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Citizen participation and education for democracy

Mercedes Oraisón*

Abstract

Participation by the citizenry in various aspects of social life – particularly the public/political sphere – is a prominent issue in social research of recent years. The purpose of this article is to reflect upon citizen participation's potential as a citizenship-building strategy. It addresses calling attention to citizen participation – an aspect that has been steadily taking shape and becoming stronger and whose keynote is the interaction of civil society actors and a government institution, with the purpose of intervening in matters of public interest.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the potential of citizen participation as a strategy for constructing citizenship. The experiences and practices of participation we analyze are not in a school or institutionalized educational context, but rather in broader social and political environments, in which we confirm an effective link between state and civil society. It aims to call attention to a space that has been shaping and consolidating itself in recent years with the name of citizen participation, whose main objective is the interaction of civil society stakeholders with government institutions (mainly local, municipal, town or city hall), with the purpose of intervening in matters of public interest.

As it is presented on a discourse level, citizen participation tends to promote state democratization processes and increase the capacity for impact. Both of these aspects allow us to specifically delve into participation's potential to consolidate more symmetrical social and political – and therefore more democratic – relationships. These relationships would constitute forms of organization and coordination between the state and civil society based on cooperation, reciprocal acknowledgment and equal distribution of power.

This article will address the considerations surrounding participation spaces and practices as schools of citizenry, which aim to "break with political control by local elites and with bureaucratic, corrupt and clientelist governance, in order to establish

*PhD of Philosophy and Educational Sciences, University of Barcelona. Research team member of the Centre for Social Studies, Universidad Nacional del Nordeste, Argentina. Consultant for the education program and the values of OEI.

a new public sphere of non-state decision" (Gadotti, 2002).

Within this framework we can obtain some considerations from various research and social intervention projects developed over the last few years. The main purposes of these projects are linked to strengthening citizen participation processes and spaces, as well as deepening and broadening communal organizations' capacities to focus on public policies and local development.

Citizen participation in various areas of social life, particularly in the public/political sphere, is an issue that has held an important place in social research in recent years. Debates centered on democratic construction present this matter as an inevitable demand for inclusion, justice and equality. In this context the notion of "citizen participation" refers to a type of participation in which the stakeholders of civil society interact with some form of government, with the purpose of intervening in matters of public interest.

Origins of Citizen Participation

Over the last few decades citizen participation has been associated with at least two contexts in which different and alternative meanings are shaped: a) the context of the state authority crisis and new citizenship strategies, resulting from the dismantling of the welfare state and the hegemonic installment of neoliberalism; b) the context of transforming representative democracies in the West.

Self-Developed Citizenship and Communal Participation

The emergence and construction of one of the notions of participation may be associated with the social and political crisis of the last 30 years, which led to the disruption of the welfare state model during the late 1970's as well as to the structural transformations imposed by the neoliberal hegemony of the 80's and 90's. The financial crisis of western countries during the 1970's —originating from the oil crisis that affected the capitalist system— put the welfare state model into question. From the right, representatives of neoliberalism strongly questioned the state's role as a system guarantor. According to their assessment, the state itself was at fault for the crisis, because by establishing itself as the controller, generator and distributor of wealth it had considerably increased its budget, thus diminishing the earnings of major businesses. According to this position, the state should stop interfering with the economy.

Starting in the 1980's, the triumph of neoliberalism set into motion a process of re-structuring the state, along with adjustment plans and budget cuts, which created a new social and political scene. This new setting was characterized by the privatization of power spaces, the deregulation of productive and economic activities, and the shrinkage of the public sphere. These processes led to a profound decline in labor and life conditions, and were expressed in the deepening of the social exclusion of a growing population mass. On a symbolic level, a weakness appears in bonds, due to mistrust and vulnerability (Beck, 1998), as well as an exacerbation of modern individualism (Fitoussi and Rosanvallon, 1997, p. 36). However, only a few —those whose social position allows— can associate individualism

with autonomy and independence, while others take "their individuality as a cross to bear, because it signifies a lack of bonds and an absence of protection" (Castel, 1997, p. 477).

This explains the phenomena known as "poverty individualization" and "risk individualization." The risk is individualized; it disintegrates into an unlimited number of individual paths, as social issues are conceived as a constant cyclical component of social life. Those excluded do not share an established social profile, but rather a biography: "their lives have traveled paths that present certain homologies; an identical succession of social or familial ruptures, the same type of professional disjointedness" (Rosanvallon, 1995, p. 194).

Social policies aimed at resolving exclusion problems promoted during the late 90's and early 2000's were based, according to this logic, on material support and compensation for those personal characteristics assumed to be associated with poverty: a scarce enterprising spirit, passivity, inaction and a lack of ability to self-organize. In the framework of these policies, decentralization and communal participation are emphasized (Clemente and Smulovitz, 2004). The participative component of these programs attempts to promote self-esteem as a means of increasing the social capital and human capital necessary to drive the agents' empowerment processes (Putnam, 2001).

