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# The concept of participation. If they have access and interact, do they really participate?[1]

## O conceito de participação. Se eles têm acesso e interagem, eles participam de fato?

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**ABSTRACT**
Participation is a concept that is being used in a wide variety of fields, and that has obtained an evenly large range of meanings. This article attempts first to ground participation in democratic theory, which allows introducing the distinction between minimalist and maximalist forms of participation. In the second part of the article, a broad definition of the politics will be used to transcend to logics of institutionalized politics, and to emphasize that the distribution of power in society is a dimension of the social that permeates every possible societal field. Both discussions are then used to describe the key characteristics of participation, and to increase the concept's theoretical foundation. The article then zooms in on one of these characteristics, namely the difference between access, interaction and participation, as this distinction allows further sharpening the key meanings attributed to participation as a political process where the actors involved in decision-making processes are positioned towards each other through power relationships that are (to an extent) egalitarian.

**Key words:** Participatory theory, democratic theory, politics, power, access, interaction, contingency.

**RESUMO**
Participação é um conceito que tem sido utilizado em uma ampla variedade de áreas e que obteve uma gama ainda maior de significados. Esse artigo tenta, primeiramente debater participação na teoria democrática, o que nos permite introduzir a distinção entre formas minimalistas e maximalistas de participação. Na segunda paete, uma definição mais ampla de política é utilizada para transcender para as lógicas das políticas institucionalizadas e para enfatizar que a distribuição de poder na sociedade é uma dimensão do social que permeia todo campo possível da sociedade. Ambas as discussões são então utilizadas para descrever as características chave de participação, e para ampliar a fundamentalção teórica do conceito. O artigo então prossegue enfocando cada uma dessas características, nomeadamente a diferença entre acesso, interação e participação, uma vez que essa distinção nos permite delimitar mais afinadamente os significados chave atribuidos à participação enquanto um processo político no qual os atores envolvidos nos processos de tomada de decisão estão posicionados em direção ao outro através de relações de poder que são (em um certo sentido) igualitárias.

**Plavras-chave:** Teoria da participação, teoria democrática, política, poder, acesso, interação, contingência.

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# Introduction

Participation has (again) become one of the key concepts of communication and media studies, especially after the popularization of web 2.0. At the same time, the concept of participation has a long history, where especially in the 1960s and 1970s the debates about participation were omnipresent in a wide variety of societal fields. This has caused this concept to feature in a surprising variety of frameworks, which have been transformed through an almost infinite number of materializations.

But the problems that characterize (the use of) participation have not disappeared, on the contrary. Already in 1970, Pateman wrote (1970, p. 1) "the widespread use of the term […] has tended to mean that any precise, meaningful content has almost disappeared; 'participation' is used to refer to a wide variety of different situations by different people", and this situation has not altered. In communication and media studies, but also in many other fields and disciplines, participation is still used to mean everything and nothing, remains structurally undertheorized and its intrinsically political nature –as part of a democratic-ideological struggle on the democratic nature of democracy- remains unacknowledged.

By returning to democratic theory, this article aims to firmly ground participation in democratic theory, in order to show the importance of power in defining the concept of participation. At the same time we need to transcend the realm of institutionalized politics, as democracy and participation cannot be restricted to this realm but need to be seen as transecting all realms of society. By revisiting these theoretical debates, a series of key characteristics of participation can be developed, in combination with a model that explicates the differences between access, interaction and participation.

# Back to democratic theory

Democracy, because of its concern with the inclusion of people within political decision-making processes, is one of the key sites of the articulation of the concept of participation. The centrality of people's participation is described in Held's (1996, p. 1) definition of democracy as "a form of government in which, in contradiction to monarchies and aristocracies, the people rule. Democracy entails a political community in which there is some form of political equality among the people". Held's work provides an immediate and excellent overview of the complexity of the notion of democracy. In his *Models of Democracy*, Held (1996, p. 3) initiates the debate by referring to Lively's (1975, p. 30) list of ways to organize this form of political equality in practice. Lively distinguishes seven variations: (i) all should govern; (ii) all should be involved in crucial decision-making; (iii) rulers should be accountable to the ruled; (iv) rulers should be accountable to the representatives of the ruled; (v) rulers should be chosen by the ruled; (vi) rulers should be chosen by the representatives of the ruled and (vii) rulers should act in the interest of the ruled. This list first highlights the strong emphasis in democratic theory on the difference between rulers and ruled, with the important consequence that the concept of participation is articulated exclusively in relation to the ruled, ignoring the rulers. The list can also be seen as an initial indication that democracy is not a stable concept with a fixed signification, but encompasses a multitude of meanings.

The meaning of the concept of democracy is complicated by three elements: the variety of democratic manifestations and variants, the distinction between formal democracy and democratic cultures and practices, and the distinction between the narrow-political system ('politics') and the broad-political dimensions of the social (the 'political'). One of the crucial dimensions structuring the different democratic models is the minimalist versus maximalist dimension, which underlies a number of key positions in the articulation of democracy.

