside challengers, inside organizers, or something else? Have movement actors been able to press for policy changes that were endorsed in public forums even when those changes were resisted by those in power? Answers to questions like these will require integrating insights from the study

of social movements, public deliberation, and policymaking, along with close empirical examination of the trajectories of public deliberation.

Another set of questions worth asking has to do with the influence of social movements on the contemporary practice of democracy. Many people who participated in or followed recent movements like Occupy and the Indignados were exposed to the radically democratic practices that were brought into those movements by global justice activists (Polletta 2014). Participants learned to make decisions by consensus and media audiences learned about the People's Mic, progressive stacks, and twinkling. What impact have those experiences had on people's expectations of how organizations outside the movement should operate? For many activists, the point of radically democratic decision making is to "prefigure" or model a world in which radical democracy is the norm (Breines 1989). The success of such modelling might be evident in the diffusion of radically democratic practices from movement organizations to non-profit organizations more generally. Yet, we know little about whether that kind of diffusion is occurring (Polletta and Hoban forthcoming). In other words, are movements reshaping the contemporary participatory landscape? Finding out will require integrating the literature on social movements with that on the non-profit sector.

"Participation," like "civil society and "democracy," is such a valorized term that it is easy to see how initiatives promising participation might win public legitimacy whether or not they deliver on that promise. Activists are therefore justified in treating such initiatives warily, but would be wrong to shun them altogether. Strategic opportunities rarely come with labels identifying them as such, and rarely come without accompanying risks.

References

Amenta, Edwin, Beth Gharrity Gardner, Amber Celina Tierney, Anaid Yerena, and Thomas Alan Elliott. 2012. "A Story-Centered Approach to the Newspaper Coverage of High-Profile SMOs." *Research in Social Movements, Conflict, and Change* 33: 83-107.

AmericaSpeaks. 2002. "The AmericaSpeaks Model: Taking Democracy to Scale." www.americaspeaks.org/history.html

Baiocchi, Gianpaolo. 2005. *Militants and Citizens: The Politics of Participatory Democracy in Porto Alegre*. Stanford University Press.

Baiocchi, Gianpaolo, Elizabeth A. Bennett, Alissa Cordner, Peter Klein, and Stephanie Savell. 2015. *Civic Imagination: Making a Difference in American Political Life*. Routledge Press.

Baiocchi, Gianpaolo and Ernesto Ganuza. 2014. "Participatory Budgeting as if Emancipation Mattered." *Politics and Society* 42(1): 29-50.

Baiocchi, Gianpaolo, Patrick Heller, and Silva. 2011. *Bootstrapping Democracy: Transforming Local Governance and Civil Society in Brazil*. Stanford University Press

Baker, Dean. 2010. "America Speaks Back: Derailing the Drive to Cut Social Security and Medicare." *Huffington Post*, 21 June.

Barnett, Clive and Dianne Scott. 2007. "Space of Opposition: Activism and Deliberation in Post-Apartheid Environmental Politics*." Environment and Planning A*, 39(11): 2612–2631.

Bennett, W. Lance and Alexandra Segerberg. 2013. *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics*. Cambridge University Press,

Bevington, Douglas. 2009. *The Rebirth of Environmentalism: Grassroots Activism from the Spotted Owl to the Polar Bear.* Island Press.

Bonabeau, Eric. 2009. "Decisions 2.0: The Power of Collective Intelligence." *MIT Sloan Management Review* 50(2): 45-52.

Breines, Wini. 1989. *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962-1968: The Great Refusal*. Rutgers University Press

Brabham, Daren C. 2013. *Crowdsourcing*. MIT Press.

Carson, Lyn. 2001. "Innovative Consultation Processes and the Changing Role of Activism." *Third Sector Review* 7(1): 7-22.

Castells, Manuel. 2013. *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. John Wiley & Sons.

Coelho, Vera Schattan P., Alexandre Ferraz, Fabiola Fanti, and Meire Ribeiro. 2010. "Mobilization and Participation: A Win-Win Game?" Pp. 176-198 in *Mobilizing for Democracy: Citizen Action and the Politics of Public Participation*, edited by Vera Schattan P. Coelho and Bettina von Lieres. Zed Books.