A transition from social to communal can be observed, thus linking citizenry construction processes with the conveyance of tools promoting social, productive and cultural practices that allow the organizations and groups to grow and develop. The purpose is to support personal as well as socio-communal skills and abilities, without referring to the more structural causes that bring about poverty and exclusion. This type of participation clearly appears in the development of social policies whose methodological operation incorporates one or more participative components (workshops, forums, meetings, etc.). The practice of participation is seen as a counter-proposal, acquiring a proactive and depoliticized slant (Clemente, 2007). The main reason for participation is linked to the satisfaction of needs for material conditions. Reproduction of these conditions is secured through the participation of the subjects in an exchange system, a system of cooperation, mutual aid and clientelist networks.

In the framework of deepening the neoliberal model, the state is positioned in a subsidiary role for these processes. The point is for the citizen to assume a key role in the resolution of his own issues, securing his own necessary resources to such an end. By questioning clientelism and the passivity created by the welfare state, neoliberalism promotes a citizenship strategy of self-development, which places the social participant in a position of self-sufficiency. The citizen becomes the "administrator" of his own needs and interests.

Participation surfaces as a new way of articulating social demands, allowing a focus on the interests and needs we claim in the face of traditionally marginalized sectors' situations of injustice. At the same time it becomes an instance to defend human rights in the face of the discrimination to which some groups feel subjected. The main stakeholders are NGOs and social movements, which, in addition to making concrete claims linked to assistance in the terms established by state policies, express the failure of these very policies due to their regressive and perverse impact (Giarraca, 2001, Svampa and Pereyra, 2003, Schuster, 2005).

Although we are discussing citizen participation, what takes shape is a form of communal participation leaning toward community promotion or development. This occurs through the improvement of material living conditions, by means of an individual or collective initiative and self-development.

Participative Democracy and Citizen Participation

In more recent years, however, other forms of participation have arisen which take on different political meanings and intentions, subscribing themselves to a context of crisis or "metamorphosis" of contemporary democracies. This context is created through disappointment and loss of trust in the modernity project, and through awareness of abuses of power, situations of social inequality, and manipulation of the masses, produced by using instrumental rationale. Many of these situations were created in contexts that were self-proclaimed as "democratic," and socially legitimized through political representation mechanisms. This proves that rather than coming closer to the ideals of enlightenment and the revolutions of the 18th century, a large part of western liberal democracies, and particularly those in Latin America, seem to have taken a route that, to a greater or lesser extent, has deepened social inequalities instead of resolving them. As a result, participation and deliberation spaces have been further constrained. They have been excluded from negotiations and the construction of agreements for civil society, devaluating and depreciating the role of citizenry and public opinion. Thus one of the current major challenges is the recovery of the main foundations of democracy, which have been marred and repealed by interferences, corporatism and a distortion of the demo-liberal model. These foundations would guarantee autonomous and rational popular participation through the creation of procedures, institutions, and deliberative and decision-making spaces, which allow these processes to be incorporated into all sectors of society, fundamentally those that have been historically marginalized.

On a theoretical level, authors like Barber (2004), Cohen (2000 and 2001), Pateman (1970), Elster (2001), Habermas (1998 and 1999), Schumpter (1984) and Dahl (1993 and 1999), among others, have become involved with this challenge and multiple proposals have been made to tackle it. Prioritizing one of the fundamental principles of democracy or another, the various proposals have argued over its convenience and validity in ethical terms, raising the concept of "participative democracy" as a central theme of discussion. On an empirical level, these ideas are translated into concrete claims for greater participation; new forms of citizen behavior emerge that demonstrate citizenship initiative and autonomy in the face of state powers. The crisis of representative democracy reveals the tensions surrounding it, which can be analyzed from various perspectives. One of the first tensions is found between the legality and legitimacy that surface and deepen in the process of historically constructing the rule of modern law and the representative democracy model that hegemonized the Euro-Western world.

The political project of modernity feeds off of two conflicting perspectives: the liberal perspective, which builds up the rule of law; and the republican perspective, which offers the democratic component. Founded in the tradition of natural law, the rule of law spurs from the idea that the law is preceded by a

naturally normative source. Therefore it is limited to embodying, declaring and sanctioning individual liberties derived from the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. The task of setting, interpreting and sanctioning the rights and obligations of citizens —through the social contract in which each individual delegates his sovereignty, and therefore his faculty, in coercively imposing his rights— falls to the state.

> And in him consisteth the essence of the commonwealth; which (to define it,) is one person of whose acts a great multitude, by mutual covenants one with another, have made themselves every one the author, to the end hey may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for their peace and common defence. And that carrieth this person is called sovereign, and said to have sovereign power, and every one besides, his subject. (Hobbes, 1651/1996, p. 114. Leviathan, Part 2, Commonwealth, Chapter 17: The causes, creation, and definition of a commonwealth)

In this rule of law, the subject's liberty begins where the sovereign's law ends.

