

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN EUROPEAN METROPOLIS

Few notes for a comparative debate

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1. Some classical landmarks...

'Low participation and social inequalities are so narrowly linked that a fairer and more human society requires a more participative political system', Macpherson 1977

'Political participation' is not a concept but a whole semantic area. Its becoming public 'issue' always follow the emerging of a 'social question' (inequalities appear dysfunctional and morally unbearable) and generally focus on one aspect of political participation. This does not mean that in Western democratic thought participation is intended only as a protection against possible arbitrary decisions of the leaders: it is conceived as training to democracy and primary step in the selection of a good leadership (Pateman 1970). But it turns on the agenda when the unavoidable oligarchical component of representative democracy appears to threaten social integration (and opposed to representative democracy). What is questioned in such historical phases is a specific aspect of participation: participation as action, as intervention in the decisional process. One component of participation to politics.

Considering local polity, one can not fail to remember that participation to local political life vests a large set of visible and non visible, active and non active forms: while reading newspapers, following TV and radio news, discussing inside the family or at the bar about political themes, convening in public debates and private circles on local policy choices, citizens demonstrate their so-called 'interest' in politics, the prerequisite for the development of a 'civic culture' but also the keystone of identification to a local (social and political) system, determining local systemic stability. This partly rational, often emotive, participation is the precondition for the acts of participation requested to the citizen (vote in elections, referenda and other consultations) or not requested but included in the traditional political ways of participating in Western political culture, and specially on local political life (street protests, petitions, lobbying, parties or associations membership and activism).

The acts of political participation requested to European citizens are not circumscribed to the sphere of government; they enlarge to school, factory, public services... 'Participating' in these cases signifies fulfilling the duty to share a decision associated to a position (of resident, parent, worker, user, owner, 'stakeholder'...); In the same numerous spheres of social activity participation may develop, far from being an institutional duty, as the attempt of influencing the decision under the competence of other actors (lobbying, petitions, movements).

Empathy and action, demonstration of interest/ attempt to participate in the decision, decision/influence on decision-makers, institutional /non institutional participation, required/free, electoral/non electoral participation, resident/other roles participation; These are some of the distinctions ordering the scientific questioning; and which are worth recalling to mark strengths and weaknesses of the current debate and of the consequent innovative trend.

2. Towards a state-centred direct democracy?

In the last fifty years, the call for political participation, more specifically the call for direct democracy (vs. representative democracy) recurs in two waves in the European political debate, in two moments when inequalities (unfair distribution of social rights) are conceived as a threat for the use of political rights, under very different ideological thematization. In the Seventies, mainly through post marxist criticism, but motives and rhetorics were partly shared by different and large parts of the political spectrum, direct democracy was conceived as the disrupting tool against a bureaucratising State, the instrument of the *élite*. The debate opposed true participation lead by direct, un-institutionalised participation (appropriation) to false participation (representation and manipulation). The request for more direct participation come from below, and inscribed in the wide cultural and political 'movements' contesting the institutional settings.

From the Nineties on, the critics of representative democracy starts from the denounce (or the undeclared threat) of local 'coalitions' and points mainly at direct institutionalised participation. The negative reference is the city as a 'growth machine', in which the definition of public policies, pointing mainly at the improvement of the economic effectiveness, is directed inside a stable partnership of local businessmen and public administrators. Even in different 'urban regimes', with different motives for semi-collective action, a *lieu commun* of the images of local democracy is that few people contribute to public life: the stakeholders participate for the questions they are interested in , in more or less stable configurations, and citizens only in 'nimby' episodic and single issue movements.

The problem is old as democracy, the context is nevertheless new, principally as a result of:

- the so-called 'shift to governance': i. e the enlargement of the set of actors institutionally included in the decisional process. Consequently, participation as a duty acquires more importance in the political process (vs. participation as attempt of influence), while the real capacity of counting may not grow similarly (increasing exit in decisional contexts with high level of technicity) and may consolidate oligarchic tendencies;
- the transformation of local authorities in a complex formed by a classical core expressing the logic of representative democracy and a holding of variously autonomous entities dealing with offer and demand of public 'services' sustaining collective or individual interests; the *loci* of decision are many and unclear; decisions with a strong impact on the quality of public services acquire a renewed 'bureaucratic' aspect;
- the (supposed) decline of mass political parties (at least as vectors of political request) and of partisan *élite* as 'one' component of governing coalitions. Effects: a decline of the 'translators' of technicity in great objectives, more flexible majorities (to the electoral majority does not correspond a stable majority of sus-