Coelho, V. S. P., Pozzoni, B. and Cifuentes, M. 2005. "Participation and Public Policies in Brazil." Pp. 174-84 in *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the 21st Century*, eds. J. Gastil and P. Levine. Jossey-Bass.

Cornwall, Andrea. 2007. "Negotiating Participation in a Brazilian Municipal Health Council." Pp. in *Spaces for Change? The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas*, edited by Andrea Cornwall and Vera Coelho. Zed Books.

Cornwall, Andrea and Vera Coelho. 2007. "Introduction." Pp. in *Spaces for Change? The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas*. Zed Books.

Cornwall, Andrea, and Melissa Leach. "Putting the Politics Back into 'Public Engagement':
Participation, Mobilization and Citizenship in the Shaping of Health Services." *Brighton: IDS* (2010).

Collins, Lauren. 2010. "All Together Now." *The New Yorker* 86 (33; 25 October): 38-48.

Craig, David and Doug Porter. 2006. *Development Beyond Neoliberalism? Governance, Poverty Reduction and Political Economy*. Routledge.

Dodge, Jennifer. 2010. "Tensions in Deliberative Practice: A View from Civil Society." *Critical Policy Studies* 4 (4): 384-404.

Eliasoph, Nina. 2011. *Making Volunteers: Civic Life after Welfare's End*. Princeton University Press.

Eskow, Richard. 2010. "America 'Speaks' on Saturday, but There's an Anti-Social Security Script." *Huffington Post*, 23 June.

Fung, Archon. 2010. "Public Deliberation: The Left Should Learn to Trust Americans." *Huffington Post*, 28 June.

Gastil, John and Peter Levine, eds. 2005. *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the 21st Century*. John Wiley

Goldberg, Arielle. 2005. "Civic Engagement in the Rebuilding of the World Trade Center." Pp. 112-139 in *Contentious City: The Politics of Recovery in New York City*, ed. John Mollenkopf. Russell Sage.

Goldberger, Paul. 2004. *Up from Zero: Politics, Architecture, and the Rebuilding of New York*. Random House.

Goodin, Robert E., and John S. Dryzek. 2006. "Deliberative Impacts: The Macro-Political Uptake of Mini-Publics." *Politics & Society* 34(2): 219-244.

Hamill, Pete. 2002. "Thrilling Show of People Power." *New York Daily News*, 22 July, Sports

    Final Edition, p. 8.

Hendriks, Carolyn. 2002. "Institutions of Deliberative Democratic Processes and Interest

    Groups: Roles, Tensions and Incentives." *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 61

    (1): 64-75.

Hendriks, Carolyn M. 2006. "When the Forum Meets Interest Politics: Strategic Uses of Public

    Deliberation." *Politics and Society* 34(4): 571-602.

Hendriks, Carolyn M. 2011. *The Politics of Public Deliberation: Citizen Engagement and*

    Interest Advocacy. Palgrave Macmillian.

_____, John S. Dryzek, and Christian Hunold. 2007. "Turning Up the Heat: Partisanship in

    Deliberative Innovation." *Political Studies* 55 (2): 362-383.

Hetland, Gabriel. 2014. "The Crooked Line: From Populist Mobilization to Participatory

    Democracy in Chávez-Era Venezuela." *Qualitative Sociology* 37 (4): 373–401.

Irwin, Alan. 2006. "The Politics of Talk: Coming to Terms with the 'New' Scientific

    Governance." *Social Studies of Science* 36(2): 299-320.

Juris, Jeffrey S. 2008. *Networking Futures: The Movements against Corporate Globalization*.

    Duke University Press.

Keane, John. 2009. *The Life and Death of Democracy*. Simon and Schuster.

Kreiss, Daniel. 2014. "The Virtues of Participation without Power: Campaigns, Party Networks,

    and the Ends of Politics." *The Sociological Quarterly* 55 (3): 537-554.