In this regard, a key theme has been the always-present balance between representation and participation, which, for instance, provides structuring support for Held's (1996) typology of democratic models. As Held describes it, "Within the history of the clash of positions lies the struggle to determine whether democracy will mean some kind of popular power (a form of life in which citizens are engaged in *self*-government and *self*-regulation) or an aid to decision-making (a means to legitimate the decisions of those voted into power)" (Held, 1996, p. 3 – emphasis in original). The notion of representation refers here to political representation, *Vertretung*, or speaking-for, in contrast to the other main meaning of representation, *Darstellung*, or standing-for (Spivak, 1990, p. 108).[3] Political

[3] In this interview, Spivak refers to the etymology of *Vertretung* ("to thread into someone's shoes"), but also emphasizes the differences and interconnections between the notions of *Vertretung* and *Darstellung*, which she also refers to her 1988 essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*.

representation is grounded in the formal delegation of power, where specific actors are authorized on behalf of others "to sign on his behalf, to act on his behalf, to speak on his behalf" and where these actors receive "the power of a proxy" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 203). Obviously, one of the basic democratic instruments for the formal delegation of power is elections, where, through the organization of a popular vote, political actors are legitimized to gain (at least partial) control over well-defined parts of the state's resources and decision-making structures. This control is not total, but structured through institutional, legal (often constitutional) and cultural logics.

On the other side of the democratic balance is the notion of participation, which refers to the involvement of the citizenry within (institutionalized) politics. As Marshall (1992, p. 10-11) explains in his discussion of political citizen rights, this not only includes the right to elect, but also the right to stand for election: "By the political element [*of citizenship*] I mean the right to participate in the exercise of political power, as a member of a body invested with political power or as an elector of such a body". Again, these forms of political participation are not total, but structured through institutional, legal and cultural logics (see Dahlgren, 2009). One important example is the limits imposed by the concept of citizenship itself, which is not only a democracy-facilitating concept, but also has an exclusionary component.

Different democratic models (of democratic theory and practice) attribute different balances between these concepts of representation and participation. When the political is defined, following Schumpeter (1976), for instance, as the privilege of specific competing elites, thus reducing the political role of the citizenry to participation in the election process, the balance shifts towards representation and the delegation of power. In this minimalist model, the societal decision-making remains centralized and participation remains limited (in space and time). In contrast, in other democratic models (e.g., participatory or radical democracy – see below), participation plays a more substantial and continuous role and does not remain restricted to the 'mere' election of representatives. These democratic models with more decentralized societal decision-making and a stronger role of participation (in relation to representation) are considered here to be maximalist forms of democratic participation.

## Maximalist versions of participation in democratic theory

Although the field of democratic theory is extensive, and characterized by an almost unsettling degree of diversity, I want to focus in this part on the democratic models that share a strong(er) commitment to maximalist democratic participation. These models each show the intimate connection between participation, power and decision-making processes, in a variety of different articulations. At the same time, this overview also shows the development of participatory thought over time, and the way this has contributed to their articulatory diversity.

A more practical implication of this diversity is that in this part only a selection of models is discussed, a decision that inevitably leads to the exclusion of some other, still relevant, models (such as Giddens's (1998, p. 113-117) model of dialogical democracy[4]). The models I briefly discuss here are Marxism, anarchism, the New Left models of participatory democracy, deliberative democracy and radical democracy, which I deem to be the most representative models showing the workings of the more maximalist participatory articulations.

Marxist theory takes a strong emancipatory position that is embedded in a critique of the bourgeois domination of society. Marx nevertheless foresaw a structural change, through a series of class conflicts and revolutionary struggles, fed by logics internal to capitalism, establishing a communist society. Despite its inevitability, Marx did not envisage this change as being immediate: He distinguished two stages in the development of communism. In the first and transitional stage (later referred to as socialism by Lenin), most productive property would become collectively owned, but some class differences would persist, because society would "still [*be*] stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges" (Marx, 1994, p. 315). In practice this meant that the worker (in this transitional phase) would receive "[*t*]he same amount of labour which he has given to society in one form, [...] back in another". In this transitional phase the state needed to be democratized through what Marx calls the revolutionary dictatorship of the

[4] The reason for excluding this model is that it can be seen as a hybrid combination of deliberative and radical democracy, both of which are discussed in this chapter.

proletariat.[5] In *The Civil War in France*, Marx expands on the blueprint provided by the Paris Commune and develops it to extend to the national level. This national Commune model was based on a council structure[6] and delegation to higher decision-making levels (Marx, 1993). The pyramid structure of the model of direct (or delegative) democracy (Held, 1996, p. 145-146) allows for (and requires) high levels of participation, through the selection of and subsequent actions of delegates, which would create a more horizontal set of power relations. But not until the second phase would society have completely transcended capitalism, and would "the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour [*have*...] vanished" (Marx, 1994, p. 321). For Marx, communist society is constructed on the basis of a new conception of the self, which is highly altruistic and non-conflictual: For instance, labour is performed to please the others, and not out of a sense of duty. In this utopian situation, the need for repressive state apparatuses would also have disappeared, and only a series of basic coordination, purely administrative tasks would require elected coordinators. This "labour of supervision and management" (Marx, 1992, p. 507) could be compared to the role of the conductor of an orchestra, as Marx (1992, p. 507) writes in *Capital*. Through the logics of cooperation, participation would become maximized in the egalitarian communist society. This implied the disappearance of the principle of power delegation, as participation was organized through everyday life.

