Tyranny/Transformation: Power and Paradox in Participatory Development

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Review Essay:

Bill Cooke & Uma Kothari (Eds.) (2001). Participation: The New Tyranny?
New York: Zed Books, 207 pages, ISBN 1 85649 793 3 (hardcover), USD 80.00

Samuel Hickey & Giles Mohan (Eds.) (2004). Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation? New York: Zed Books, 292 pages, ISBN 1 84277 460 3 (hardcover), USD 85.00

Abstract: Two recent works on participatory development provide perspectives on values and process in development. The first book, *Participation: The New Tyranny* compiles and builds on criticisms of participatory practice, and the second, *Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation* extends the same debate in the interest of attempting to theorize a more coherent and potentially transformative participatory development. The contributions in the volumes move participation from a seemingly unassailable theoretical panacea to a point from which it can be critically examined in multiple contexts. Participation's frequent failure to achieve what its proponents have hoped is exposed in multiple ways—and participatory theory is restructured to account for, and potentially move beyond these failures. This essay reviews these contributions and proposes that a more thoroughly pragmatic orientation might advance the interests of a transformative participation even further. Pragmatic praxis allows for more experimental habits and does away with unnecessary philosophical dualisms that exist in participatory theory. Finally, this essay sketches transdisciplinary conceptual connections from participation in development to several other fields at work on issues such as empowerment, civic engagement, urban planning, and the psychological sense of community. The issues exposed in these works are relevant to these other branches of applied social research. A constant, similarly reflective stance is necessary in each.

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1. Participatory Development

The now familiar critique of mainstream development goes like this: community development by multinational organizations after World War II was driven by the knowledge and decisions of experts. The experts were, almost without exception, western white men with common conceptions about the recently post-colonial populations that they sought to develop. "Development" for these experts meant becoming more modern, rational, industrial and westernized—even if at high cultural or environmental costs. The ideas behind development plans changed from time to time, but the power, money and expertise remained in the hands of the rich countries. [1]

The backlash against this model of developmental decision-making advocated for the alternative of participatory approaches to development. The most visible early promoters of participatory techniques in development and research were CHAMBERS (1983, 1997) and FALS-BORDA and RAHMAN (1991). Drawing on popular models like those of FREIRE (1970), the promoters of these methods were vociferously opposed to the existing "top-down" approaches of institutions. They claimed that utilizing their participatory methods made the development process more empowering, democratic, just and effective. Their methods promoted power-sharing in the research and planning phases of development through the incorporation of the perspectives of local residents. The intended result was a leveling of power imbalances between development professionals and local residents. The "empowering" results of this process were touted as having far-reaching effects in the lives of the participants. [2]

The participatory approach has gained acceptance in international development. The incorporation of "local knowledge" in development projects is now commonplace. What was initially a radical critique of development has relatively quickly become a staple of international development practice. With its widespread adoption, concerns have periodically been raised about the degree to which these participatory methods are living up to the claims of their promoters (i.e. NELSON & WRIGHT, 1995). One concern is that the development agencies are implementing participatory practices in ways that serve their own agendas. A more sweeping critique sees the idea of participatory development as flawed, idealistic or naïve. This strain of criticism is most thoroughly developed in COOKE and KOTHARI (2001) *Participation: The New Tyranny?* [3]

2. Critiques of Participation

Participation: The New Tyranny challenges the pervasive belief that participation is unequivocally good. In eleven chapters written by academics and practitioners who have extensive experience in international development, the authors provide analyses, supported by detailed descriptions of development fieldwork, to support their assertions. These contributions, drawing from psychology, sociology and critical theory, assert that participation in practice is nowhere near the participatory, bottom-up, open process that it is commonly held to be. [4]

The New Tyranny demonstrates that the theoretical ideal of participation is often
not functioning as the tool for liberation and distribution of power that its rhetoric
suggests. Instead, efforts embracing participation are described as largely
maintaining existing power relationships, though masking this power behind the
rhetoric and techniques of participation. This masking, therefore, represents the
tyranny of participation. [5]