- tains in the decisions of policy-making, veto power and micro-veto power is diffused) and a wearisome search of consensus from local leaders;
- the emerging of ‘cultural rights’ as new political arena: in multiethnic and more segmented local societies new forms and places of participation must be invented (a problem not solved with the mere – and more or less complete - representation of foreigner residents and ‘minorities’ in local assemblies;
 - the European indication of horizontal subsidiarity as meta-principle of local government emphasises participation as a duty: it is a duty of local government to mobilise ‘civil society’ in the decisional process as it is a duty of European citizens to contributing in improving the quality of local services;
 - globalisation as de-structuration of the center-periphery logics: local systems must be more effective, and local authorities produce decisions in order to face competition;
 - the concentration of power or of visibility in the executive (and specially the mayor): participation as attempt of influencing tends consequently to converge in one political figure. More ‘participation’ is searched by executives who feel insufficiently strong to face the challenges imposed by their charge considering the necessity to root locally their influence, to interpret a local reality highly differentiated, to deal with the globalised threats and opportunities, to dialogue with private partners and need to consolidate their personal influence.

European mayors acknowledge daily the weakness of the traditional communicating process (see tab. 1) and affirm in large majority the necessity of some modality of direct democracy.

3. The shift to ‘deliberative democracy’

Ideas are without power when politics are a zero-sum game (Majone 1994, 579)

The current call for direct democracy (vs. representative democracy) faces specific problems and turn in part to specific institutional tools, often in a multidirectional effort of mobilisation of the citizenship, under the sign of intense and thorough innovation. To which shall be dedicated the following contributions in this conference. These few notes aim hence only to stress general tendencies and open questions for further debate.

Reforms of local government and administration (Kersting 2003) insisted recently on one side on the development of one way ‘spot’ or replicated consultations (referenda, citizen satisfaction analysis), on the other side on the reinforcement in the larger local authorities of the quite always already delineated structures for proximity democracy. E- tools introduce in the meanwhile new opportunities for a simplified relation between citizens and institutions, transforming political praxis proportionally with electronic alphabetisation.

The new forms of projecting, planning, specially urban planning, and programming, partly led by European financing opportunities and rules (concerted urban and territorial plans, social and participative reporting), form nevertheless the main area of innovation in institutional participation, offering a new declination of the dichotomy direct-representative democracy.

To insist on deliberation as qualifying democracy means to assume that decisions must be based on arguing, debating and eventually changing opinion on the basis of the rational examination of a sufficient set of information, and not on the mere counting of votes in an assembly. To insist in deliberative direct democracy means to assume that citizens are willing to arguing, debating and forming their opinion if adequately informed and motivated but also that some decisions may be taken outside the arena traditionally in charge of political decision (executive and assemblies).

Including, training competence, allowing non-conflictive confrontation on policy-matters: such principles match in fact with the segmented, diversified, even 'atomised' feature of current local polity. The constitution of new deliberative arenas (of institutional participation) may be the first step in a process of development of 'non visible' participation. In such a direction, the international patrimony of institutional recipes has been recently improved, in very different decisional areas and on different types of issues. In the experiences listed, more or less fully inspired to the principle of 'deliberative democracy', the methods, the quantity of citizens involved, the length of the procedure, its effectiveness in the decisional process introduce further differences, which may be summarised as in the following scheme (Fig. 2). Such procedures differ anyway from the other forms of direct democracy and from the ordinary process of decision-making, even from most recent experiences of consultation and participation (*public inquiries* or *enquêtes publiques* for example, where the distinction between public institutions proposing and citizens heard remains rigorous). In a deliberative arena, all the entities directly interested – persons, organisations, public authorities) enter in a guided process of collective decision based on the exchange of argumentation inside a structured *deliberative setting* imposing reciprocal attention (Elster 1998). Deliberative arenas are artificial structures created to face a single problem. They may successively dissolve or transform. Created from above, even if under some pressure from movements from below (political movements consequently often split or offer an ambivalent position in front of the creation of a deliberative arena, between threat of remaining out and threat of being manipulated (Young 2001, Mouffe 1997, Fung e Wright (2001). Highly institutionalised, but slightly regulated, they often constitute informal moments in a formal procedure; with varying effects consequently in the production of decisions (see Fig. 3).