However, along with the liberal perspective of the state's legality is installed a criterion of legitimacy, which will have to either complement or oppose the former: the general will. Article six in the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) states: "Law is the expression of the general will. Every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through his representative, in its foundation." The conflict arises when a legitimate law is considered to be that which expresses "the general will," which thus violates laws preceding the constitution of the political community.

In this way, a normative framework is created, in which both perspectives concur with different notions of freedom: the liberal notion (that of the negative liberties of the moderns), and the democratic or republican notion, (that of the positive liberties of the classics). With Rousseau, among other defenders of the doctrine of general will, another definition of freedom is presented that goes far beyond the liberal principle of a non-intrusive state in the private sphere of individuals: the freedom created from the relationship between sovereign and subject comes to be understood as a political autonomy. In other words, it does not primarily consist of being able to do anything that might harm the other, nor in being able to do that which the sovereign's laws prohibit, but rather in "find[ing] a form of association that defends and protects with all the common force the person and property of each partner, and by which each partner, uniting himself with all the rest, nevertheless only obeys himself" (Rousseau, 1762/2004, Book I, Chapter IV of the Social Contract). Having been submitted to laws, not having been submitted to laws other than those that one was able to impose upon himself with each of the others validating for everyone and for anyone. In this way, the social contract provides a procedure for the expression of the general will, which offers the democratic principle as the sole criterion for the legitimacy of the state.

This tension between the criterion of legality of the rule of law and legality of the doctrine of popular will established the bases for the organization of states and the democratic —or pseudo-democratic— experiences of modern Euro-Western society. In an effort to find points of resolution between both positions which would allow the creation of legitimate foundations of democratic government, Habermas (1999), among others, has pointed out the need to build and institutionalize a procedural legitimization principle. This would

regulate relationships and social contracts, assuring basic conditions of equality and liberty for the participation of all citizens in the communication processes to shape the general will.

Rosanvallon analyzes a second tension (2007, p. 283), which centers on the distance between a political principle —the affirmation of the supremacy of the general will— and a sociological reality. The people are a master of democracy that is at once imperious and elusive. Modern politics have trusted the people with power when the emancipation project it was transmitting would simultaneously lead to making the social abstract by abolishing the ancient society of orders and corporations. Thus the contradiction between the political principle of democracy and its sociological principle: the political principle establishes the power of a collective subject whose sociological principle dissolves its consistency and reduces its visibility. There is inherent tension toward the very notion of the people's sovereignty when the definition of a representative government is not being determined by its origin. Representative democracy was thus considered to be a technical equivalent to direct democracy – that is, as an alternative to an inorganic democracy considered dangerous or a regime to protect freedom, far from the more ancient ambition of an effective sovereignty of the people.

However, for the last two centuries, various constitutional mechanisms were visualized and militant practices were developed in order to again offer meaning and shape to a demand for active and interventionist participation. This history is not over, as proven by the quantity of projects and experiments in other countries, which seek to activate the citizen imperative for participation and improve representative mechanisms. "In this framework the development of modes of citizen participation in decision-making that concerns them is one of the greatest traits of recent evolution in democratic regimes" (Rosanvallon, p. 284).

> Participative democracy is thus proposed as an alternative form of communication, as a rescue for popular speech, which expresses and broadcasts public consciousness and opinion, and seeks to carry out the will of groups considered to be under-represented. It is the expansion of the concept of democracy aimed at carrying out the planned objective in its definition: the people's government, recognizing the protagonist and active nature of said people. These opinions and these actions express ways of breaking with passivity and with activity derived from party institutions or from state organizations. Forms of social re-identification are thus presented, as well as methods of rejecting the political identification that considers citizens to be an excluded third party, useful only for voting and applauding. The political concept that makes the state-governors binomial into a separate, impenetrable universe, open to the people for a certain number of years, is also rejected. Thus through the act of voting, (the only acknowledged and backed form of participation) the sacred duty of exercising the power to delegate power, to legitimize power, to lose power is carried out (Montero, 2006, p. 154).

Such processes reveal clear evidence that we are in a stage of transition away from the classic liberal model of representative democracy based on partocracy toward a "hybrid" model that offers different attempts at participative democracy through a revaluing of the role of public opinion, building social consensus. The proposal for deliberative

democracy is subscribed in this framework by authors such as Elster (2001), Habermas (1998) and Cohen (2001), who seek to formalize a more procedural comprehension of democracy founded in the vision of a conscious people.

This is how "impure representative democracies" have been taking shape. These are characterized by the incorporation of semi-direct democracy mechanisms (referendums, plebiscites, public audiences, revocation of mandates, popular initiative, etc.) in the representative systems of government, which, without excluding the traditional representation mechanisms, offer new opportunities to express popular will that are fundamental for channeling new and multiple emerging demands (Abal 2009, p. 206). In this sense a public space is configured, which broadens and re-politicizes the spheres of citizen participation, since citizens are being summoned to participate not only to intervene in the performance of actions aimed at resolving specific issues, but also to analyze, decide and build a common will surrounding the contents of the rights that aid us and deal with some unavoidable questions of justice.