Frequently ignored in debates on maximalist versions of participatory democracy is (the legacy of) anarchist theory (cf. May, 1994). Arguably, this neglect does justice to neither anarchist nor democratic theory. Anarchism's emphasis on decentralization and local autonomy led to a strong emphasis on participation within what Godwin (1971) called 'parishes' or voluntary federations. The distrust of government and rejection of (political) representation, that characterize anarchism, are fed by a discourse of anti-authoritarism, which resists the establishment of societal hierarchies and systems of domination and privilege (Bookchin, 1996, p. 29). Illustrative of this is Bakunin's (1970, p. 31) statement, "It is the characteristic of privilege and of every privileged position to kill the mind and heart of men". This immediately brings us to the anarchist theory's strong emphasis on maximalist participation and decentralization as principles of decision-making. As Jennings (1999, p. 138) formulates it, there is a "generalised preference for decentralisation, autonomy and mass participation in the decision-making process". Through the free and equal participation of all in a variety of societal spheres, government as such becomes unnecessary, and an equal power balance in these decision-making processes can be achieved, which, in turn, maximize individual autonomy within a context of societal heterogeneity. Similarly, within the economic realm, the principle of capitalist struggle is replaced by a decentralized gift economy.

The New Left conceptualizations of participatory democracy – developed by Pateman (1970, 1985) and Macpherson (1966, 1973, 1977) and later by Mansbridge (1980) and Barber (1984) – focus on the combination of the principles and practices of direct and representative democracy. The problems of coordination in large-scale industrial societies bring the latter to accept representation (and power delegation) as a necessary tool at the level of national decision-making. At the same time Pateman (1970, p. 1) critiques authors such as Schumpeter (1976), for attributing "the most minimal role" to participation, and for basing their arguments on a fear that the implementation of more developed forms of participation might jeopardize society's stability. This induces Pateman and Macpherson to introduce a broad-political approach to participation, which can be found in Pateman's seminal definitions of partial participation as "a process in which two or more parties influence each other in the making of decisions but the final power to decide rests with one party only" (Pateman, 1970, p. 70), and full participation as "a process where each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions" (Pateman, 1970, p. 71). This broad-political perspective also brings Pateman (1970, p. 110) to look at what she calls "alternative areas", in order to maximize participation. It is only through participation in these 'alternative areas' of the political that a citizen can "hope to have any real control over the course of his life or the development of the environment in which he lives" (Pateman, 1970, p. 110). This expansion of participation into these 'alternative areas' is deemed a necessity, since "for a democratic polity to exist it is necessary for a participatory society to exist, i.e. a society where all political

[5] The dictatorship of proletariat should not be confused with the Leninist notion of dictatorship of the vanguard of the proletariat.
[6] Some authors, like Gramsci, related the council to the soviet (Bottomore, 1991, p. 114).

systems have been democratized […]" (Pateman, 1970, p. 43). For Pateman, this also implies a broadening of the concept of politics: When discussing participation in the industry, she explicitly defines these realms of the social as "political systems in their own right" (Pateman, 1970, p. 43). In *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Pateman (1970) focuses on participation in one specific 'alternative area': industry. Macpherson's (1977) work takes a different angle: He describes the (first) model of participatory democracy, which he develops in *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, as follows: "One would start with direct democracy at the neighbourhood or factory level – actual face-to-face discussion and decision by consensus or majority, and election of delegates who would make up a council at the next more inclusive level, say a city borough or ward or a township. […] So it would go up to the top level, which would be a national council for matters of national concern, and local and regional councils for matters of less than national concern" (Macpherson's, 1977, p. 108). At the same time, Macpherson (1980, p. 28) acknowledges that "[*t*]he prospects of a participatory pluralist system […] appear rather slight" and investigates how some of the principles of participatory democracy can be reconciled with (and supported by) a competitive party system. Macpherson is suggesting the reorganization of the party system on less hierarchical principles, which would increase organizational democracy within political parties, rendering them "genuinely participatory parties [*that*] could operate through a parliamentary or congressional structure" (Macpherson, 1977, p. 114).