4. Metropolitan specificities and the threat of the 'fluid mass'

Each European metropolis is special in its productive and social structure. They share nevertheless two features impacting on modalities and capacities to participate

(political and social participation). These features are no more linked to the longer education traditionally considered as typical of the large city, not regularly verified. In them we find many more foreigners and many lonely people (Magnier 2005); A social structure which requires a particular attention for social inclusion and for the consolidation of public sphere, for avoiding in other terms the growing of the 'fluid mass' (vs. public), considered from the beginning of last century as characteristic of the metropolis (Fig. 5, Fig. 6).

The most traditional and visible expression of political involvement offers regularly in the last decades some empirical illustration of such a threat. The great city is not favourable to electoral participation: with few exceptions among Europe, electoral turnout is there inferior to the country average in national polls (Fig. 7, Fig. 8); the participation to local elections is even weaker, while the whole local system of communication in such large urban systems does not generally fit its functional requisites.

The path of communication on municipal matters in European metropolis is highly specific. Under many aspects it remains typical of 'local' communication: narrow closeness between the different actors (constructors of the news, stakeholders, elected officials and administrators), reduced capacity of the citizens to acquire information for the paradoxical high technicity of administrative production about very concrete daily matters; under other aspects it remains 'in the middle': a higher professionalisation and structuration of the press, more organisational resources allowing in particular a more intense use of e-procedures, a specific closeness between local and national political élite. A vicinity which means more 'partisanship' and reliance on parties as vectors of participation form the political leaders (Tab. 2) .

The main combined effects of local government reforms and of this structure of communication are nevertheless a paradoxical accentuated concentration of the communication system on the person of the mayor; but not an accentuated capacity of the leaders to deal with the request of communication. Such metropolitan trends of change are further indications of the creation of new inclusive deliberative arenas as a possible vector of renewal of participation.

Finally, specially in large urban systems, boundaries in service provision and local identification do not correspond to the borders of the local authorities which more or less stably constitute them. These same core metropolitan local authorities are quite always steered by large (and distant) organisations. With two consequences:

- the building (and the continual maintenance) of a structure for 'democracy of proximity' appears as the pre-condition of the improvement of participation in large urban systems;
- participation may be used as a way of improving local traditional identification in spread-out city or as a way of resolving dysfunctions of traditional bordering or conflicts rooted in local competitiveness; a direction not easily practiced by local governments.

5. Institutionalising experience: open questions for comparison...

In the perceived decline of and disaffection for representative politics, and weakening capacity of social integration of European metropolis, the increasing and diversified experimentation of new direct democracy modalities, as the necessary corollary of local government reforms and a response to the social question, raise growing consensus and few shy spheres of resistance (local assemblies, local movements?).

Intra-European cultural integration favours the movement, allowing the diffusion of participation models outside their traditional identifying area (it is clearly the case for local referenda, a general spreading of Nordic models may be supposed). Such contexts of cultural homologation, whenever ruled by imitation and fashion, or by sounder and more stimulating competition, may lead to forgot local contextualisation as a condition of success. The major recent experiences of proximity democracy clearly develop on the contrary very specific models, some of which will be illustrated further.

The deliberative model to which inclines the trend of experience is not exposed to risks different from those inherent to the more 'classical' systems of direct democracy. Such a model should furthermore offer major guarantees against manipulation and some kind of antidote against a menacing populism (for the information provided, the consequent empowerment, the presence of a neutral mediator) but under the condition of a good protocol. The extension of participation to all the entities involved, in deliberative and in other experiences, offer the crucial dividing line between direct citizens participation and participation of the stakeholders: participation of whom, and consequently for what (Even in Porto Alegre the number of citizens participating in plenary assemblies of the quarters have been valued to 15.000 persons, a little more than 1% of the population; while the citizens participating in informal meetings should represent 5-6% of the population (Gret e Sintomer 2002: 75-76)). Deliberative local consultations, not rare but too episodic until now, need probably to find roots in or create connections with different democratic arenas to enlarge their significance (neighbourhood councils, local assemblies...). The future structure of European local democracy (their representative component) may anyway be read in the various link until now created between direct participation experiencing and local assemblies.

The need of tools for comparing, and improve through comparison, such protocols for valuing and promoting large social involvement and qualified information in sustain of popular deliberation and for reorganising the traditional deliberative arenas emerges clearly in this phase of the local institutional innovation. The extraordinary opportunity of exchange of information and analyses allowed through this Conference by the Municipality of Madrid may represent an important and operative step in the common path towards a renewal of social and political participation in our metropolises.

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