COOKE and KOTHARI, in the opening chapter, identify three types of tyranny.
First, the dominance of multinational agencies and funders exists just beneath the
rhetoric and practices of participation. This tyranny addresses the enduring
decision-making control held by agencies and funders. Second, the emphasis on
participatory practices obscures many limitations and manipulations that suppress
local power differentials; in fact, participatory practices sometimes contribute to
the maintenance and exacerbation of local power differentials. This tyranny is a
group level tyranny and addresses the well-known social psychological dynamics
of group functioning which are largely ignored in the participation literature. The
third form of tyranny addresses the dominance of the participatory method, noting
that the overwhelming acceptance of participation, particularly the goals and
values expressed, has limited dialogue and even consideration of other methods
for cultivating development. [6]

Decision-making control is theoretically held and commonly believed to move to
local or grassroots levels through participation. As noted, the traditional critique of
development was that outsiders and experts set the agenda and made the
decisions—participation was seen as the antidote to this power. At the level of
multinational agencies and funders, however, participation has proved quite
compatible with central planning. Many international agencies and funders justify
participatory processes by noting the efficiency and productivity with which
participatory methods advance the goals held by development organizations. In
corporate parlance, participation saves on "transaction costs". So, despite the
participatory rhetoric, the status quo of top-down planning is maintained. [7]

Tyranny challenges some of the anchoring assumptions of the ability for top-
down organizations to be transformed with bottom-up processes. Specifically,
how can local knowledge transform bureaucratic organizations? In contrast to the
broad claims of participation advocates, chapters by both MOSSE and CLEAVER
argue that local knowledge be understood as a product of the social relationships
which developed it, rather than a fixed commodity to be extracted. [8]

In practice, the participation of local people often simply lends credibility to
decisions that have already been made by agencies and organizations outside
the community. The strong embrace of participation by multinationals has served
their interests since participation itself has become a commodity that these
organizations use to advance their corporate image. [9]

Local decision-making is lifted-up in participatory models as a genuine and pure
act that, once unveiled, will transform the powers "above" it. In contrast, *Tyranny*
emphasizes that, at local levels, the practice of participation is always embedded

in the politics of that local context. Although the mechanics of such power at the local level are detailed by the HILDYARD, HEDGE, WOLVEKAMP and REDDY chapter, development institutions ignore such power differentials. So, local knowledge always reflects local power. Case studies describe how knowledge generated in public venues suppresses candor, openness and critique. The very openness of deliberations and the public venues in which participation unfolds, both of which are celebrated in participatory theory, make participatory processes political. Particularly in contexts where there is great variability in power distributions, individuals who speak up must do so at their own peril. As described in the chapter by FRANCIS, often, facilitators of participatory processes are in and out of local communities, thus are unable to confront the unintended consequences of the processes they promote. [10]

At the local level meanings and definitions of terms are assumed, yet, these meanings and definitions are political in nature. Beyond the political nature of terminology, local participatory input is commonly reinterpreted in light of project deliverables by outside facilitators. In addition to distortions facilitated by outsiders encouraging participatory processes, local people are also implicated; locals are charged with colluding in the distortions endemic in participatory processes. In the extreme, local people learn about outside planning processes and learn how to manipulate planners for short-term, local gains. These gains frequently come in the form of employment and financial compensation. Over time, the participatory process can be understood as a complex dialectic between outsiders and locals or staff and villagers where both negotiate to fit local payoffs that match external agendas. Though at one level, both gain in such a process, at another level this dialectical negotiation obscures the way in which outsiders or participatory staff leverage and reinforce existing local power differentials and use the resources at their disposal to essentially feed a patronage system. In sum, participatory processes can work to reinforce exclusion of women, the poor and the socially marginalized, rather than to open up channels for their voice. [11]