The model of deliberative democracy also tries to (re)balance the participatory and representative aspects of democracy, but, here, the participatory moment is located in communication, as deliberative democracy refers to "decision making by *discussion* among free and equal citizens" (Elster, 1998, p. 1, emphasis added). Elster (1998, p. 8) points to the two main characteristics of this model: Its democratic nature is ensured because of its focus on "collective decision making with the participation of all who will be affected by the decision or their representatives", and its deliberative nature lies in the focus on "decision making by means of arguments offered *by* and *to* participants who are committed to values or rationality and impartiality" (emphasis in original). Habermas's work is one of the main sources of inspiration for the model of deliberative democracy.[7] His older work on communicative rationality and the public sphere plays a key role in grounding deliberation in the intersubjective structures of communication, where the "speakers' orientation toward mutual understanding entails a commitment to certain presuppositions rooted in the idea of unconstrained argumentation or discourse" (Flynn, 2004, p. 436). In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas (1996) further develops his model of deliberative democracy (and its relationship to law). In the Habermasian model of deliberative democracy, participation is multidirectional because of the strong emphasis on the procedural-deliberative, and on the role that institutions play in the transformation of public opinion into communicative power. In his two-track model of deliberative politics, the public sphere becomes a "warning system with sensors that, though unspecified, are sensitive throughout society" (Habermas, 1996, p. 359) and that can problematize issues, while deliberative procedures in the formal decision-making sphere focus on cooperative solutions to (these) societal problems, without aiming for ethical consensus.[8]

Laclau and Mouffe (1985), aiming to de-essentialize Althusser's and Gramsci's work (and thus, also, the work of Marx and Engels),[9] developed a post-Marxist democratic model. Their work parallels the work on the deliberative model, but was developed differently because it was inspired by a post-structuralist agenda. They considered their democratic project to be radically pluralist because of its embeddedness in a social ontology, which emphasized that "subject positions cannot be led back to a positive and unitary founding principle" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 167). This implies also that the radical pluralist democracy advocated by Laclau and Mouffe was not radical in the sense of identifying 'the true and pure democratic model': "Its radical character implies, on the contrary, that we can save democracy only by taking into account its radical impossibility" (Žižek, 1989, p. 6). For this reason, Mouffe (1997, p. 8) refers to radical pluralist democracy as a democracy that will always be 'to come'. Nevertheless, the radical pluralist democratic model also

[7] Of course, Habermas is not the only author in this debate. See Cohen (1989), Fishkin (1991) and Dryzek (2000). The deliberative democratic model was also supported by Rawls (1999, p. 139), who in 1999 declared that he was "concerned with a well-ordered constitutional democracy [...] understood also as a deliberative democracy".

[8] For instance, Mouffe (2005) continues to criticize Habermas for his focus on consensual outcomes.

[9] See Carpentier and Spinoy (2008). This part is mainly based on the introductory chapter of this book.

contains a plea to balance power relations in society. In particular, Laclau and Mouffe want to "broaden the domain of the exercise of democratic rights beyond the limited traditional field of 'citizenship'", claiming that the distinctions between public/private and civil society/political society are "only the result of a certain type of hegemonic articulation" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 185). Again, we can identify a call to extend the political into the realm of the economy, where the importance of the "anti-capitalist struggle" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 185) is emphasized. But through Laclau and Mouffe's (1985, p. 176) emphasis on the plurality and heterogeneity of the social, the broad definition of the political and "the extension of the field of democracy to the whole of civil society and the state", also the notion of participation moves to the foreground. Although the concept of participation is used only rarely, its importance becomes clear in Laclau and Mouffe's critique on the "anti-democratic offensive" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 171) in neo-conservative discourses. These neo-conservative discourses are seen as the antipode of their radical democratic model because they want to "redefine the notion of democracy itself in such a way as to restrict its field of application and limit political participation to an even narrower area" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 173). Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 173) continue by stating that these discourses would "serve to legitimize a regime in which political participation might be virtually non-existent". The increased level of (political) participation that radical pluralist democracy has to offer is still delineated by the need to "agree on the liberal-democratic rules of the game", although this is not taken to mean that "the precise interpretation of the rules of the game" would be given once and for all (Torfing, 1999, p. 261; Mouffe, 1995, p. 502). In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 176) state explicitly that the contemporary liberal-democratic ideology should not be renounced, but rather reworked in the direction of a radical and plural democracy, which generates sufficient openness for a plurality of forms and variations of democracy, which correspond to the multiplicity of subject positions active in the social. It is at this level also – combined with their dealing with "a very different theoretical problematic" – that Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 194) explicitly distinguish their position from the work of Macpherson and Pateman, who they see as defending a too specific and too well-aligned democratic model. But Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 194) add that they "nevertheless share [*with them*] many important concerns".