Citizen participation thus reaches its most complete form when it is already evident in the initial process of shaping a public policy through the definition of priorities and the inclusion of common and differing themes and perspectives. Citizen participation can therefore be defined as a semi-direct democratic strategy which bridges the gap between representatives and the represented, governors and the governed, opening and institutionalizing alternative channels so that popular will on relevant subjects may be expressed.

Citizen Participation: Between Politics, the Political and the Impolitic

In terms of these considerations, the political nature of citizen participation is evident. We conceive that the way in which we give meaning to the political sense of participation will determine its potential to bring about change, in terms of the communities or collectives that promote it as well as the subjectivity of the stakeholders who exercise it.

Depoliticization and Technocratic Rationale

In the framework of the neoliberal model, participative democracy presents itself, "not as the model for broadening representative democracy, in crisis in the Western world, but rather as a new label to validate and legitimize the transformations in process, almost always hailed by the academic and intellectual sectors without it being evident as to just how participative the new democratic schemes truly are" (Mejía, 2005, p. 30).

Participation in this context opens itself up to insubstantial issues and the implementation of policies, generating a false sense of participation whose questionable benefits end up causing mistrust in the stakeholders. This reinforces a process that generalizes the neutral role of technocracy, shifting decision-making and performance of large- and small-scale policies to economic planning organisms without consulting the affected communities. Decision-making and policy implementation are thus legitimized by statistical —not democratic— consensus. In these cases, the policy objective is to prevent

dysfunction and avoid risks that could threaten the system. In other words, the policy is not aimed at realizing practical ends, but rather at resolving technical issues (Habermas, 2002, p. 84). In this way, the political becomes a matter of administration that refers to the state as a self-regulating system in terms of economics. As Habermas (2002) explains, state activity is centered on technical tasks that demand depoliticization of the masses in order to avoid problems with the marginal conditions of the system. Political control is reduced to a simple administration at democracy's expense, since this logic breaks with the concept of a sphere of public opinion with political functions.

Paradoxically, citizen participation with a strong political component that attempts to reverse the unjust situations produced or validated by the absence of a state may operate functionally in such processes. Such is the case when civil society enters the stage from an overestimation of the non-state origin of citizen participation, which comes to consider the latter as an independent intervention tool in public administration. That is, without the need to form a part, not only of the government or a political party but rather of a space untouched by the system's instrumental rationale and free from the established political party's co-optations.

When citizen participation is seen as a practice that originates and develops only from civil society, a process of depoliticization may be favored, which offers different forms of dialogue with the state based more on negotiation[1] than on cooperation and bonds. It is this sense of participation that neoliberalism appropriates, using it to hide its political matrix and to develop axes of social junctions based solely on economic and productive criteria.

However, neoliberalism does not warn that all participative processes, no matter how reductionist or insubstantial, carry deep within their core a contradiction: the process itself can place social action within the reach of a vast number of people, from social sectors that are far removed from power, providing instruments or creating spaces to establish demands regarding specific rights. It is in the creation of these spaces, within the institutionalization of technocratic rationale, that the political function of participation is resolved.

Citizen Participation: Impolitic Counter-Democracy?

For Rosavallon (2007), the processes of depoliticization promoted by neoliberalism seem to have been reversed, establishing the issue of the impolitic in the contemporary context. This transforms the idea of citizen passivity into myth. If there are any clear indicators of citizen mistrust toward political institutions, these indicators must be reestablished within a wider understanding of the transformations of citizen action. Growing unconventional or "non-political" methods of intervention, which are actually occurring in different contexts in Latin America, suggest that we have not entered a new era of political apathy, and the idea of a growing withdrawal of the private sphere—which Rosanvallon had analyzed in previous essays (*Cfr.* Fitoussi y Rosanvallon, 1997, p. 35.)— is in fact baseless. Therefore, it is in this author's best interest to concentrate more on the mutation of citizenship rather than its decline. As political parties erode and large representative institutions are weakened, social organizations are multiplying and the range of political expression is diversified.

These protean manifestations testify to the arrival of unprecedented types of interventions and political reactions that reveal that there is no depoliticization in the

sense of a lesser interest in public affairs and a decline in citizen activity. However, it does also reveal that a certain kind of relationship with politics has been extensively modified. "The modern day issue is not passivity, but rather the impolitic; in other words, the lack of global apprehension towards issues linked to the organization of a common world." Thus appears a variety of particular, fragmented and widely scattered interests and demands, which do not manage to or intend to join together in a political project. Thus is outlined "a type of counter-politics founded on control, opposition, [and] a decrease in powers whose main priority is no longer conquest" (Rosanvallon, pp. 38-39). "Impolitic counter-democracy" has the distinctive trait of assuming a democratic activity and nonpolitical effects, due to the fact that its reactive nature cannot sustain a collective proposition, dissolving all expressions of belonging to a common world.