Finally, the embrace of participatory processes has been commingled with a constellation of terms, such as empowerment, that are uncritically accepted as co-occurring with participation. The language around development work is cloaked in the rhetoric of empowerment—and participation has blended into this language. To the extent that empowerment does exist in participatory processes, it has been largely depoliticized and individualized. In these practices, empowerment as systemic transformation does not exist; empowerment is simply a feeling or individual psychological state rather than a phenomenon which exists in a community or collective way, thus insuring an inability to produce structural change. Instead, participation and empowerment have been reframed in this individual orientation to have normative value, denoting initiative, responsibility, good citizenship, and vibrant economic activity. This normative role for participation and empowerment has served to entrench participatory methods; the mere contemplation of alternatives, such as the strengths of expertise or leadership models, is non-existent. Such a dogmatic embrace of participation is yet another facet of tyranny. [12]

3. Theoretical Transformations

From Tyranny to Transformation is not intended to refute or deny the claims made in *The New Tyranny*. Instead, it endeavors to extend the critical debate and to modify participatory theory in the process. The volume is a consideration of claims and an attempt to build a coherent conceptual and theoretical base for transformative participatory development. The book's 18 chapters are structured around three themes, which the editors, HICKEY and MOHAN, suggest must each be engaged if participation is to be reconsidered as a legitimate approach to development. [13]

The first theme, transformation, clarifies the implicit aspirations of participatory praxis and describes conditions and methods that may facilitate and impede their achievement. Chapters by MOHAN and HICKEY, GAVENTA, WILLIAMS, MITLIN and others address various dynamics and criteria of transformative participatory practice. Broader moves for political change, and civil and state responses, are foci of the work on this theme. [14]

The second theme, the temporal and the spatial, aims to help participatory theory evolve from its typically acontextual footing by reconstructing a theory that is attuned to overlapping and unfolding political processes and spaces of power, communication, and resistance. CORNWALL's chapter is the most developed on this theme, and chapters by FLORISBELO and GUIJT, MASAKI, and MITLIN all contain additional insights. [15]

The third theme, representation, addresses the need for the participatory process to fit into broader, multidimensional processes of democratization and the achievement of functional citizenship. Contributions by GAVENTA and BROWN are particularly focused on the theme of representation. Their work attempts to reposition the participatory development process as a vehicle for the achievement of sustainable decision-making power for the poor. [16]

One of the simplest refinements in *Transformation* is discursive: the recommendation that many forms of participatory practice adopt a much more modest and gradualist rhetoric while extolling projects and achievements, thus closing the door to many critiques. While it is claimed that even these less transformative forms of participation may be preferable to development without participation—the authors do believe that participation can be transformative in specific instances. The majority of the book reflects on these types of projects in theory and practice. [17]

The concept of citizenship is key to this theoretical modification. It is appropriated from political science literature in order to correct for participatory development's traditionally narrow view of agency and general neglect of structure. Participants' agency in development projects, instead of being viewed as distinct from other acts, is situated within the wider array of actions that are taken by these individuals to gain control and self-determination. It is acknowledged that this process often begins with particular claims to rights and identity within, for

instance, an ethnic group—but that the possibility exists for these claims to
progressively expand to a more universal "radical citizenship", which is active and
is viewed as a right. Particular structural conditions must exist to promote this
progress. It is, therefore, acknowledged that while participatory development may
contribute to this achievement in the right circumstances, it may not in others. It is
not, for these authors, a panacea. [18]

The requisite structural conditions for the transformative participatory process
include a state that is responsive to its citizenry. The preference is for a civic
republican state and innovative mechanisms for citizen-state engagement. With
this in mind, it is acknowledged that the work of the pro-poor development worker
should not always be with (or on) the poor, but building accountability to citizens
in governmental and other social or political structures, with the intersection of
participation and accountability as a focal point. [19]

The underlying assumptions that more participation yields better structures, better
citizen agents and better outcomes, are briefly explored. With a few notable
exceptions, the wider critiques of development from a post-development
perspective are skirted. One interesting way of dealing with this evasion is
COOKE's chapter, which contains a dogmatic list of rules and caveats for
performing participatory practice (if you must!). It reads as if the editors of
Transformation chained one editor of *Tyranny* to a desk and compelled him to
write a chapter for their team. *Transformation* generally steers away from
alternative and post-development perspectives, characterizing them as
atheoretical populist reactions that are incapable of accounting for interactions
between agency and political economy and would be likely to repeat the localist
fallacy which holds "local knowledge" as an almost mystical, uniform good. [20]