# Beyond democratic theory

In late (or post) modern societies, the frontiers of institutionalized politics have also become permeable. Discussions within the field of democratic theory, as exemplified in the previous part of this article, indicate that it would be difficult to confine the political (and the logic of power and decision-making in society) to the realm of institutionalized politics. Democratic theory has (sometimes) incorporated such transformations, but these theoretical expansions did not develop in a void. They grew out of a diversity of political practices that originated from actors that often were (strictly speaking) situated outside the realm of institutionalized politics. Whether they are called interest groups, old/new social movements, civil society or activists, these actors broadened the scope of the political and made participation more heterogeneous and multidirectional.

In some cases these political practices were still aimed at impacting directly on institutionalized politics, but in other cases their political objectives diverged from the 'traditional' and were aimed at cultural change. In many cases, several objectives and 'targets' were developed in conjunction. For instance, the feminist movement aimed for the re-articulation of gender relations, within a diversity of societal spheres, combining identity politics (see e.g. Harris, 2001) with (successful) attempts to affect legal frameworks. Not only do we witness a broadening of the set of actors involved in political activities, but also an expansion of the spheres that are considered political. One example here is the feminist slogan "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1970), which claimed the political nature of social spheres such as the body and the family. Millett (1970), for instance, coined the term sexual politics, extending the notion of the political into the sphere of the private. In her chapter on the *Theory of Sexual Politics*, she introduces her sociological approach with the simple sentence "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family" (Millett, 1970, p. 33). A few pages on she, notes that "The chief contribution of the family in patriarchy is the socialisation of the young (largely through the example and admonition of their parents) into patriarchal ideology's prescribed attitudes toward the categories of role, temperament, and status" (Millett, 1970, p. 33).

In these feminist projects we see (a plea for) the political (to) move further into the social. We can apply a similar logic within democratic theory, since a considerable number of authors who tend towards the more maximal-

ist versions of democratic participation have sought (and found) solutions to the scale problem in large democracies by reverting to civil society, the economy and the family as sites of political practice. Here, Mouffe's (2000, p. 101) concept of the political, as the "dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations", can be used to argue that the political touches upon our entire world, and cannot be confined to institutionalized politics. Here, also, the difference Mouffe makes between the political and the social is helpful because she locates this difference in the sedimented nature of practices. To use her words:

> *The political is linked to the acts of hegemonic institution. It is in this sense that one has to differentiate the social from the political. The social is the realm of sedimented practices, that is, practices that conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution and which are taken for granted, as if they were self-grounded. Sedimented social practices are a constitutive part of any possible society; not all social bonds are put into question at the same time (Mouffe, 2005, p. 17).*

At the same time hegemony and the taken-for-grantedness it brings is never total or unchallengeable. Sedimented practices can always be questioned, problematized and made political again. This is what democratic and social movement theorists, together with political activists, have attempted to do in a variety of societal fields: to disrupt the taken-for-grantedness of a specific social ordering and to show its political nature.

These logics do not apply only to the realms often discussed in democratic theory (such as the economy); they apply also to the cultural/symbolic realm and the media sphere, which has to be implicated in the broadening of the political. In other words, the representational is also political. The concept of the politics of representation (see e.g. Hall, 1997, p. 257) can be used to refer to the ideological logics in representational processes and outcomes. Dominant and/or hegemonic societal orders feed into these representational processes and outcomes, and at the same time are legitimized and normalized by their presence (or in some cases by meaningful absences). Organizations such as publishers and broadcasters – to mention but a few – act as discursive machinery that produces these representations, but at the same time they are organizational environments with specific politics, economies and cultures where, for instance, the politics of the expert or the professional create power relations that impact on the organization itself, but also on the 'outside' world and who from this 'outside' world is allowed in.

This all-encompassing process of the broadening of the political, where all social realities become (at least potentially) contestable and politicized, means also that the notions of democracy and participation can no longer remain confined to the field of institutionalized politics. All social spheres are the potential objects of claims towards democratization and increased participation, although these claims (and the struggles provoked) do not lead necessarily to their realization, and the resistance in some societal realms turns out to be more substantial than in others.

## Characterizing participation

As argued in the previous part: We should keep in mind that the political-democratic does not stop at the edges of institutionalized politics. The political-democratic, and the distribution of power in society that lies at its heart, is a dimension of the social that permeates every possible societal field. But democratic theory still takes a privileged position in the theoretical discussion on participation, as it immediately shows its political nature, and the key role of power in defining participation. Keeping the need for a broad-transectional application of participation in mind, we can still return to democratic theory (and especially to its more maximalist versions) to describe the key characteristics of participation, and to increase the concept's theoretical foundation:

*(i) The key defining element of participation is power.* The debates on participation in institutionalized politics and in all other societal fields, including media participation, have a lot in common in that they all focus on the distribution of power within society at both the macro- and micro-level. The balance between people's inclusion in the implicit and explicit decision-making processes within these fields, and their exclusion through the delegation of power (again, implicit or explicit), is central to discussions on participation in all fields. Some prudence is called for here, as power is often reduced to the possession of a specific societal group. Authors such as Foucault (1978) have argued against this position, claiming that power is an always-present characteristic of social relations. In contemporary societies, the narrations of power are complex narrations of power strategies, counter-powers and resistance.