Some citizen participation practices are considered by Rosanvallon, in this conceptual framework, as forms of counter-democracy, as they are maintained by the separation between civil society and the political sphere created by the counter-powers. These forms of participation are increasingly widespread, as liability, revocation of mandates, and vetoes positions the citizen as a political consumer with strong expectations and great demands toward institutions, but strips him of the role of producer associated with the common world.

However, other practices exist alongside these in which the bond between citizenship and administrative political power is not considered from a standpoint of distancing, mistrust or antagonism. Instead, a type of relationship based on cooperation and mutual acknowledgement is created. Another form of association between citizens and the state is in play here, with the purpose of redistributing power. In this new type of relationship, the state, as observed by Santos Souza (2003), becomes a broader political organization, which articulates and coordinates the various interests, trends and organizations born from the privatization of social regulation. In this way, it is more directly committed to redistribution criteria and therefore to inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The state's democratization processes converge with democratization of the non-state sphere, allowing a reconstruction of the public space of democratic deliberation as well as a revitalization of the citizen's protagonist role, stemming from the idea of co-government as "good government." It deals with a "new, less hierarchical way of governing, where public and private stakeholders take part and cooperate in the formulation and application of public policies" (Mayntz, 2000, p. 151).

Citizen Participation as Political Participation: Deliberative Democracy

These reflections warn us that it is not possible to separate citizen participation from political participation, as some typologies attempting to classify these practices tend to do (Cunill, 1999; Chávez, 2006, Landau, 2008). Citizen participation is a form of political involvement that develops through channels outside of political party structures and frameworks, widening the definition of political activity to include those actions that tend to exercise some kind of influence, directly or indirectly, on issues of public interest.

The political nature of citizen participation springs from the dialogue space between state and civil society in which it constructs itself. There are various spheres and devices of citizen participation, but they can be classified into three large groups:

- Non-governmental organizations or citizen associations dedicated to addressing disturbing social themes, alerting or making society aware, and supporting state actions dedicated to solving them—without substituting the government in its functions.

- Democratic education spaces for public opinion. Forums organized to discuss issues important to citizens.

- Citizen councils or committees, or coordination spaces that incorporate state organizations in public policy administration or evaluation. Comprised of interested citizens and independent experts.

In all cases, the political nature of participation is evident. The first two categories deal with democratically building popular will and strengthening the public-political space of expression, in order to establish specific demands in the political agenda. The last category, where the impact is direct, compels us to consider that citizen participation is a strategy of cooperation and coordination with the state, which allows the conditioning factors of service policies to transcend and move forward in social transformation processes.

The concept of citizen participation to which we adhere combines three dimensions of interaction between citizenship and the political sphere: expression, implication and intervention. "A democracy of expression corresponds to taking society's word, manifesting a collective feeling, formulating judgments about governors and their actions, or also expressing claims. A democracy of implication includes all of the different means through which citizens reach agreements and come together to produce a common world. A democracy of intervention is composed of all forms of collective action aimed at obtaining a desired result" (Rosanvallon, 2007, p. 36).

These aspects of the relationship between citizens and the state are placed at stake in both spheres or scenes of political participation and citizenship, as distinguished by Habermas (1999, pp. 242-243): (a) the institutionalized sphere, which leads to resolutions, and (b) informal processes of shaping non-institutionalized opinion, which is not under duress to reach resolutions, and which consists of discussions on values, issues and various contributions which are allowed to flow freely. The hope for rational results rests on the interaction between the political formation of institutionalized will and spontaneous communication trends. This requires a strengthening of free associations, which will focus the discussion onto issues and values that are relevant for all society and that will indirectly influence political decisions (Cortina, 1993, p. 117).

Participation in these spheres is manifested with the notion of political autonomy that Habermas (1999) has recovered from the tradition started by Rousseau. In the face of the liberal and modern idea of a state that monopolizes a legitimate physical coercion and exercises a concentration of power capable of subduing all other powers in the world, Rousseau (1762/2004) shifts the idea of sovereignty to the will of the united people, which fuses the classic idea of self-control of free and equal subjects with the modern concept of autonomy. The constituent power is based on the citizens' practice of self-determination.

Habermas' discursive concept of participative democracy stems from a decentralized image of a society that, through the emergence of public space, is truly transformed into a distinct platform for

perception, identification and deliberation of its overall issues. In this way, popular sovereignty emerges from the interactions between the shaping of a common will, institutionalized by the rule of law's own techniques, and culturally-mobilized public spaces, which for their part are based on the associations of a civil society equally distanced from the state and the economy (Habermas, 1999, p. 245). The independence of civil society, however, would not be based on its renunciation of political activity, but rather on its power to stand strong in the face of administrative and economic powers. In this way it would unfold not only in the second category listed above (sources of communicative action), but rather throughout various autonomous public spaces and the institutionalized procedures that democratically shape public opinion and common will enabled by the rule of law (Habermas, 1999, p. 243).