The ontological and epistemological position taken in *Transformation* is carefully
distinguished from more post-modern systems of thought. The claim is made for
a foundational value: material well-being. The perspective called "critical
modernism" is built around several interesting claims. First, that modernism is not
inherently wedded to capitalism or a singular rationality. Second, that many
countries in the South have never been "modern" in the way that post-modernism
uses the term. Critical modernism is scientific in requiring empirical evidence and
study—but it is not universalistic or particularly positivist. It proposes that there is
room in critical modernism for multiple modernisms and multiple rationalities.
These are not all equally productive, though, since they must be held up to the
foundational value of material well-being. In the quest to account for structure and
agency, "community" is not viewed as a homogeneous entity, but is understood
as any number of overlapping and co-constitutional groups. This understanding
makes the claims and attributes of every group—even the groups that the
development workers find oppressive—relevant, since every group is shaping
every other. [21]

The underlying equation of the *Transformation* volume is that: Critical Modernism
+ Citizenship = Citizen Participation with the potential for Transformation. It also
requires that these strategies utilize a quasi-HABERMASian communicative ethic;

"are multi-scaled and span political arenas … and involve political agents engaged with both structural conditions and popular agency, and dedicated to a broader project of social justice and emancipation" (MOHAN & HICKEY, p.69). What is articulated, then, is a meta-theoretical ideal that is at least ostensibly critically sensitive to context while attempting to account for both structure and agency. [22]

4. A Pragmatic Contribution

The task of entering poor countries from rich ones and working with people to "develop" the country economically, politically, and socially is one inherently fraught with complexities. Allowing public participation in decision-making processes appeared for some time to fix multiple problematic elements of this process. Perhaps partly because participatory development projects had to be sold to donors and institutions, overstatements of the utility of participatory process were routinely made. A more cynical social-psychological reading of the motive for the prevalence of overstatement is that practitioners actually believed their inflated claims—due to the power they perceived in their work due to the ego gratification inherent in being facilitators of participatory meetings (the representatives of supranational power) and, consequently, the institutional bearers of highly esteemed "local knowledge." [23]

The *Transformation* volume attempts to discard the more primitive and under-theorized versions of participatory theory and introduce a new ideal strategy that still clings to the exuberance of the potential for transformation of oppressive systems. The new participation demands that practitioners engage a variety of critical theories in their work. As has been the case in participatory theory, HABERMASian communicative ideals play a prominent role, although not always explicitly. Various insights from FOUCAULT and NIETZSCHE challenge these ideals from the fringes, although not as frequently or artfully as might be expected (or hoped; see BRIGG, 2002). And, GIDDENS and BOURDIEU are called on by some authors to help with a more coherent account of structure and agency. The volume concludes with a call for reducing the gap between theory and practice. [24]

John DEWEY held that the distinction between theory and practice was a false philosophical duality—that because thought and action are never far apart, every practice is informed by a theory. When theorists speak of a theory-practice gap, then, what they often mean is the gap between *their* preferred theory and other people's practices. The distinction is not between theory and practice, but between theory and theory. Accordingly, the idea that something would work in theory, but not in practice must be discarded. If an idea can't work in practice, it can't work in theory. [25]

Following DEWEY's thinking further, the only things that make a difference in theory are things that make a difference in practice. If acting on a new theory makes no difference in practice, there is actually no theoretical difference. The way to know whether there is a theoretical difference, then, is to test the new theory in practice. GAVENTA's chapter (2) in *Transformation* highlights the need

for more evidence. We would echo this as a key to progress—although we are certainly not calling for a deterministic, scientistic approach. Rather, we would advocate for a more reflexive praxis that allows experimental habits to constantly reconstruct ideas and beliefs about participation and development. [26]