*(ii) Participation is situated in always particular processes and localities, and involves specific actors*. In order to understand participation, and the many different participatory practices with their sometimes very different participatory intensities, the characteristics, power positions and contexts of the specific processes, localities and actors have to be taken into account. Participation is not limited to one specific societal field (e.g., 'the' economy) but is present in all societal fields and at all levels. The contexts that these different fields and levels bring into the equation, is crucial to our understanding of any participatory process. For instance, in the theoretical debates on participation, we can see that at the macro-level, they deal with the degree to which people could and should be empowered to (co)decide on for instance political, symbolic-cultural and communicative matters. At the micro-level, they deal with the always-located power relations between privileged and non-privileged actors, between for instance politicians and media professionals on the one hand, and (ordinary) people who do not hold these positions on the other. Although it would be too much of a simplification to define all privileged actors as part of one societal elite, these privileged actors do form (partially overlapping) elite clusters, that hold stronger power positions compared to individuals not part of these elite clusters. Within all fields, debates about participation focus exactly on the legitimization or the questioning and critiquing of the power (in-) equilibrium that structures these social relationships.

*(iii) The concept of participation is contingent and itself part of the power struggles in society.* The signification of participation is part of a "politics of definition" (Fierlbeck, 1998, p. 177), since its specific articulation shifts depending on the ideological framework that makes use of it. This implies that debates on participation are not mere academic debates, but are part of a political-ideological struggle for how our political realities are to be defined and organized. It is also not a mere semantic struggle, but a struggle that is lived and practiced. In other words, our democratic practices are, at least partially, structured and enabled through how we think participation. The definition of participation allows us to think, to name and to communicate the participatory process (as minimalist or as maximalist) and is simultaneously constituted by our specific (minimalist or maximalist participatory) practices. As a consequence, the definition of participation is not a mere outcome of this political-ideological struggle, but an integrated and constitutive part of this struggle.

More particularly, the definition of participation is one of the many societal fields where a political struggle is waged between the minimalist and the maximalist variations of democracy. In the minimalist model, democracy is confined mainly to processes of representation, and participation to elite selection through elections that form the expression of a homogeneous popular will. Participation here exclusively serves the field of institutionalized politics because the political is limited to this field. In the maximalist model, democracy is seen as a more balanced combination of representation and participation, where attempts are made to maximize participation. The political is considered a dimension of the social, which allows for a broad application of participation in many different social fields (including the media), at both micro- and macro-level, and with respect for societal diversity.

A similar logic can be used to describe minimalist and maximalist media participation. In (very) minimalist forms, media professionals retain strong control over process and outcome, often restricting participation to mainly access and interaction; to the degree that one wonders whether the concept of participation is still appropriate. Participation remains articulated as a contribution to *the* public sphere but often mainly serving the needs and interests of the mainstream media system itself, instrumentalizing and incorporating the activities of participating non-professionals. This media-centred logic leads to a homogenization of the audience and a disconnection of their participatory activities from other societal fields and from the broad definition of the political, resulting in the articulation of media participation as non-political. In the maximalist forms, (professional) control and (popular) participation become more balanced, and attempts are made to maximize participation. Here we see the acknowledgement of audience diversity and heterogeneity, and of the political nature of media participation. The maximalist articulation allows for recognition of the potential of media participation for macro-participation and its multidirectional nature.

*(iv) Participation is not to be seen as part of the democratic-populist fantasy*, which is based on the replacement of hierarchical difference by total equality. The celebrative-utopian variation of this fantasy defines the equalization of society, and the disappearance of its elites, as the ultimate objective for the realization of a 'truly' democratic society. In contrast, the anxietatic-dystopian variation is based on the fear that the democratic-populist fantasy might actually be realized. These are both populist fantasies, because (following Laclau's approach to populism) they are based

on an antagonist resistance of the people against an elite. As Laclau (1977, p. 143) puts is: "Populism starts at the point where popular-democratic elements are presented as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant block." Models that support stronger forms of participation (even the most maximalist versions) do not aim for the (symbolic) annihilation of elite roles, but try to transform these roles in order to allow for power-sharing between privileged and non-privileged (or elite and non-elite) actors. For instance, the positions that defend strong forms of media participation do not necessarily focus on the elimination of the media professional (or the journalist), but attempt to diversify and open up this societal identity so that the processes and outcomes of media production do not remain the privileged territory of media professionals and media industries.

*(v) Participation is invitational.* Even the contemporary maximalist participatory models only rarely aim to impose participation. Their necessary embeddedness in a democratic culture protects against a post-political reduction of participation to a mere technique, but also against the enforcement of participation. Here, I concur with Foss and Griffin (1995, p. 3), who contrast invitation and persuasion (the latter being fed by the "desire for control and domination"), and Greiner and Singhal (2009, p. 34), who develop the concept of invitational social change, which "seek[*s*] to substitute interventions which inform with calls to imagine and efforts to inspire". These kinds of reflections allow participation to be seen as invitational, which implies that the enforcement of participation is defined as contradictory to the logics of participation, and that the right not to participate should be respected.