Subjectivity and Participation

When viewed in the foreground, the political and democratic horizon of participation is conceived as a social action committed to the education of subjects capable of changing the world, not merely reproducing it. From this standpoint, participation can be visualized in the relational field as able to contribute to more critical and emancipated political stances, and more symmetrical social relationships, which, on a subjective level, could be translated into an autonomous and proactive citizenship.

From this perspective, participation is emphasized as the transition from the role of passive subject to that of agent of social and communal processes in which the citizen is involved. In this capacity, the citizen is rationally motivated to intervene in public deliberations, banishing his role as a simple spectator complacent to the blind activities that are externally run by others. Participation is thus considered to be a political practice, specifically aimed at changing power relationships, making them more horizontal, more dialogic, and therefore more democratic.

In accordance with these assertions, psychology —particularly social and communal psychology— assumes that participation is a key experience in subjectification processes (Montero, 2006). Beginning in the 1970's, social psychology stops considering participation as a simple information broadcast and starts relating it to a greater subject control over decision —making. In this way, participation is defined as all forms of exchange between subjects that can lead to changes or transformations of an initial state— that is, the condition prior to carrying out this action. In other words, participation is an interactive practice with the potential to influence others.

Influences resulting from participation are not just over others, but also over the self. Participation always involves the subject's affect; "It is precisely from this characteristic that the psychic importance of the process as a tool of human production emerges (as much 'external' —referring more to the power to do— as 'internal' — referring more to the power to be)" (Ferullo de Parajón,2004, p. 48). From the perspective of psychology, two levels of participation are distinguished according to their effects:

> The first refers to the inaugural effects on the constitution and support of the subjects as part of the world [...] The second [...] tackles the side effects, which refer to the multiple, complex, permanent and heterogeneous subsequent impacts that [...] participation processes have on the production of subjectivities [...] with particular traits characteristic

> of each culture and subject, which in turn vary over time (Ferrullo de Parajón, 2004, p. 190).

This comment once again presents evidence that participation is a social practice that presents contradictions and ambiguities, in its external as well as internal impact. Therefore, to think that participation always produces empowerment and emancipation in subjects is a fallacy and an idealization. We can deduce from these discussions that there is a clearer warning against the political nature of participation, given that the exercise of power is always at stake within it. In other words, it is a practice that affects all those who carry it out differently and ambiguously: a practice that can subjugate the subjects by passively incorporating them into the social hegemonic order, or can also favor critical and proactive positions, tending to cause certain ruptures, re-significations or transformations in their self-referential contexts. That is to say, it can create social and subjective scenarios either for subordination or for empowerment.

Montero (1996) synthesizes this idea when he maintains that when discussing participation, the result is not always a process of cooperation, solidarity, construction and appropriation of the object by the social and participative stakeholders. He affirms:

> This undefined use of the concept, which turns it into a kind of umbrella under which multiple forms of social coincidence take shelter, has led to the distinction of different degrees of participation […] Thus, even the most varied forms can be included under the definition of participation, from manipulation, consultation, and spreading information, to the delegation of power in groups and complete communal control" (Montero, 1996, p. 10).

Demystifying participation, as Montero refers to it, reveals the complexity of the processes it entails and the multitude of personal and contextual factors that can condition it.[2] However, due to the fact that this is a key and necessary tool for constructing the agent subject, a positive concept of participation can be considered as a "consciously upheld ideal" (Ferrullo de Parajón, 2004, p. 43), as a regulative principle that marks the normative horizon as the most desirable destination for all social and political lessons. In this sense, one can consider that authentically participating means being able to interact with and relate to the other, recognizing in the other and in the self a valid participant who must be taken into account.

From this standpoint, the subject may reaffirm his subjective and social rights (having a part); become involved (being a part of), and commit to and be able to speak about the issues that affect him (taking part in), whether directly or indirectly. For Ferrullo de Parajón, *being a part of* refers to the social bond between the subject's entry into the world and the subsequent ties that make up the complex and dynamic trajectory which keeps it a part of the world; *having a part* refers to one's position, providing a place in the social structure; finally, *taking part in* refers to one's role, which opens up the subject's potential for political action (*Ibid*, p. 190).

Learning through Participation

Participation cannot be taken as a given; it is always a process that is constructed and developed through limited but constant actions. Like all social practices, it cannot spring from a single norm, or from voluntary decisions. Participation is a learning process in

itself, requiring training and information, but fundamentally there is a genuine possibility of exercising this practice, enabling the spaces and conditions necessary for it.