Among the beliefs that we would leave constantly open to experimentation is the final value toward which participatory development is working. Values such as social justice and emancipation are frequently mentioned, but *Transformation* explicitly sets the consideration of these values as means to the end of material well-being. Whether this is rationally or theoretically correct, or whether it is, indeed, "transformative" is hard to say. What can be more easily examined is: *what is accomplished* by working toward this final value compared to others? Might there be better values for development to work toward? Might multiple rationalities and multiple modernisms devise other final values? Does this line of questioning result in the untenable philosophical relativism that the authors of *Transformation* see in more postmodern or post-development approaches? Not necessarily. Values, like other beliefs, are formed through experience—and can be questioned and critiqued through more experience, especially when an experimental and critical inquiry is a part of the experience itself. [27]

These two volumes on participatory development theory make numerous significant contributions to that literature. A more thoroughly pragmatic approach might allow for more dynamism and experimentalism. It would deny the distinction between theory and practice, making practitioners theorists and vice versa. Accordingly, the distinction between means/ends would be treated as merely a temporal distinction. Regardless, participatory development theory now accounts for more of the complexity and paradox in change processes. It is an intense, multifaceted debate that lies at the interstices of world-views and academic disciplines. [28]

5. Connections

It is unfortunately seldom that a professional field considers its own practices in such a self-critical and honest way. The books, *Participation: The New Tyranny?* and *Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation?* demonstrate the full utility and risk of doing so. The debates on participatory development raise issues that are analogous to issues in several similar fields. Some of these fields have given space to these critical insights within their literatures, while others have yet to do so. As far as we know, none have done so with the candor and veracity of these volumes on participation in development. The purpose of this final comment is to sketch these transdisciplinary connections. [29]

Community psychology is a branch of applied social research that works with, in, or on communities to prevent mental illness and promote well-being at various levels. Like participatory development, community psychology is interactively involved with many groups across the world and is, consequently, complex. Community psychological rhetoric around empowerment is often under-theorized and overestimated, but critical examinations of the concepts and specific

applications are rare (for an exception, see RIGER, 1993). Just as participatory
development has avoided internal criticism by focusing critique on mainstream
development—community psychology is critical of the more mainstream clinical
psychology. The psychological sense of community (McMILLAN & CHAVIS,
1986) is another construct that community researchers seek to actively promote
in various contexts, but rarely unmask for its potential for similar unintentional
tyrannies. How often is "community" exclusive and patriarchal? How often does it
preserve inequity and mandate conformity? How should community psychological
theory evolve to decrease these opportunities for tyranny? [30]

Urban planning in Europe and the United States has embraced methods similar
to the participatory practices of international development agencies for decades
(SMITH, 1973). Planners like FLYVBJERG (1998) and SANDERCOCK (1998)
have shown that urban planning processes often run up against forms of power
that are capable of frustrating their purposes. How often are the planning
processes themselves contributing to or consumed by powers that work toward
the maintenance or furtherance of injustices? Although they are scrutinized (e.g.
TALEN, 2000), the same terms—participation, community, and empowerment—
can be blithely thrown around in the planning literature. [31]

Since Robert PUTNAM's (1995) work on *social capital*, the concept has gained
incredible momentum in U.S. social research. PUTNAM's thesis is that social
capital has been on the decline in the U.S. since WWII. One component of social
capital is *civic engagement*—often measured by the frequency with which citizens
participate in collective activities. Much like participation in the international
development literature, civic engagement takes on a normative role in the
literature. More is (almost) always unquestionably better. This functions to give
the research an apolitical stance. The structures with which citizens are engaged
and the mechanisms of that agency are suddenly less important than the
magnitude of the activity. All citizens could be vigorously engaged in the
furtherance of any value and the requirements of civic engagement would be met
—yet civic engagement is frequently treated as the final value. [32]

The *Tyranny* and *Transformation* books offer two important contributions to other
social science disciplines. First, they provide a model of critical and open
reflection that should be replicated in disciplines other than international
development and on topics other than participation. Second, the insights and
issues which are surfaced with regard to participation have applicability to related
constructs such as empowerment, planning, social capital and civic engagement.
These constructs, as with all constructs, come with implicit assumptions that are
often taken for granted. Reflection about these assumptions, as demonstrated in
these books, has the potential to advance practices of social research and action
toward transformation. [33]

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Citation