*(vi) Participation is not the same as access and interaction*. Arguably, these notions are still very different – in their theoretical origins and in their respective meanings. But they are often integrated (or conflated) into definitions of participation. One example here is Melucci's (1989, p. 174) definition, when he says that participation has a double meaning: "It means both taking part, that is, acting so as to promote the interests and the needs of an actor as well as belonging to a system, identifying with the 'general interests' of the community". Another example of this conflation[10] can be found in *Convergence Culture* where Jenkins (2006, p. 305) defines participation as referring "to the social and cultural interactions that occur around media". Yet another example can be found in Taylor and Willis's (1999, p. 215) introductory sentences to their chapter on *Public Participation in the 1990s*: "Broadly, three different models of audience participation can be identified in the non-fiction media. First[11], there has been a wide increase in the use of audience interaction 'segments' on television."

However valuable these approaches and analyses are, I would like to argue that participation is structurally different from access and interaction and that a negative-relationist strategy – distinguishing between these three concepts – helps to clarify the meaning(s) of participation. A considerable number of academic disciplines, including communication and media studies, have become insensitive towards the need to properly define participation, which implies that audience practices like watching television, surfing on the web, visiting a museum, talking to a neighbour, pressing the red button to initiate the interactive functions of digital television are all deemed necessarily participatory activities. This over-stretched approach towards participation causes the link with the main defining component of participation, namely power, being obscured. Moreover, the over-stretching of participation often causes the more maximalist meanings of participation to remain hidden[12].

Access and interaction do matter for participatory processes in the media – they are actually its conditions of possibility – but they are also very distinct from participation because of their less explicit emphasis on power dynamics and decision-making. Here, especially Pateman's (1970, p. 70-71) definition of participation, which refers to influence or (even) equal power relations in decision-making processes, is useful to avoid the signifier participation being over-stretched. Taking this definition and the here discussed characteristics of participation as starting point; we can develop a model that distinguishes between access, interaction and participation.

[10] It should be added that Jenkins does distinguish between interactivity and participation (Jenkins, 2006: 305), and that (in some rare cases) he uses the concepts of participation and interaction alongside each other, leaving some room for the idea that they are different concepts (Jenkins, 2006, p. 110, 137)

[11] The other two modes they distinguish are programmes that entirely consist of audience participation and programmes that are centred on a live studio audience.

[12] From this perspective, the conflation of access, interaction and participation is actually part of the struggle between the minimalist and maximalist articulations of participation.

# Access, interaction and participation (AIP)

If we revisit the theoretical discussions on participation, we can find numerous layers of meanings that can be attributed to the three concepts. This diversity of meanings can be used to relate the three concepts to each other and to flesh out of the distinctions between them. All three concepts can then be situated in a model, which is termed the AIP-model (see Figure 1[13]). First, through this negative-relationist strategy, access becomes articulated as presence, in a variety of ways that are related to four areas: technology, content, people and organizations. For instance, in the case of digital divide discourse, the focus is placed on the access to media technologies (and more specifically ICTs), which in turn allows people to access media content. In both cases, access implies achieving presence (to technology or media content). Access also features in the more traditional media feedback discussions, where it has yet another meaning. Here, access implies gaining a presence within media organizations, which generates the opportunity for people to have their voices heard (in providing feedback). If we focus more on media production, access still plays a key role in describing the presence of media (production) technology, and

**Access (presence)**

| | Technology | Content | People | Organizations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Production** | Presence of (proto-) machines to produce and distribute content | Presence of previously produced content (e.g., archives) | Presence of people to co-create | Presence of organizational structures and facilities to produce and distribute content |
| **Reception** | Presence of (proto-) machines to receive relevant content | Presence of (relevant) content | Presence (of sites) of joint media consumption | Presence of organizational structures to provide feedback to |

**Interaction (socio-communicative relationships)**

| | Technology | Content | People | Organizations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Production** | Using(proto-machines to produce content | Producing content | Co-producing content as group or community | Co-producing content in an organizational context |
| **Reception** | Using (proto-) machines to receive content | Selecting and interpreting content | Consuming media together as group or community | Discussing content in an organizational context (feedback) |

**Participation (co-deciding)**

| | Technology | Content | People | Organizations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Production** (and reception) | Co-deciding on/with technology | Co-deciding on/with content | Co-deciding on/with people | Co-deciding on/with organizational policy |

**Figure 1.** Access, interaction and participation – The AIP model.

[13] See Carpentier (2007) for an earlier version of the AIP model.

of media organizations and other people to (co-)produce and distribute the content.