The famous pedagogic principle of "learning by doing" indicates that we learn to participate through experiencing and exercising participation. Those who defend the participative ideal assume that participation cannot be restricted nor linked to a priori conditions.[3] They maintain that this is a moral value unto itself, but it also produces a series of positive social and personal benefits. For Del Aguila, participation:

> creates interactive habits and spheres of public deliberation which prove to be key in attaining autonomous individuals […] it makes people take charge, democratically and collectively, of decisions and activities over which it is important to exercise a control aimed at achieving self-government and establishing stability and governability […] it also tends to create a civil society with strong and deeply-rooted communal bonds, which are creators of collective identity— that is, architects of a specific way of life built around values such as the greater good and plurality (1993, p. 36).

Lessons of Citizen Participation from the Stakeholders' Perspective

Although participation is a process built from individuals or groups mobilizing for a common interest, it can also be promoted by those who see a citizenship-building strategy in such a process.

The purpose of participative methodologies is to contribute so that mobilized citizens can discuss and develop concrete policies. At the same time, its aim is that the unequal positions in which people concur will continue to be modified from the resulting empowerment of the organization and the construction of communal knowledge. And although interventions tending to strengthen and establish participation spaces can promote and favor certain processes, often they can also condition the emergence of others in which spontaneous forms of mobilization, organization and political action are resolved and annulled.

Over the last few years we have developed several studies on participation,[4] which receive feedback from community work experiences in various neighborhoods in the cities of Resistencia and Corrientes,[5] Argentina. These projects have allowed us to become familiar with and value the lessons stemming from the practice of participation.

Overcoming Individualism: Transcending the Sphere of Collective Needs

Some decades ago, we came across a very important turning point in modernity, characterized by its destructive effects, which, for authors like Fitoussi and Rosanvallon (1997), originates in the globalized economy and modern individualism.

As previously mentioned, individualization has an ambivalent or bipolar nature, since it involves independence and emancipation, while at the same time it entails disconnection, disaffiliation, vulnerability, fragility and uprooting. In this sense, authors like Bauman (2005a, p. 71 and ss.), Castells (2003, pp. 32-33) and Svampa (2003, p. 15) warn that such processes threaten to divide and polarize society.

Bauman (2005b), in one of his most

significant works, describes the fear of establishing lasting relationships and the fragility of the bonds of solidarity that seem to depend solely on the benefits they offer. The commercial sphere pervades all, in the sense that relationships are measured in terms of costs and benefits. The breakdown and weakening of human bonds in communities and relationships is one of the most salient characteristics of globalized society.

This same author warns us that we are all interdependent in this world of ours, which is in a rapid process of globalization, and it is because of this interdependence that none of us can be master or our own fate. There are tasks faced by every individual that cannot be approached or dealt with individually. Everything that separates us and compels us to keep our mutual distance, draw borders and build barricades makes those tasks harder to carry out. This conclusion has been clearly made evident within the communities where we have been working, in greater force in some than in others. There is much isolation between neighbors, along with a withdrawal into private living, occasionally modified by the integration of some type of social reference group.

Yet in these very communities there is an endless number of social organizations that have managed to form a collective space, not only of contention but of resistance and action. Those who can see the potential of citizen participation have sought to form strategic and political alliances, constructing demands with greater social impact and strengthening their visibility in the public space. These alliances are established not only by the organizations that work in a single community, but also among those that pursue common goals in distant and diverse communities. In this way we find federations of civil organizations – networks of neighborhood associations that build their dialogue with the state around the discussion of a collective project rather than out of an urgency that restricts their actions to the negotiation of the resources necessary for the material reproduction of life.

Participation in social and political spaces has allowed stakeholders to step outside of the micro-sphere of individual needs and move on to the sphere of common interests in which the political struggle is resolved by improving common material and symbolic life conditions. To quote Bauman (2005a), the community thus rebuilds its strengths not only in solidarity but also in its capacity to generate political actions.

Re-Politicizing: Visibility in the Public Space – Making Voices Heard

There is no doubt that these forms of organization and agreement involve a re-politicization of the relationships between state and civil society as well as the establishment of a conscientious subject. This subject can observe the imbalance of losses and gains in the distribution of common appurtenances and design actions to compensate for these inequalities.

Politicizing spaces, stakeholders and interactions "consists of making everything that has been repressed and privatized public. To politicize is to broaden the public sphere and enable an open political dialogue, where many voices are heard with equal respect for all" (Montero, 2006, p. 155). For Freire (2002) shifting the symbolic aspect is often the key to the subject's ability to shift the material aspect of his existence. Positive subjectification allows stakeholders to emerge from their historical stupor by becoming conscious of their existence

in the world and by their capacity to act and reflect.

> If man's ontological vocation is to be a subject rather than an object, he can only develop it as long as, reflecting upon his temporal-spatial conditions, he critically immerses himself in them. The more he is led to reflect upon his situation, upon his temporal-spatial roots, the further he will "emerge" from it, consciously "charged" with commitment to his reality, in which, because he is a subject, he must not be a mere spectator, but rather he must intervene more and more each time (Freire, 2002, p. 67).