Lee, Caroline, W. 2014. *Do-It-Yourself Democracy: The Rise of the Public Engagement Industry*.

    Oxford University Press.

Leighninger, Matt. 2006. *The Next Form of Democracy: How Expert Rule is Giving Way to Shared Governance*. Vanderbilt Univ. Press.

Leighninger, Matt. 2009. "Funding and Fostering Local democracy: What Philanthropy Should Know about the Emerging Field of Deliberation and Democratic Governance." *Denver, CO: Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement.*

Levine, Peter, and Rose Marie Nierras. 2007. "Activists' Views of Deliberation." *Journal of Public Deliberation* 3 (1), article 4.

Mansuri, Ghazala and Vijayendra Rao. 2013. *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?* The World Bank.

Mattson, Kevin. 1998. *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy during the Progressive Era*. Pennsylvania State Univ Press.

McCann, E.J. (2001) "Collaborative Visioning or Urban Planning as Therapy? The Politics of Public-Private Policy Making, *The Professional Geographer* 53(2): 207-218.

McCoy, Martha L. and Patrick L. Scully. 2002. "Deliberative Dialogue to Expand Civic Engagement: What Kind of Talk Does Democracy Need?" *National Civic Review* 91 (2):117–135.

McGrath, Mike. 2009. "The New Laboratories of Democracy: How Local Government is Reinventing Civic Engagement." National Civic League, Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement.

Nabatchi, Tina and Cynthia Farrar. 2011. *Bridging the Gap between Public Officials and the Public. A Report of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium*. Retrieved from: www. Deliberative-democracy.net.

Pedersen, Martin C. 2002. "Missing Persons: Who Will—and Won't—Be Deciding What Gets Built at the World Trade Center Site." *Metropolis* 21(6).

Polletta, Francesca. 2014. "Participatory Democracy's Moment." *Columbia Journal of International Affairs* 68(1): 79-92.

Polletta, Francesca. 2015. "Deliberation and Contention." In *Democratizing Inequalities*, edited by Caroline Lee, Michael McQuarrie, and Edward Walker. New York University Press.

Polletta, Francesca and Chen, Pang Chen Bobby. 2013. "Gender and Public Talk: Accounting for Women's Variable Participation in the Public Sphere." *Sociological Theory,* 31(4): 291-317.

Polletta, Francesca and Katt Hoban. 2016. "Why Consensus? Prefiguration in Three Activist Eras." In *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 4 (1): 286-301

Polletta, Francesca and Lesley Wood. 2005. "Public Deliberation after 9/11." Pp. 321-348 in *Wounded City: The Social Effects of the World Trade Center Attack on New York City*, edited by Nancy Foner. Russell Sage Foundation Press.

Postero, Nancy Grey. 2007. *Now We Are Citizens: Indigenous Politics in Postmulticultural Bolivia*. Stanford University Press.

Roberts, Nancy. 2004. "Public Deliberation in an Age of Direct Citizen Participation." *The American Review of Public Administration* 34 (4): 315-353.

Shankland, Alex. 2010. "The Indigenous Peoples' Movement,'Forest Citizenship'and Struggles over Health Services in Acre, Brazil." Pp. 991-119 in *Mobilising for Democracy: Citizen Action and the Politics of Public Participation*.

Shirky, Clay. 2008. *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations*. Penguin.

Sirianni, Carmen and Lewis Friedland. 2001. *Civic Innovation in America: Community Empowerment, Public Policy, and the Movement for Civic Renewal.* University of California Press.

Smilde, David. 2011. "Introduction." In *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: Participation, Politics, and Culture under Chávez*, ed. David Smilde and Daniel Hellinger, 1–27. Duke University Press.

Tilly, Charles. 1978. *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Addison-Wesley.

Tilly, Charles, Doug McAdam, and Sidney Tarrow. 2001. *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge University Press.

Walker, Edward T. 2014. *Grassroots for Hire: Public Affairs Consultants in American Democracy*. Cambridge University Press.

Young, Iris Marion. 2001. "Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy." *Political Theory,* 29(5): 670-690.