The second concept, interaction, has a long history in sociological theory, where it often refers to the establishment of socio-communicative relationships. Subjectivist sociologies, such as symbolic interactionism and phenomenological sociology, highlight the importance of social interaction in the construction of meaning through lived and intersubjective experiences embodied in language. In these sociologies the social is shaped by actors interacting on the basis of shared interests, purposes and values, or common knowledge.[14] Although interaction is often equated with participation, I here want to distinguish between these two concepts, as this distinction allows an increase in the focus on power and (formal or informal) decision-making in the definition of participation, and – as mentioned before – protecting the more maximalist approaches to participation.

If interaction is seen as the establishment of socio-communicative relationships within the media sphere, there are again a variety of ways that these relationships can be established. First, in the categorizations that some authors (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Lee, 2000) have developed in order to deal with the different components of Human-Computer Interaction, different types of interaction have been distinguished. Through these categorizations the audience-to-audience interaction component (strengthened later by analyses of co-creation) has been developed, in combination with the audience-to-(media) technology component. At the production level this refers to the interaction with media technology and people to (co-)produce content, possibly within organizational contexts. A set of other components can be found within the 'old' media studies approaches. The traditional active audience models have contributed to this debate through their focus on the interaction between audience and content, which relates to the selection and interpretation of content. As these processes are not always individualized, but sometimes collective, also forms of media consumption like family or public viewing (Hartmann, 2008) can be included, not to forget the role that interpretative communities can play (Radway, 1988; Lindlof, 1988).

This then brings me to the concept of participation. As repeatedly argued, this difference between participation on the one hand, and access and interaction on the other is located within the key role that is attributed to power, and to equal(ized) power relations in decision-making processes. Furthermore, the distinction between content-related participation and structural participation can then be used to point to different spheres of decision-making. First, there are decision-making processes related to media content production, which might also involve other people and (proto-)machines, and which might take place within the context of media organizations. Second, there is the structural participation in the management and policies of media organizations; also technology-producing organizations can be added in this model, allowing for the inclusion of practices that can be found in, for instance, the free software and open source movement(s). At the level of reception, many of the processes are categorized as interaction, but as there are still (implicit) decision-making processes and power dynamics involved, the reception sphere should still be mentioned here as well, although the main emphasis is placed on the production sphere.

# Conclusion

Participation is not a fixed notion, but is deeply embedded within our political realities and thus is the object of long-lasting and intense ideological struggles. The search for harmonious theoretical frameworks to capture contemporary realities might have been an important fantasy of the *homo academicus*, but also it might not do the analysis of these realities any favours. This does not mean that conceptual contingency needs to be celebrated and radicalized; after all, "a discourse incapable of generating any fixity of meaning is the discourse of the psychotic" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 112). It requires careful manoeuvring to reconcile the conceptual contingency with the necessary fixity that protects the concept of participation from signifying anything and everything. But still, at some point participation simply stops being participation.

Through a more detailed reading of the articulations of participation in (maximalist) democratic theory, participation's crucial and intimate connection with power (and the societal redistribution of power) becomes emphasized. Moreover, participation's embeddedness in a democratic logic allows us to avoid two key problems:

[14] I do not want to claim that power plays no role in interactionist theory, but power and especially decision-making processes do not feature as prominently as they do in the democratic-participatory theories that provide the basis for this book.

the democratic-populist fallacy, where the myth of total equalization rears its ugly head, and the repressive version of participation, where participation is enforced. But the main theoretical strategy used in this article to clarify participation's contemporary discursive limits is negative-relationist. In this negative-relationist strategy, concepts are defined through their juxtaposition to other concepts. In the case of participation, it is seen as structurally different from interaction and access. Access and interaction remain important conditions of possibility of participation, but they cannot be equated with participation. The concept of access is based on presence, in many different forms: for instance, presence in an organizational structure or a community, or presence within the operational reach of media production technologies. Interaction is a second condition of possibility, which emphasizes the social-communicative relationship that is established, with other humans or objects. Although these relationships have a power dimension, this dimension is not translated into a decision-making process. My argument here is that, through this juxtaposition to access and interaction, participation becomes defined as a political – in the broad meaning of the concept of the political – process where the actors involved in decision-making processes are positioned towards each other through power relationships that are (to an extent) egalitarian.

The qualification 'to an extent' reintroduces the notion of struggle because the political struggle over participation is focused precisely on the equality and balanced nature of these power relationships. Participation is defined through these negative logics – distinguishing it from access and interaction – which demarcates the discursive field of action, where the struggle for different participatory intensities is being waged. This is also where the distinction between minimalist and maximalist forms of participation emerges: While minimalist participation is characterized by the existence of strong power imbalances between the actors (without participation being completely annihilated or reduced to interaction or access), maximalist participation is characterized by the equalization of power relations, approximating Pateman's (1970) concept of full participation. Although maximalist participation – seen as equalized power relations in decision-making – has proven to be very difficult to translate into social practice, we should be careful not to erase it from the academic agenda of participation research because of mere carelessness.

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