The transition toward critical consciousness entails overcoming fatalism and the assumption of citizen protagonism.

Reconstructing the Political Link

Landau (2008, p. 147) points out that in addition to leading to a revaluation of the link to institutional representation (of state authorities), citizen participation builds a space in which a new kind of representation emerges: participative representation. Constructing a participative representation produces a game of double acknowledgment: one between the state authorities and the participative representatives, and another between the participative representatives and the stakeholders. This enables the creation —or re-creation— of an acknowledgment between state authorities and citizens, and brings forth a new space in which individuals and participating organizations are reconfigured due to participative representation.

Landau has studied several experiences in the city of Buenos Aires, identifying a bond in the relationship between citizens and participating state authorities that is sustained despite an initial reciprocal mistrust. This mistrust existed among the participating citizens, evolving into a suspicion surrounding their motivations for participating and common interest. There was also mistrust between the stakeholders and the authorities, developing into suspicions toward those responsible for implementing agreed-upon initiatives, and toward the corroborative nature of participation and whether the initiatives that participants had agreed upon would be fulfilled. At the same time, mistrust between authorities and stakeholders surrounded professional skills and the possibility of working together, and specifically on the part of the authorities, suspicions arose that organizations were taking advantage of the space to confront the government and boycott programs. When the relationship in the participative situation is confirmed, this mistrust tends to dissolve and an alliance is reached in which a common language is constructed to address a new form of bonding and the development of new skills, which implies a learning process.

In this space, representation is redefined by the strengthening of a bond of cooperation through which a communication unfolds, with the potential to broaden the technical field and force the political aspect to be considered. In this way, representatives who insert themselves and take part in the fields of creation are obliged to acquire a technical knowledge that allows them to actively participate in discussions on issues of communal interest established from such a rationale. State authorities also find themselves obligated to consider all claims and demands brought by the communities through their representatives from a practical and communicative rationale.

From the context of the Habermasian categories, this leads to new delineations

between the system and the world. In this way, democracy and citizenship-building can lead to a reciprocal and circular bond, with a breakthrough of communicative power in joining with the state sphere, institutionalizing deliberative procedures, and strengthening and broadening the public political space. This new layout of the system and the world in short demands the recovery of civil society, popular participation and community.

Conclusion

Participation and citizenship building are enmeshed with one another. Being a citizen comes from actively exercising this role. In this sense, citizenship is praxis, not a formal condition. Only though experiencing citizenship, verified in active participation, does the subject take on and identify himself in this role, far beyond the rights supporting him.

Citizen participation establishes a new government model based on cooperation, where the citizen contributes with his knowledge to the resolution of public issues and commits himself to controlling the government's actions. Thus a sphere of interaction between different stakeholders is founded in which an unprecedented scenario plays out for citizen learning. Civil society's impact on public policy is an indicator of citizen participation's accomplishment. We can consider the latter to be authentically democratic when it guarantees real and effective citizen intervention concerning the programs, agenda and workings of public institutions. In this sense, and following in Habermas' (1999) footsteps, it can be asserted that participation assumes an "offensive" dimension when dealing with matters whose relevance affects the community or the global society. This is also true when defining problems, making contributions, introducing changes to the criteria of shaping political will, and pressuring parliaments and governments in favor of certain policies. In the same way, participation takes on a "defensive" dimension when it attempts to maintain communicative structures and channels, and to establish new identities or means of expression, regulation and communication of social action and cultural transformations, in order to develop sensitivity to new claims.

Citizen participation translates not only into the struggles over particular and collective claims, but also into the strengthening of a more plural, just and inclusive democracy.

Endnotes

1 It has been indicated on numerous occasions that when it is the state that starts the participation game, this practice is aimed at efficient administration, neutralizing spontaneous moves or legitimizing administrative processes.

2 See previous projects, *cfr*. Oraison (2010) and (2007).

3 In social citizenship, for example, only those who enjoy fundamental social rights would be genuinely empowered for political participation.

4 "Citizenship Inclusion and Construction. Subjectivity and Praxis of Participation." Director: Lic. (Mg) Ana María Pérez. CONICET (PIP 112-200801-01881) 2008 – 2010 and "Studies of Participation in Specific Contexts: Educational, Habitat and Labor." Director: Lic. (Mg) Ana María Pérez. Secretary of Science and Technology in UNNE (121/07) 2009 – 2011.

5 "Constructing the Citizen and Communal Participation. An Experience in Promoting Neighborhood Commissions in the City of Corrientes" in the framework of the "Social Responsibility University" Program of the Secretary of University Policies and approved by Resolution Nº 277/08, 2008 – 2009 and "Citizen Movement: Participation and Representation in 3 Neighborhoods in the City of Corrientes" in the framework of the University Volunteer Program of the Secretary of University Policies 2009 – 2011.

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